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## Metal objects of Byzantine origin in medieval graves from Croatia

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Series Byzantina 8, 197-211

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2010

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej [bazhum.muzhp.pl](http://bazhum.muzhp.pl), gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

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# *Metal Objects of Byzantine Origin in Medieval Graves from Croatia*

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The metal finds of Byzantine origin from the graves (6<sup>th</sup>–11<sup>th</sup> centuries) in Medieval Croatia can be divided into three groups:

1. Sixth- and seventh-century objects;
2. Grave objects from the 8<sup>th</sup> and the first half of the 9<sup>th</sup> century;
3. Grave objects from mid-ninth to the late 11<sup>th</sup> century.

## *1. Sixth- and seventh-century objects*

The Great Migration of Peoples completely changed the political and ethnic map of the former Roman province of Dalmatia. In 395 AD, when the Roman Empire was divided in two, Dalmatia became part of the poorly defended western half. The situation of the time is illustrated in St Jerome's letter to Heliodorus, which states that already "for twenty years and more the blood of the Romans has been shed daily between Constantinople and the Julian Alps."

In 401, under the leadership of Alaric, the Visigoths travelled through Dalmatia on their way to the Apennine peninsula. After the foundation of Attila's tribal union based in Pannonia, many refugees from that area fled to Dalmatia. Until 437 Dalmatia stayed with the Western Roman Empire, while from 454 it was part of the Eastern Roman Empire and soon became independent until 480, the year of a death of Julius Nepos. Immediately before that, in 476, the Western Roman Empire formally ceased to exist. After the disintegration of the union of the Huns, some Germanic tribes succeeded in establishing stronger communities on the territory of the former Roman Dalmatia, which was ruled first by Odoacer, the commander of the Germanic troops in Italy, while subsequently most of its territory (together with Pannonia Savia) became part of the political formation established by the Ostrogoths. During the Byzantine-Gothic wars, or the so-called reconquest of Emperor Justinian, associated with his attempts to reconquer the territory of the former Western

Roman Empire, Dalmatia became part of the Eastern Roman Empire in 535 and remained within it until the arrival of the Slavs. However, soon after the reconquest of Sirmium, in the summer of 597, during the reign of Emperor Maurice Tiberius, Dalmatia was invaded, probably through the old Roman road Servitium-Salona, by Avar khagan Bayan who captured the fortified town of Vonka (βονκεις) and forty more forts and settlements. Not long after that, the Slavs started to move towards the south by crossing the Drava and Sava rivers. A letter from Pope Gregory the Great to Maximus, the bishop of Salona, mentioning Slavic incursions in Istria and Italy, also states that bishop himself is in danger, and so it seems that the Slavs had come close to Dalmatia's old capital city of Salona. In the scholarly literature, the fall of Salona was traditionally placed in 614 based on the funerary inscription of abbess Iohanna from Sirmium, while today it is well documented by numismatic evidence: that is by, two coin hoards found in the Salonitan area.

The first hoard of golden Byzantine coins was found near the foundations of the basilica from the age of Justinian at the site of Šuplja crkva, and it contains the coins of Maurice Tiberius, Phocas and Heraclius (minted in 613).<sup>1</sup>

Of particular importance is a hoard of fifty-one bronze coins discovered in a Late Antique canal, in which the oldest coins are of Justinian, while the youngest are of Heraclius, minted in 631, all of which allows to conclude that Salona must have been abandoned around the middle of the seventh century, when the newly migrated peoples posed a threat to the city.<sup>2</sup> Written sources which mention the arrival of the Croats also place this event during the reign of Emperor Heraclius. The clearest picture of the material heritage of the inhabitants of Dalmatia in this period is provided by the graveyard with 218 graves on the site of Greblje at Knin.<sup>3</sup> Most burials are those of the indigenous inhabitants that were romanized and converted to Christianity, while only 7 graves are Germanic. Therefore, the majority of finds display Late Antique and early Byzantine features, and mostly belong to the second half of the 6<sup>th</sup> and early 7<sup>th</sup> century.

