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An Early Roman dagger from the vicinity of Štanjel

Summary : A relatively well-preserved early Roman type dagger with a double disc handle is a single find from the vicinity of the town of Štanjel, in the Karst region of Western Slovenia. It indicates the presence of the Roman army in the Augustan period, in the Karst region, in the hinterland of the Vipava Valley with its very important route from Aquileia towards the Balkans and the central Danube region.

Keywords : Roman dagger, Augustan period, Western Slovenia.

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Introduction

In the late 1990s, a Roman dagger was found near the town of Štanjel, in the Karst region of Western Slovenia, and was recorded and conserved by the National Museum of Slovenia (No. Zn 112). The dagger was a relatively well-preserved example of early Roman type with a double disc handle, and it was therefore deemed worthy of more detailed research and publication. The author would like to dedicate the present paper to Mitja Guštin, whose wide field of work has also touched on the early Roman period and its military equipment.

The find-spot

The finder claimed to have found the dagger on the terrain of Merce, in a vineyard (Štanjel land-survey register plot No. 807/3), where the ground had been levelled out and additional earth brought in from a nearby sinkhole¹. He did not notice any structures or other finds in the vicinity. The terrain of “Merce”, lying about a kilometre SW of Štanjel by the Hruševica road (Fig. 1), has already been noted in the literature, as the location of a Roman settlement, and also of a Roman road connecting the Karst to the Vipava Valley².

The description of the dagger

The dagger (Figs. 2–6)³, which is in excellent condition, is made of iron and is 29.5 cm long. The blade (18.7 cm long), with a pronounced midrib, and the tang are forged in one piece (Fig. 7). The relatively well-preserved right side of the blade indicates that it was not of a waisted form. The handle has two round or (to be more precise oval) expansions, – the top one 3.4 cm wide, and the middle one 2.7 cm wide, – and a triangular hand-guard on its lower terminal. It has a sandwich-like construction, in that the exterior is formed of two iron plates, whereas the interior comprises a flat tang (1.3 to 2 mm thick), which follows the shape of the dagger with its round expansion in the middle. The two iron plates cased the upper end of the blade and the tang, as well as the wooden parts on both sides. The wood is partly preserved only in the upper disc of the handle, as the neutron radiography clearly shows (Figs. 9–10). As seen from the neutron radiography and the X-ray radiography (Figs. 10–11)⁴, the tang seems to have ended at the beginning of the upper disc. Presumably the end of the tang



Fig. 1 : The probable find-spot of the dagger, on the terrain of Merce, SW of Štanjel (Scale 1 : 5000; modified from Atlas Slovenije, Ljubljana 1985).

was pushed into the wood. The various parts of the handle were attached to one another with six iron rivets, – two on the triangular lower part of the handle, one on each of the rod-like parts (above and below the central expansion of the handle), and one in the centre of each of the two circular expansions (Figs. 3–6). The rivets survive on the triangular section and on the rod-like parts of the handle, although they are almost invisible on the surface, whereas in the centre of each of the circular expansions, the rivets are missing (Figs. 4–8). On the upper disc, the gap between the two iron plates is closed from the side by a strip of pure brass (3–4 mm wide)⁵, decorated with a chased motif of wolves’ teeth (Figs. 3 and 6).

The dagger has no front (upper) side as such, because the handle has inlaid decoration on both sides. For practical purposes, the side illustrated on the left in Fig. 4a will be treated as the front side. The decorative motifs are abstract. One side is decorated mainly with straight and slightly curved lines (forming segments of the circumference), the other with distinctly curved lines (Figs. 4 and 5). The upper and central discs are divided into six segments, four or five of them in-filled with tiny concentric grooves, and two or one with straight grooves; the other side has four- and six-petal rosettes. In the centre of each of the discs was a rivet; each rivet head was probably visible and would have constituted part of the decoration. On the reverse side, the motif of the concentric circle in the corrosion layer at the centre of the upper disc suggests that the rivets had also had inlaid decoration. The two rod-like sec-

¹ Bavdek 2006.

² Bavdek 2006; Osmuk 1997; Slapšak 1974.

