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— *a River and its  
Past*



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# The Ljubljanica — *a River and its Past*

edited by  
Peter Turk,  
Janka Istenič,  
Timotej Knific and  
Tomaž Nabergoj

# Contents

|    | Prehistory  | Roman Period  |
|----|---|---|
| 9  | <b>Introduction</b><br><i>Janka Istenič</i>   | 79 <b>The Ljubljana – a Roman trade and transport route</b><br><i>Janka Istenič</i>                                       |
| 13 | <b>The geology of the Ljubljansko barje</b><br><i>Tomaž Verbič and Aleksander Horvat</i>  | 86 <b>The Ljubljana and the Roman army</b><br><i>Janka Istenič</i>  |
| 21 | <b>Climatic change and marsh vegetation at the end of the Pleistocene and in the Holocene</b><br><i>Maja Andrič</i>                     | 92 <b>The Ljubljana in ancient sources</b><br><i>Marjeta Šašel Kos</i>  |
| 26 | <b>The history of the acquisition of finds and archaeological investigation of the Ljubljana</b><br><i>Andrej Gaspari</i>               | 96 <b>Nauportus – a settlement at the beginning of the transportation route along the Ljubljana</b><br><i>Jana Horvat</i> |
| 32 | <b>The conservation and restoration of finds from Ljubljana</b><br><i>Zoran Milič, Gorazd Lemajič, Sonja Perovšek and Janka Istenič</i> | 102 <b>Emona – a Roman trading centre on the Ljubljana</b><br><i>Janka Istenič</i>  |
|    | 38 <b>The Ljubljana in prehistory</b><br><i>Andrej Gaspari</i>  | 108 <b>Ig – a rural settlement on the southern edge of the Ljubljansko barje</b><br><i>Marjeta Šašel Kos</i>              |
|    | 45 <b>Zalog near Verd. A hunting camp from the middle Stone Age</b><br><i>Andrej Gaspari</i>  | 112 <b>The Roman regulation of the Ljubljana and the draining of the Ljubljansko barje</b><br><i>Andrej Gaspari</i>       |
|    | 51 <b>The pile-dwelling settlements of the Ljubljansko barje and contemporary finds from the Ljubljana</b><br><i>Anton Velušček</i>     | 116 <b>A cargo ship of Mediterranean sewn construction from Lipe</b><br><i>Andrej Gaspari</i>                             |
|    | 56 <b>The fauna of the pile-dwelling settlement period</b><br><i>Borut Toškan</i>   | 120 <b>The Ljubljana and the myth of the Argonauts</b><br><i>Marjeta Šašel Kos</i>  |
|    | 59 <b>Relationships between people and animals in prehistory</b><br><i>László Bartosiewicz, Alice M. Choyke and Erika Gál</i>           |   |
|    | 61 <b>The earliest metal artefacts from the Ljubljana – an archaeometallurgical review</b><br><i>Neva Trampuž Orel</i>                  |   |
|    | 66 <b>Gifts to the gods and ancestors</b><br><i>Peter Turk and Andrej Gaspari</i>   |   |
|    | 72 <b>Celtic warriors and the Ljubljana</b><br><i>Andrej Gaspari</i>  |   |

| Middle Ages |  | Modern Era |  | Catalogue |   |
|-------------|--|------------|--|-----------|---|
| 125         | The Ljubljana and its long Middle Ages<br><i>Tomaž Nabergoj</i>                  | 162        | The Ljubljana from the Modern Era to date: the nature and culture of the river<br><i>Tomaž Nabergoj and Matija Žargi</i> | 213       | Introduction<br><i>Janka Istenič</i>  |
| 131         | Barbarian soldiers on the Ljubljana<br><i>Polona Bitenc and Timotej Knific</i>   | 169        | Archival sources of the Ljubljana from the 16 <sup>th</sup> to 18 <sup>th</sup> centuries<br><i>Olga Pivk</i>            | 217       | Prehistory<br><i>Andrej Gaspari, Neva Trampuž Orel and Peter Turk with contributions by Janka Istenič and Alenka Miškec</i>                         |
| 136         | The Ljubljana and the early Slavs<br><i>Timotej Knific</i>                       | 173        | Valvasor's Ljubljana<br><i>Matija Žargi</i>  | 265       | Roman Period<br><i>Janka Istenič with contributions by Milan Lovenjak, Alenka Miškec and Timotej Knific</i>   |
| 142         | Ljubljana in the Middle Ages<br><i>Miha Kosi</i>                                 | 179        | Fužine Castle and the onset of industry along the Ljubljana<br><i>Maja Žvanut and Mateja Kos</i>                         | 319       | Middle Ages<br><i>Polona Bitenc, Timotej Knific, Tomaž Nabergoj and Nika Veršnik with a contribution by Julijana Visočnik</i>                       |
| 148         | Navigation on the Ljubljana in the Middle Ages<br><i>Miha Kosi</i>               | 184        | Regulation of the Ljubljana<br><i>Matija Žargi</i>   | 373       | Modern Period<br><i>Blaženka First, Mateja Kos, Darija Mavrič, Tomaž Nabergoj, Nika Veršnik and Matija Žargi with a contribution by Igor Cvetko</i> |
| 153         | Arms and armour from the era of knights and mercenaries<br><i>Tomaž Nabergoj</i> | 189        | The Ljubljana in old books<br><i>Anja Dular</i>  | 465       | Brief Explanations of Selected Terms and Persons  |
| 158         | A time of citizens, a time of merchants<br><i>Tomaž Nabergoj</i>                 | 194        | The portrait of a river: views of a town on the Ljubljana<br><i>Blaženka First</i>                                       | 469       | Bibliography<br><i>edited by Barbara Jerin</i>  |
|             |  | 204        | They were meeting along the Ljubljana ...<br><i>Darija Mavrič</i>  |           |   |