The Sucidava type of buckle (fig. 1) is common in the Byzantine provinces on the Balkan peninsula and is found mostly in Justinianic and post-Justinianic strata of the forts along the Danube *limes*, but also in the Early Byzantine urban centres, and they have been dated to the second half of the 6<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>4</sup>

The iron T-brooch with knobs represents a derivative of more luxurious prototypes from the earlier centuries. It was worn on the right shoulder (*more romano*) and is the last example which witnesses this Roman custom, since it was found in the same grave which contained a buckle that cannot be dated prior to the late 6<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> GJURAŠIN 2000, 86.

<sup>2</sup> MAROVIĆ 2006.

<sup>3</sup> SIMONI 1989; VINSKI 1989;

<sup>4</sup> SIMONI 1989, 64, pl. XV, 5; VINSKI 1989, 26.

<sup>5</sup> SIMONI 1989, 60, pl. XI, 4; VINSKI 1989, 27.

The origin of buckles of the so-called Mediterranean type should also be sought in the Late Roman production of the 4<sup>th</sup> and the 5<sup>th</sup> centuries. They were widespread in Pannonia, the Danube area, Italy and the Iberian peninsula. Although they are often found in Germanic or Avar-Slav graves, they should be considered as post-Justinianic Early Byzantine cultural goods of the second half of the 6<sup>th</sup> and the 7<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>6</sup>

Buckles with prominent shield-like base of the tongue (fig. 2) are undoubtedly of Early Byzantine origin and are part of the costume of the Romanized indigenous population in Dalmatia in the period of the late 6<sup>th</sup> and early 7<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>7</sup>

The buckle with a U-shaped plate can be ascribed to a large group of Early Byzantine buckles that were widely distributed during the late 6<sup>th</sup> century, but particularly throughout the 7<sup>th</sup>.

Circular disc brooches with the function of safe-keeping the amulets are typical of the romanized indigenous population. Brooches of this type appear during the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> century in Europe, and several the production centres can be located in Pannonia, Lombard Italy and Merovingian Rhineland.<sup>8</sup>

Peacock-shaped brooches (fig. 3) belong to a numerous group of Late Antique zoomorphic brooches associated with sixth-century female costume.<sup>9</sup>

Pins are also characteristic of the romanized indigenous population and appear in female graves in the function of hair- and safety-pins.<sup>10</sup>

A silver signet-ring with engraved representation of two antithetical lions can be considered product of Early Byzantine goldsmithing from the



Fig. 1. Sucidava type of buckle  
(Photo: Ante Jurčević)

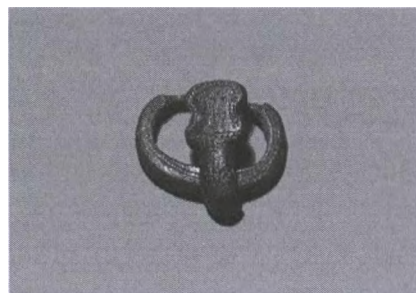


Fig. 2. Buckle with prominent shield-like base of the tongue  
(Photo: Ante Jurčević)



Fig. 3. Peacock-shaped brooch  
(Photo: Ante Jurčević)

<sup>6</sup> SIMONI 1989, 60, pl. XI, 5; VINSKI 1989, 26.

<sup>7</sup> SIMONI 1989, 73, pl. XXIX, 1.

<sup>8</sup> SIMONI 1989, 71, pl. XX, 3.

<sup>9</sup> SIMONI 1989, 66, pl. XVII, 4.

<sup>10</sup> SIMONI 1989, 66, pl. XVII, 3.