³ The documentation relating to the dagger is kept in the National Museum of Slovenia (Reference No. Zn 112).

⁴ X-ray radiography was carried out by Zoran Milić (Department of Conservation and Restauration, National Museum of Slovenia) who also discussed their interpretation with the author. NR photographs were undertaken by Jože Rant at Ljubljana TRIGA Mark II research reactor (cf. Rant *et al.* 2006).

⁵ The alloys used in the manufacture of the dagger were analysed by PIXE (proton induced X-ray examination (PIXE), carried out by Žiga Šmit at the tandem accelerator of the Jožef Štefan Institute. The brass of the strip contains ca. 77.5 % of copper and 21.8 % of zinc.

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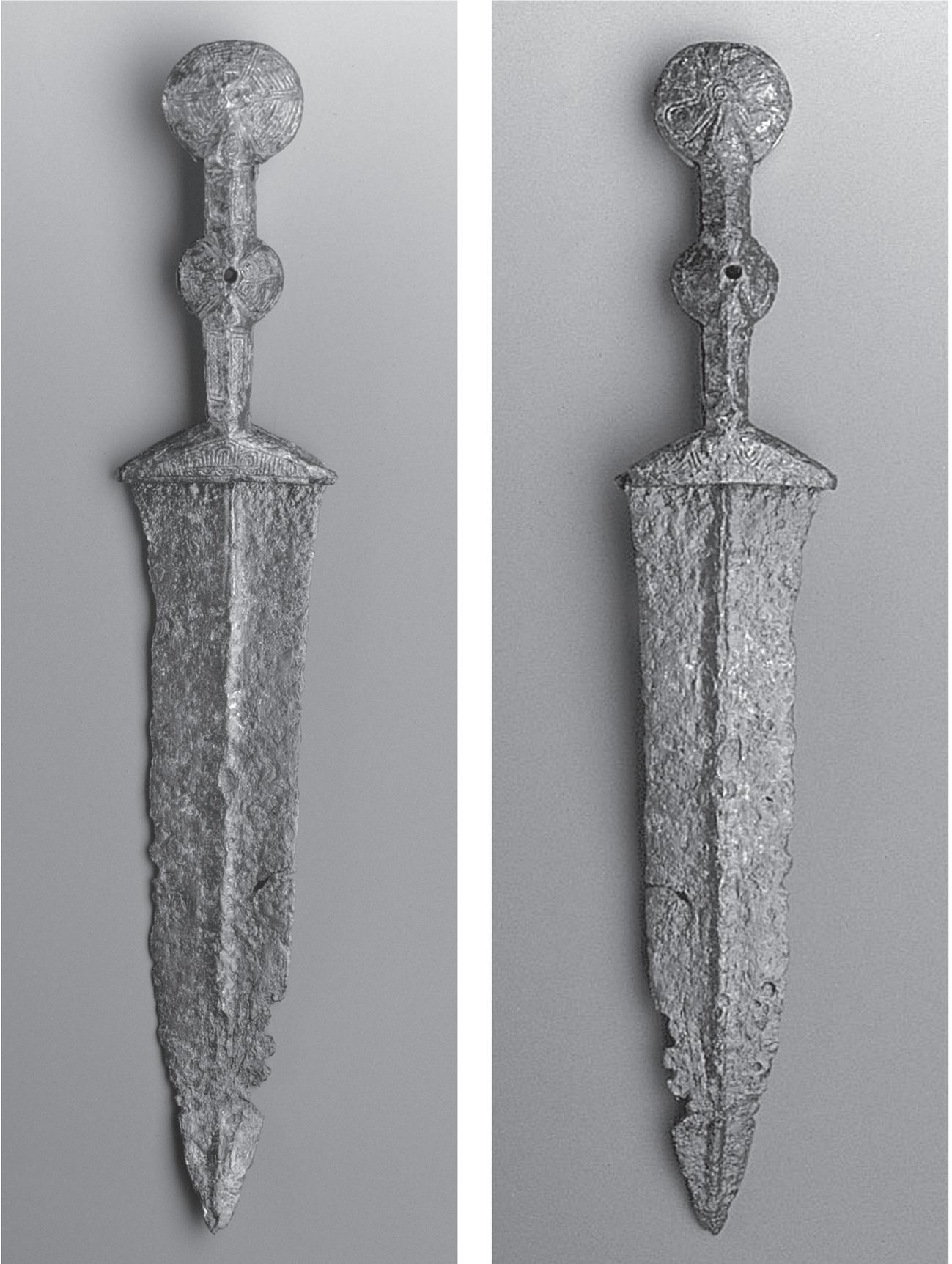


Fig. 2 : Štanjel dagger, both sides. (Not to scale; photograph by Tomaž Lauko, National Museum of Slovenia).