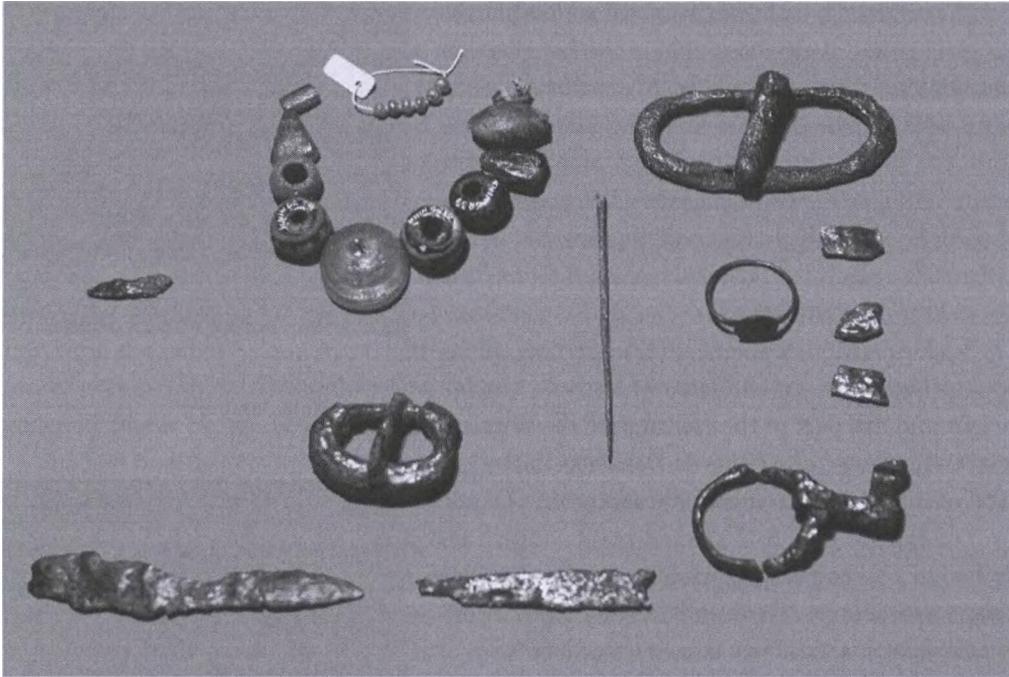


Fig. 4. Objects with local indigenous features from Knin-Greblje (Photo: Ante Jurčević)

second half of the 6<sup>th</sup> or early 7<sup>th</sup> century, as can the silver rings with monograms and a key-shaped ring.<sup>11</sup>

The rest of the finds in the graves are objects with local indigenous features such as poorly made cast earrings inspired by luxurious Early Byzantine earrings, cross brooches of local production, necklaces made of glass beads, simple iron buckles, flints, keys, iron knives (fig. 4).<sup>12</sup>

As I have already pointed out only several graves are Germanic: six are Ostrogothic (fig. 5) and one West Germanic (with a find of an S-brooch), that can be linked to the short incursion of the Lombards in Dalmatia, before their migration to Italy.<sup>13</sup>

A similar picture is yielded by other graveyards of the same period<sup>14</sup> and therefore the archaeological heritage can be said to have three components:

- a) Late Antique tradition of the eastern Mediterranean area
- b) The influence of the Early Byzantine culture
- c) Minor presence of Germanic elements

<sup>11</sup> SIMONI 1989, 67, pl. XVIII, 5.

<sup>12</sup> SIMONI 1989.

<sup>13</sup> VINSKI 1989, 20–27.

<sup>14</sup> BELOŠEVIĆ 1965; BELOŠEVIĆ 1968; MILETIĆ 1956; MILETIĆ 1978; JURČEVIĆ 2007.