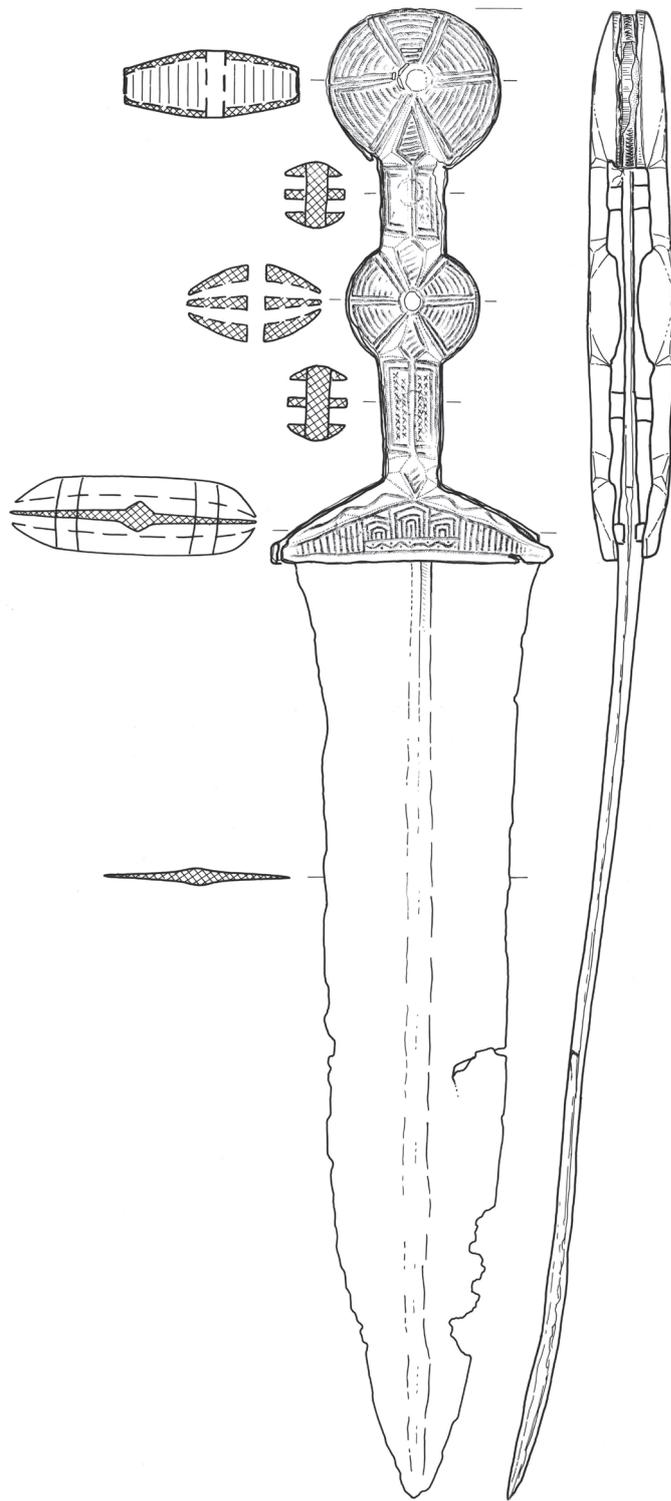


Fig. 3 : Drawing of the Štanjel dagger. (Scale 2 : 3; drawing by Dragica Knific Lunder and Ida Murgelj).