## 2. Grave objects from the 8th and the first half of the 9th centuries

The period following the fall of Salona, Avar-Slav incursions and the arrival of the Croats in Dalmatia is usually referred to as the dark centuries of Croatian history. The silence of the written sources is matched by the lack of archaeological finds that can be firmly dated. The only reliable seventh-century source is that from the pontificate of pope John IV, referring to the mission of abbot Martin who was sent to Dalmatia and Istria in 641, with the task to ransom the captured Christians and collect the relics of the Early Christian martyrs.<sup>15</sup> These relics were later placed in the chapel of St Venantius next to the Lateran basilica at Rome, which displays the famous mosaics of the mentioned martyrs.

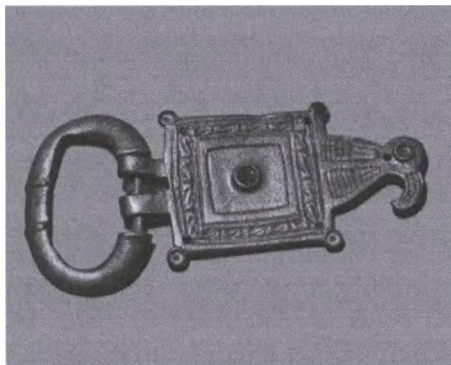


Fig. 5. Ostrogothic buckle  
(Photo: Ante Jurčević)

This piece of information indirectly attests to the presence of a new Slavic ethnic group in the hinterland of the coastal towns under Byzantine rule. Another key event was the fall of the Ravenna Exarchate in 751, affecting the coastal towns (especially those of Split, Trogir and Zadar) which became weaker and transformed into scattered Byzantine strongholds along the Adriatic. At the same time, the Frankish state under Charlemagne grew stronger. By acknowledging Frankish supremacy, Croatia entered the written records, while the Aachen peace treaty of 812 drew the line between Byzantine and Frankish empires on the river Cetina. This made Cetina also the easternmost border of Croatia, while the coastal towns, grouped in the new political unit of Byzantine Dalmatia, remained under the rule of the Byzantine Emperor.

The archaeological picture of this period is rather blurred until the last decades of the 8th century.

The oldest identifiable archaeological stratum is that of the incineration graveyards, the presence of which has to be connected to the newly arrived Slavic settlers, since the custom to incinerate the deceased was alien to the tradition inherited by Christian indigenous inhabitants of Dalmatia, but also to the Avar practice of inhumation. Incineration graves still represent a phenomenon in the medieval archaeology in Croatia that has not been fully researched and studied, and due to the lack of grave finds these cannot be precisely dated, but are loosely ascribed to the second half of the 7th century.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> GOLDSTEIN 1995.

<sup>16</sup> BELOŠEVIĆ 1972; GUNJAČA 1995; PETRINEC 2002.



Fig. 6. Golubić near Knin, female grave (Photo: Ante Jurčević)

Soon after, a series of inhumation graveyards with pottery and iron finds difficult to date appear on the territory of the future Croatian principality. What makes them different from the graveyards of the previous period, such as the site Greblje at Knin, is the presence of pottery vessels as grave goods, as well as the traces of burning and smashing of pottery connected to the the Slavic funerary customs of *trizna* and *strava*.<sup>17</sup> Completely absent, however, are finds of Byzantine provenance and thus it seems that the newly settled Slavic tribes, organized according to kinship, were not initially in any contact with the inhabitants of the nearby coastal towns included in the Byzantine *theme*. With regard to the uniformity of the burial manner and grave finds, it is not possible to reach any conclusion about the proportion of the indigenous population in these graveyards. Only during the last decades of the 8<sup>th</sup> century, probably because of the gradual process of social stratification, a stratum of the so-called tribal nobility becomes recognizable in the mentioned graveyards, which is obvious from the finds which reflect contemporary events on the east Adriatic coast. The position of Croatia at the dividing line between two great Empires of the time, left a peculiar imprint on the grave goods: luxurious male graves

<sup>17</sup> JELOVINA 1976; BELOŠEVIĆ 1980; BELOŠEVIĆ 2007.