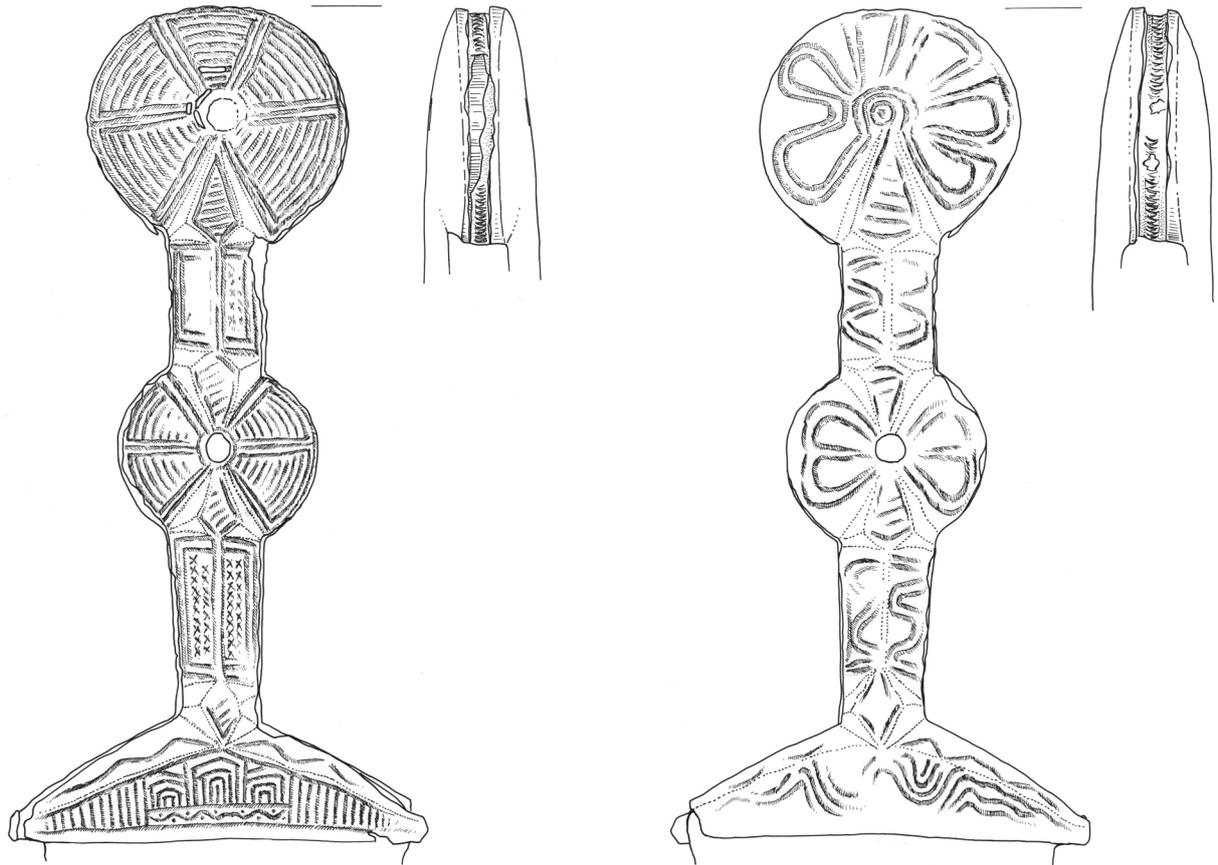


Fig. 4 : Drawing of the handle of the Štanjel dagger, both sides. (Scale 1 : 1; drawing by Dragica Knific Lunder and Ida Murgelj).

tions of the handle are decorated with tiny crosses on one side and with two inter-twined wavy lines on the other. The lower part of the handle has a triangular zone on the front. In the middle, above a tiny wavy line with dots, are three geometric motifs, possibly very stylised representations of aedicules, and the sides are decorated with vertical lines. Above the triangular zone is a wavy line along each upper edge. On the reverse, the triangular section has poorly preserved decoration, consisting of multiple wavy lines.

The inlay in the grooves appears to survive only in three areas on the upper disc of the handle; it is golden yellow in two places and silver in one (Figs. 4 and 5a). The analyses showed that the first was pure brass⁶, whereas the other inlay was most probably silver⁷.

Analyses of the corrosion layer on both sides of the upper disc (inside and outside the grooves), indicated the

presence of zinc and copper⁸; this can be explained as the corrosion of brass in the grooves.

Silver inlays would not have stood out on a fresh iron foundation, so we believe that the iron was made blue by one of the various methods⁹. It is far less likely that the oxidation of silver was used to achieve this effect. The oxidation would have caused the silver surface to turn black¹⁰; however, in that case the iron would have oxidized (i. e. darkened) as well, and again, the silver ornament would not have stood out in contrast.

Also, in the use of brass inlay in combination with other materials, golden yellow and silver decoration on a blue surface would have appeared more striking than black and golden yellow on a grey surface. However, any reconstruction of the original ornament is inevitably difficult, because the layout of the silver and brass inlays is not known.

⁶ Ca. 78 % of copper and 21 % of zinc

⁷ 87–88 % of silver, ca. 9 % of copper and ca. 2–3 % of zinc. The copper and zinc probably originated from the surrounding parts, e. g. the brass parts of the ornament.

⁸ Analyses of five different parts on both sides of the handle showed ca. 0.8 % of zinc and ca 0.3 % of copper in the patina.

⁹ Cf. Obmann 2000, 7.

¹⁰ Cf. Obmann 2000, 7.



Figs. 5a, b : The handle of the Štanjel dagger, both sides. (Not to scale; photograph by Tomaž Lauko, National Museum of Slovenia).

Discussion

The dagger from Štanjel belongs to a group of rare daggers with a double-disc handle, which constitutes the oldest type of Roman dagger¹¹. The predecessor of this dagger-type comprised a very similar group of Celto-Iberian daggers (“puñales dobleglobulares”, “puñales biglobulares”; see further down), which were a component of late Iron Age weaponry in central Spain from the 3rd century BC until the Roman occupation, and were typical of the period of the Celto-Iberian wars with the Romans¹². Daggers of this type were among the finds from the Celto-Iberian *oppidum* of Numantia¹³ and possibly from the surrounding Roman siege-camps¹⁴. Examples from the Roman fortress

of Cáceres el Viejo, Extremadura, Spain (possibly to be identified with the Roman fortress of Castra Caecilia destroyed in 78 BC), may already have constituted part of the equipment of the Roman legionaries¹⁵. Other Roman examples of this type include the dagger from the River Saône¹⁶, possibly the dagger with no surviving handle from Alesia¹⁷, and the dagger from the Roman fortress of Oberaden on the River Lippe¹⁸. This last dagger, which is very similar to the one from the vicinity of Štanjel, is known to the author only from photographs in various publications. The only relatively well preserved side of its handle¹⁹ shows decoration that is nearly identical to the decoration on the upper side of the Štanjel dagger (Figs. 4 and 5a). A photograph²⁰ shows a golden-coloured inlay

¹¹ Bishop – Coulston 2006, 56–57; Connolly 1997, 56–57.

¹² Stary 1994, 139 Pl. 26, 1a. 2a. 3b. 4a; Pl. 27, 1a. 2b; Pl. 32, 4b etc.; Álvarez Gracia – Cebolla Berlanga – Blanco Morte 1990, 288–292 nos. 4, 6, 11, Fig. 4, 1; Fig. 5, 1. 7; Quesada Sanz 1997, 292–295 Fig. 164, VI; Fig. 165, VI; Fig. 173; Schüle 1969, Pl. 33, 7; Pl. 37, 2; Pl. 38, 2; Pl. 43, 1; Pl. 56, 2. 9; Pl. 57, 1. 8; Pl. 58, 2; Pl. 115, 1; Pl. 166, 1–4.

¹³ Luik 2002, 89 Fig. 53, 1–6.

¹⁴ Luik 2002, 196, 232, 268, 358 Fig. 91, 202–205; Fig. 193, 223.

¹⁵ Ulbert 1984, 108–109, 192–194, 197–201 Pl. 25, 195–198; Connolly 1997, 57 Fig. 13, H–L.

¹⁶ Connolly 1997, 56–57 Fig. 13, N.