Fig. 7. Lepuri near Benkovac (site St. Martin), female grave  
(Photo: Ante Jurčević)

are furnished with weapons and horse fittings of the western, Carolingian type,<sup>18</sup> while female graves have yielded jewellery made of precious metals of undoubtedly Byzantine contemporary provenance.<sup>19</sup>

Accidental finds from a female grave in Golubić near Knin (two pairs of earrings, a necklace and a ring) were discovered under unknown circumstances (fig. 6).<sup>20</sup> It was long thought that the grave was that of a female member of indigenous population from the 6<sup>th</sup> or the 7<sup>th</sup> century. However, among the horizon sixth- and seventh-century graveyards there are no finds which could be compared to the luxurious set from Golubić. Moreover, this set represents top-class products of goldsmithing and is of the highest quality in the group of similar objects found in the last twenty years. These newly discovered objects themselves, resulting from systematic archaeological excavations, have contributed to a more precise dating.

Important finds come from a double female grave in Nin (site St. Asel).<sup>21</sup> The earrings are extremely similar to those from Golubić, while other items include another pair of golden earrings with basket-shaped pendant and a silver loop with punched lozenges. Also

present are the rings with Christian symbols, the most prominent one being a golden ring. The central oval-shaped disc of these rings is ornamented with an engraved Greek cross with equilateral triangles at the ends of its arms. The cross is surrounded by a circle made of punched dots. Between the arms are oblique lines also made with punched dots, making the cross have actually eight arms, which represents the monogram of Christ. On either side of the cross is a dove, each depicted in inverted position so that one is placed straight in relation to the cross, while the other one is upside-down. The doves' heads are shaped like circles and have a punched eye and beak pointing downwards, while the body and the tail are depicted with incised lines and filled with dots along their lengths. Two silver torques were also found, as were iron knives, an amulet pendant and punched Late Antique coin.

<sup>18</sup> VINSKI 1981; JELOVINA 1986; HRVATI I KAROLINZI II 2000.

<sup>19</sup> BELOŠEVIĆ 1983–1984.

<sup>20</sup> PETRINEC 2002, 213–14.

<sup>21</sup> HRVATI I KAROLINZI I 2000, 62–63.





Fig. 8. Individual finds of golden earrings from Biskupija near Knin (Photo: Ante Jurčević)

Golden jewellery from a female grave in Lepuri near Benkovac (site St. Martin) contains two pairs of earrings, a ring with lozenge-shaped front decorated with a filigree cross and two different beads from a golden necklace (fig. 7).

Individual finds of golden earrings of the same type were found at Biskupija near Knin (fig. 8),<sup>22</sup> Bribir, Solin<sup>23</sup> and around Nin near Zadar,<sup>24</sup> as well as at Livno in today's south-west Bosnia.<sup>25</sup>

Besides the golden luxurious finds already mentioned, similar sets appear in more modest manufacture at Glavice near Sinj (silver earrings and two bronze rings, together with a needle-box and a vessel, as well as a necklace made of silver and glass beads, a silver ring and three pairs of silver loops, one of which is analogous to a pair of silver loops from Nin),<sup>26</sup> a necklace from Stranče near Vinodol with silver and glass beads.<sup>27</sup> These silver beads have ornaments identical to those on the necklace from Golubić.

A silver ring from the graveyard at the site of Zduš near Vrlika (fig. 9) is decorated in the same way as a golden ring discovered by the church of St Asel at Nin.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>22</sup> PETRINEC 2005, 177, pl. I, 1–8.

<sup>23</sup> *Nakit* 1986.

<sup>24</sup> BELOŠEVIĆ 1965, 148–49.

<sup>25</sup> MILETIĆ 1980, 297–98.

<sup>26</sup> PETRINEC 2002, 240–41, pl. IV–V.

<sup>27</sup> CETINIĆ 1998, 208, pl. VII.

<sup>28</sup> GJURAŠIN 1992, 257.