¹⁷ Connolly 1997, Fig. 13, M; Sievers 2001a, 155; Sievers 2001b, Pl. 54, 182.

¹⁸ Albrecht 1942, 160 Pl. 52, 6. 6a; Römer in Westfalen 1989, Fig. 50; Fig. 87.

¹⁹ Römer in Westfalen 1989, Fig. 50.

²⁰ Römer in Westfalen 1989, Fig. 50.



Fig. 6 : Side view of the handle of the Štanjel dagger. (Not to scale; photograph by Tomaž Lauko, National Museum of Slovenia).

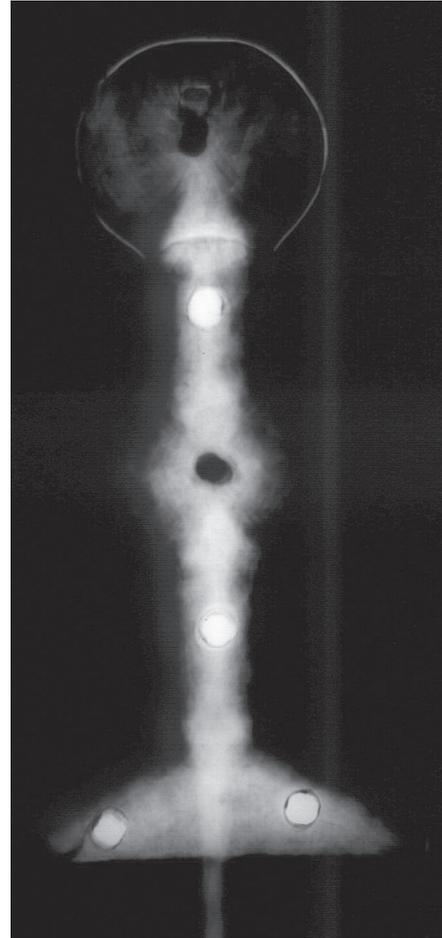


Fig. 8 : X-ray radiography image of the handle of the dagger (front view).



Fig. 7 : X-ray radiography image of the part of the dagger, where the blade turns into the handle (side view). It clearly shows the iron blade in the middle (turning into the tang of the handle), the iron plates on both sides, and one of the two rivets (appearing very bright in the picture) fastening the metal plates to the tang of the handle, on the lower triangular part of the handle.



Fig. 9 : Neutron radiography image of the handle, clearly showing a “structure” in the upper disc which is typical of wood, or more precisely, a slice cut from a branch (ca. 32 mm in diameter).



Fig. 10 : Neutron radiography image of the upper part of the handle (side view).

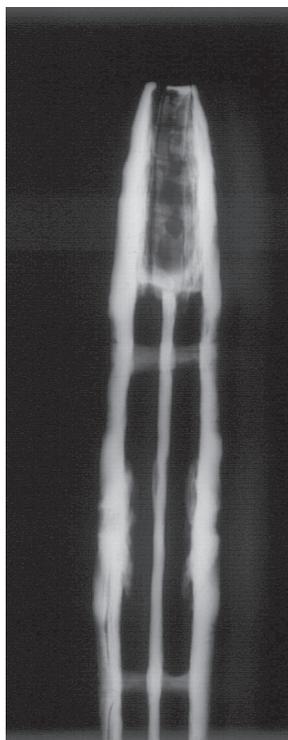


Fig. 11 : X-ray radiography image of the upper part of the handle (side view).

(probably brass) in the radial grooves of the upper disc, and in the radial and horizontal grooves of the handle's central disc; this has a rivet head with a round groove visible, probably a remnant of the inlaid decoration. In the original publication²¹, the description also states that the edge of the handle was encased in a "bronze" sheet metal, but any silver inlay cannot be detected in the photograph. In the other side of the handle cover, only poorly preserved fragments remain, which lack any surviving decoration²². The blade of the dagger is not well preserved²³, and thus its waisted form, apparent on photographs taken after its conservation and restoration²⁴, seems to be no more than one of several possibilities. The blade exhibits vertical laminations, visible due to the advanced state of corrosion; they suggest that the blade had been damascened²⁵. This is not the case with the much better preserved blade of the Štanjel dagger.