A mention should also be made of a triple grave from the site of Ždrijac at Nin where a torque and a necklace were found next to a female skeleton, while that of a man had weapons and horse fittings of the western type.<sup>29</sup>

A special place belongs to the find from Grborezi near Livno (south-east Bosnia) which includes a necklace made of glass and silver beads, a torque, silver rings with oval fronts, silver earrings and loops similar to the golden examples from Golubić and Nin, and also a pair of earrings with bunch-like decoration.<sup>30</sup>

A very similar find is that from a female grave at Kašić near Zadar which apart from a torque, a necklace with glass and metal beads, a ring decorated with engraved cross, also contains a pair of earrings with bunch-like decoration.<sup>31</sup>

The latter type of earring links this group of finds from female graves with the well-known find from Trilj near Sinj (fig. 10).<sup>32</sup> With three pairs of luxurious golden earrings with a bunch-like pendant, a ring crowned with an inlaid blue stone and four oval-shaped additions in the press forging, filigree, granulation technique, two buttons and a necklace with golden beads, this find includes a golden Byzantine solidus of Constantine V and Leo IV minted in Syracuse between 760 and 775.

This links the female grave from Trilj with the well-known male graves splendidly furnished with Carolingian weapons and spurs from Biskupija near Knin, also containing finds of identical Byzantine coins, so that it can be stated that all these finds belong to a single horizon with a common formal, cultural and chronological denominator.<sup>33</sup> It should also be noticed that the highest concentration of the mentioned finds coincides with the sites of the soon-to-be-formed most important centres of Croatian principality (Solin, Nin, the vicinity of Knin and Livno).

The appearance of Byzantine coins in the late 8<sup>th</sup> century, but also of jewellery finds from female graves, can be explained within the frame of the already mentioned historical circumstances. Incoming Slavic tribes densely populated the hinterland of Byzantine towns from the mid-seventh century. Initially, there were no contacts between the two communities, obvious from the lack of finds of Byzantine provenance which could be dated to this period. However, the situation changed in the late 8<sup>th</sup> century when the territory of Dalmatia became part of the Frankish sphere of interest. After the fall of the Ravenna Exarchate (during the reign of Constantine V) and the Frankish occupation of Istria (788), Frankish missionaries appear on



Fig. 9. Silver ring from Zduš near Vrlika  
(Photo: Ante Jurčević)

<sup>29</sup> BELOŠEVIĆ 2007, 240, 243.

<sup>30</sup> HRVATI I KAROLINZI II 2000, 261.

<sup>31</sup> BELOŠEVIĆ 1980, pl. XXXV, 3.

<sup>32</sup> HRVATI I KAROLINZI II 2000, 349.

<sup>33</sup> GIESLER 1974; ŠEPAROVIĆ 2003.

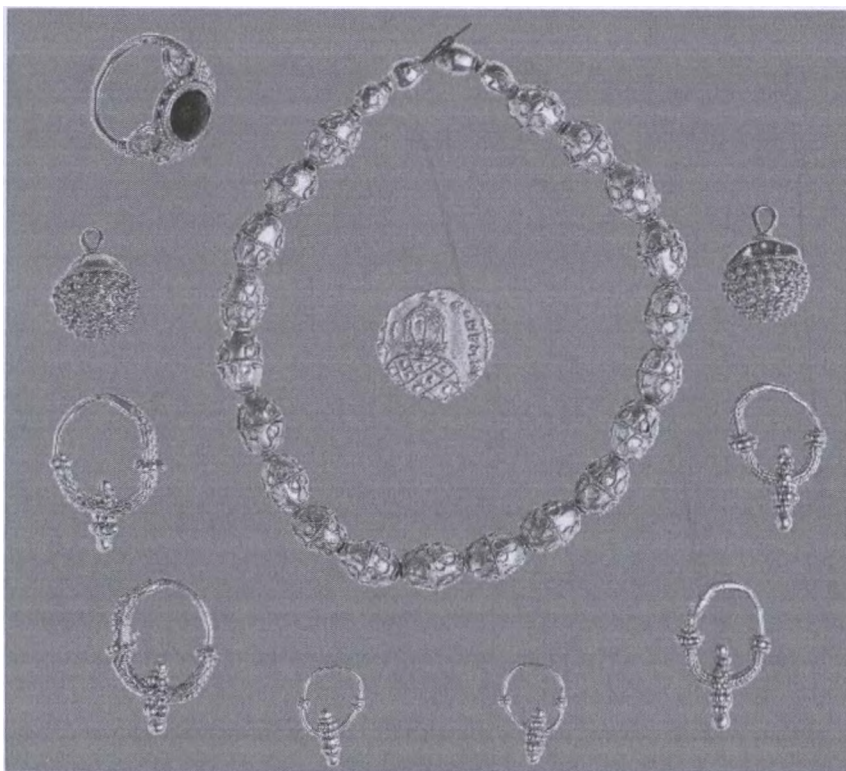


Fig. 10. Trilj near Sinj, female grave (Photo: Ante Jurčević)

Croatian territory as do the weapon makers who supplied the ruling class of the Croats with expensive weapons. Unprotected towns ruled by Byzantium were probably forced to buy their peace and existence, and as a consequence, a large amount of golden coins and luxurious female jewellery had reached the hinterland.

The situation remained unchanged until the mid-ninth century, what is confirmed by another find dated through a coin find. In a grave from Ždrijac at Nin, two pairs of earrings with bunch-like decorations were found together with a denarius of Lothair I (840–855).<sup>34</sup>

The luxurious female jewellery must have been produced by the Byzantine workshops in coastal towns, or by the workshops on Byzantine territory in the eastern Mediterranean area, since the Croats of the hinterland, with their tribal and kinship system, were certainly not familiar with the goldsmithing techniques, nor were they capable of producing good-quality items by themselves. The apprenticeship to a goldsmith, namely, required from a candidate a lengthy trial period (8 to 15 years), which is witnessed by the late medieval archival records (from the 13<sup>th</sup> century) and thus even more applicable to the early medieval period.

<sup>34</sup> BELOŠEVIĆ 2007, 147, pl. LV.



Fig. 11. Temple earrings with one bead  
(Photo: Ante Jurčević)



Fig. 12. Temple earring with two beads  
(Photo: Ante Jurčević)

### 3. Grave objects from mid-ninth to the late 11<sup>th</sup> century

In the late 8<sup>th</sup> and the early 9<sup>th</sup> century, the hinterland of the north and central Adriatic coast became the territory of the newly formed Croatian principality, later kingdom which preserved its independence under the rulers of the Trpimirović dynasty until the early 12<sup>th</sup> century, when it entered into national and judicial union with Hungary. Croatia covered the territory from the river Raša in Istria in the west, to the river Cetina in the east, while its continental area comprised of parts of present-day central Croatia and south-west Bosnia, following the old Roman boundary between Dalmatia and Pannonia. Coastal towns, on the other hand, remained under Byzantine rule until the middle of the 11<sup>th</sup> century. However, mutual contacts between Byzantine towns and Croatia were unavoidable, as is confirmed by the written sources. From the early 10<sup>th</sup> century, the bishop of Split became a metropolitan not only of Byzantine *theme* of Dalmatia but of entire Croatia. This was decided at the church synods held in Split and attended by Croatian king Tomislav. Although Split was inhabited by Romance-speakers, it attracted the neighbouring Croats who gradually migrated into it and they were present in the top levels of society already in the 10<sup>th</sup> century. John, the archbishop of Split, was a son of Tvrdatah, and his Croatian origin cannot be doubted. Jelena, a member of the noble family of the Madii from Zadar, became wife of Croatian king Mihajlo Krešimir II.