Celto-Iberian and Roman daggers with a double-disc handle differ only slightly from one another²⁶. The handles of the Celto-Iberian daggers can be richly decorated, particularly with silver inlaying, but also with copper or gold circular sheets of metal²⁷.

It has generally been accepted that the Roman daggers and their scabbards adopted from Celto-Iberian daggers their form, and their techniques of manufacture and decoration (e. g. inlay, which had a long tradition on the Iberian Peninsula)²⁸, but that this adoption applied less to the decorative motifs²⁹. However, the motifs on the Štanjel dagger do indicate connections with Celto-Iberian daggers. In fact, the use of concentric circles divided by radial lines into six segments has no real analogies among the Roman daggers, but is fairly close, for example, to the decoration on a Celto-Iberian dagger from La Osere de Chamartín³⁰.

The Štanjel dagger is also distinct in having decoration on both sides of the handle. Roman daggers of later type (with a semi-circular handle-terminal) were normally decorated on only one side of the handle, – exceptions are rare³¹ – in order to coordinate with the single-sided ornament on their scabbards, with which the decoration on the handle formed a compositional whole. Inlay was executed with silver, and rarely with brass³² or a combination of

²¹ Albrecht 1942, 160.

²² Kühlbom 1988, 586–587 Cat. 417b.

²³ Albrecht 1942, Pl. 52, 6a.

²⁴ Cf. Kühlbom 1988, 586–587 Cat. 417b; Römer in Westfalen 1989, Fig. 50; Fig. 87.

²⁵ Kühlbom 1988, 586–587 Cat. 417b.

²⁶ Connolly 1997, 56.

²⁷ Egg 1986, 906–908 Fig. 91; Cabré 1990, 222 Fig. 28; Cabre Herreros – Moran Cabre 1991, 346–347 Fig. 1; Fig. 2, A.

²⁸ Born 1998.

²⁹ Cf. Obmann 2000, 5, 14; Helmig 1990, 161.

³⁰ Avila : Cabre Herreros – Moran Cabre 1991, Fig. 1; Fig. 2, A.

³¹ Obmann 2000, 30 Abb. 4, 31; Abb. 6.

³² The yellow inlays are often (wrongly) described as »bronze« in publications (cf. Obmann 2000, 11, 13). Analyses of four daggers of the early Principate from the River Ljubljana have shown that the yellow inlays were brass (publication in preparation). The same applies to the dagger



Fig. 12 : The find-spot of the dagger in the vicinity of Štanjel (▲), in its wider geo-political setting in the Augustan period.

both³³. It is often unclear from publications, as to whether these Celto-Iberian daggers have decoration on both sides of the handle; however, definite examples of this phenomenon are known³⁴.

Important for the dating of the Štanjel dagger is the Oberaden fortress, which was occupied for only a short period of time, between 11 and 8/7 BC³⁵. Among late Roman Republican weapons, the existence of daggers with a double disc handle is clearly documented on the reverse of Roman silver coins (denarii) which were struck for Marcus Junius Brutus in Greece in a travelling mint, and which commemorated the assassination of Caesar³⁶. The Oberaden example is the latest closely dated example of a dagger with a double disc handle. At the more or less contemporary fortress of Dangstetten on the Upper Rhine, “frame-like” scabbards³⁷, belonging to either daggers with a double disc handle, or to daggers with a cross-like handle – seen on the coins of 43/42 BC just mentioned, as well as on coins of 25/23 BC³⁸, – were found side by side with daggers of later type, with a semi-circular flat-topped handle-terminal and corresponding scabbards³⁹. This seems to suggest that all the three dagger-types were in use at

least by the beginning of the middle Augustan period. The Štanjel dagger follows the same basic design as the dagger from Oberaden, so we may assume it was also made at about the same time. Because such elaborately decorated weapons were probably relatively valuable and therefore not readily discarded, the dagger from Oberaden might have been produced as early as the early Augustan period. The datespan for the Štanjel dagger is therefore likely to be middle- or possible early Augustan.

The interpretation of the find from its find-spot

The find-spot of the Štanjel dagger lies in the wider hinterland of the Vipava Valley, which was traversed by the main road from Aquileia to the central Danube region and the northern Balkans. Even older examples of Roman military equipment are known from the area. At Lokavec-Kovačevše, on the southern fringes of the Trnovski gozd north above the Vipava Valley, parts of a late-Republican helmet were found⁴⁰. The brooches of the Alesia group, recovered from the same find-spot, also probably relate to the presence of Roman soldiers⁴¹.

It was probably soon after the foundation of Aquileia (183/181 BC) that the Vipava Valley came under Roman control. At Razdrto (Ocra), which is the key pass on the route inland, there was a Roman installation as early as the second half of the 2nd century BC⁴².

The finds of Roman weapons and other types of Roman military equipment are normally interpreted as indicators of the presence of the Roman army in the area. In the

from Haltern (Harnacker 1997, 31).

³³ Obmann 2000, 13.

³⁴ E. g. Egg 1986.

³⁵ Kühnborn 1995, 120–124.

³⁶ Mackensen 2001, 352–353 Fig. 5, 1.

³⁷ E. g. Fingerlin 1986, 188 Abb. 11; Fingerlin 1998, 1034 Abb. 2.

³⁸ Mackensen 2001, Fig. 5.

³⁹ E.g. Fingerlin 1986, 207 Abb. 3; Fingerlin 1998, 972 Abb. 5; 1143 Abb. 5. – The dagger with a flat-topped handle-terminal from Titelberg, Luxembourg (Mackensen 2001, Fig. 1, 5–6; *Préhistoire et Protohistoire au Luxembourg* 2005, 197) indicates that (the earliest) daggers of this type could also have a “frame-like”, hispanic type of scabbard.

⁴⁰ Svoljšak 1983, Pl. 5.

⁴¹ Istenič 2005a, 192, 194, 197–198 Pl. 1, 3. 9. 15. 16.

⁴² Bavdek 1996.

wider region of the Vipava Valley, in the early and middle Augustan period, this may be envisaged in various contexts, connected to either peacetime activities (e. g. soldiers helping with road construction, bridge-building and the like), or to war-related activities (e. g. the advances of the army along the Vipava Valley, which were presumably frequent in the Augustan period). These were, in fact, the final stages of the Roman conquest of present-day Slovenia,⁴³ and of the wider part of the later province of Pannonia, which ended with the suppression of the Pannonian-Delmatian uprising (AD 6–9). Among other evidence, the significance of the south-eastern Alps for the Roman army in this period is indicated by the finds from Nauportus⁴⁴, by various Roman military finds from the River Ljubljanica⁴⁵, by the forts at Obrežje⁴⁶ and nearby Sredno polje near Čatež⁴⁷, by the legionary fortress at Poetovio⁴⁸, as well as from the graves containing Roman weapons from Dolenjska (Lower Carniola) and the Idrijca Valley. These burials suggest that local men were being recruited into auxiliary units⁴⁹.

Conclusion

The Štanjel dagger is a single find, with no archaeological context, so its dating depends entirely on typological criteria. These indicate that it belongs to the earliest known Roman dagger-type, that is, daggers with a double-disc handle. The closest parallel is the dagger from the Roman fortress of Oberaden (dated between 11–8/7 BC), which constitutes the latest dagger of this type from a dated context. The Štanjel dagger thus indicates the presence of the Roman army in the middle and possibly the early Augustan period, in the Karst, in the hinterland of the Vipava Valley with its very important route from Aquileia towards the Balkans and the central Danube region.

⁴³ By the beginning of the Augustan period the Romans already controlled the western and central part of the south-east Alps, with Nauportus and Emona, and probably also the wider mountainous region of the Idrijsko-Cerkljansko hribovje and Dolenjska (Horvat 1999, 218–219; Istenič 2005b; Šašel Kos 1997).

⁴⁴ Horvat – Mušič 2007, 170–171.

⁴⁵ Istenič 2008.

⁴⁶ Mason 2006; Mason 2008.

⁴⁷ Guštin 2002.

⁴⁸ Istenič 2000, 13, fn. 2.

⁴⁹ Breščak 1986; Breščak 1989; Istenič 2005b.

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