Grave goods from this period (mid-9<sup>th</sup> until late 11<sup>th</sup> century) provide a completely different picture in relation to the previous periods. With the spread of Christianity on the territory of Croatia, already from the mid-ninth century numerous churches were built



Fig. 13. Temple earrings with four beads  
(Photo: Ante Jurčević)



Fig. 14. Ring with a dome-shaped crown  
(Photo: Ante Jurčević)

as donations of Croatian rulers whose names were carved in the Latin inscriptions on the stone liturgical furnishings in these churches.<sup>35</sup> Members of the highest social classes – that is the early feudal nobility – start to be buried next to the churches and the graves contain finds of luxurious female jewellery.

These are mainly large temple earrings (diameter of the loop is 6–8 centimetres), made of precious metals, in the raised filigree and granulation technique. There are examples with one (fig. 11), two (fig. 12) or four oval-shaped beads (fig. 13) and earrings made with silver and gilded filigree wire, undoubtedly modelled after older earrings similar to the already mentioned golden examples from the late 8th and early 9th century. Although there is no direct evidence, it should be assumed that these earrings were also produced by the workshops in the coastal towns, where they were made for the ruling class of Croatian principality and adapted to the taste of their commissioners, and therefore these too can be considered products of Byzantine goldsmithing in a wider sense.

Among the horizon of the graveyards discussed here, several examples of jewellery can be linked to contemporary Byzantine goldwork.

Above all, I am referring here to the so-called rings with a dome-shaped crown (fig. 14), with many analogies in the east and south-east Balkan area under direct Byzantine rule or under a strong Byzantine influence (such as Bulgaria, Serbia and Macedonia).<sup>36</sup>

The same can be said for some examples of decorative applications and oval pendants from the rims of the clothes (fig. 15).<sup>37</sup>

<sup>35</sup> DELONGA 1996.

<sup>36</sup> PETRINEC 2003a.

<sup>37</sup> PETRINEC 2003.

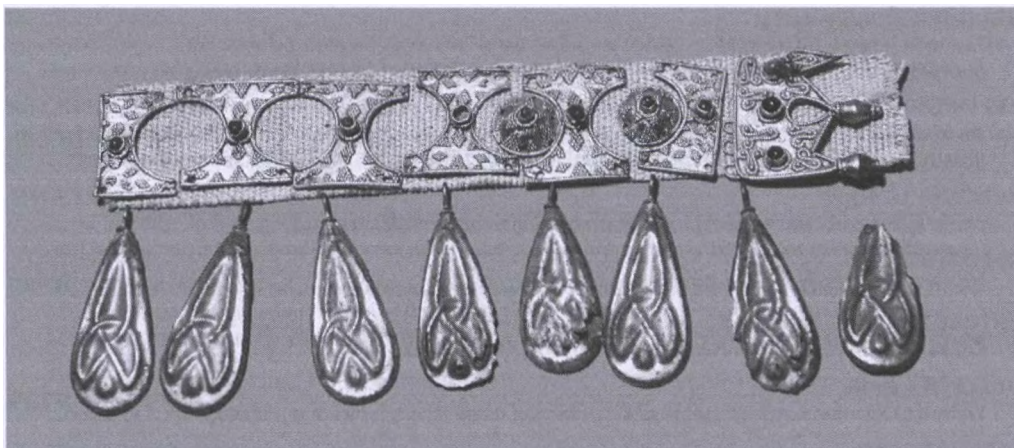


Fig. 15. Decorative applications and oval pendants from the rims of the clothes  
(Photo: Ante Jurčević)

The significance of goldsmithing in the coastal towns did not stop after the Byzantine *theme* disintegrated in the middle of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, nor did it diminish in the late medieval period. That the towns continue to supply their hinterland with luxurious golden objects, especially with earrings, is witnessed by the data from the Dubrovnik archive, mentioning Slavic earrings (*cercellis de argento slavoneschis*).<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> JAKŠIĆ 1983, 72.

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