# The Ljubljana – a Roman trade and transport route

Janka Istenič

When the Romans arrived, the Ljubljansko barje (Ljubljana Marshes; further: Barje) was undoubtedly more boggy than at present (Fig. 78). It seems that the Romans did not carry out extensive drainage works, and made no major changes to the course of the Ljubljana.<sup>1</sup>

The Ljubljana, which was navigable from *Nauportus*, flowed calmly and slowly, and was thus highly suitable for navigation, both downstream and upstream. It was the main route for transport through the Barje, as the possibilities of travel overland were limited by the marshy nature of the terrain.<sup>2</sup>

The Roman finds from the Ljubljana come from the silty riverbed through the Barje. No objects are known from the section east of Ljubljana, where they are probably hidden by riverine gravel deposits. Most of the artefacts were found in the western part of the Barje, where the Vrhnika and Bevke areas are particularly notable for their concentrations of find-spots. The artefacts are most abundant in the section from the mouth of the Zrnica stream to the boundary between the territories of the towns of *Aquileia* and *Emona*<sup>3</sup> (Figs. 79, 82: 6; Cat. 44). In the eastern part of the Barje, most of the finds come from Ljubljana itself.<sup>4</sup>

The most numerous Roman objects from the Ljubljana are pottery vessels. Cups and beakers,

most of them Italian products, are particularly well represented (Cat. 81). Iron tools are frequent finds, particularly shipping equipment and axes. Other well-represented items include weapons (Cat. 60–77),<sup>5</sup> metal vessels (Cat. 55, 56), knives, brooches (Cat. 80), and coins (Cat. 43, 46, 47, 52, 53).<sup>6</sup> Early Roman finds predominate, most of them dating to the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC and the first half of the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD; this was the period of early Roman activity in this region.<sup>7</sup>

Roman finds are known from many rivers in Europe.<sup>8</sup> The reasons for this are numerous and varied, and for individual items or groups of objects, they usually remain unexplained or merely hypothetical.<sup>9</sup>

The deliberate placement of objects in a river may have been connected with religious beliefs, or be of a completely secular nature, such as the discarding of unwanted objects in the water. The first category might have included, for example, sacrifices on the occasion of the construction of a ford<sup>10</sup> or a bridge, and votive gifts (*e.g.* after crossing a river), as well as offerings connected with the worship of springs, of other “holy parts” of a river,<sup>11</sup> or of an entire river.<sup>12</sup> A significant number of objects probably fell into the water accidentally - for example, at docks during the handling of cargoes,

Figure 78. At present, even after extensive drainage projects, there are still floods in the Barje. The central part of this area is subject to annual flooding, but extensive flooding (covering most of the Barje) is rare.



Figure 79. The Ljubljana basin with areas and sites mentioned in the text.

- 1<sup>st</sup> century BC
- 1<sup>st</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup>/4<sup>th</sup> century
- find spot of an exceptional find

→ Figure 80. On the *Tabula Peutingeriana*, the only extant Roman map (surviving as a 12<sup>th</sup> century copy), the rivers Ljubljanica and Sava (the latter without the upper stretch above its confluence with the Ljubljanica) are shown as one river, presumably reflecting the importance of the route along both rivers. The illustration shows a 60.7cm-long section from the copy of the *Tabula Peutingeriana*, made by Valentin Vodnik and kept in the National Museum of Slovenia.



or in the course of crossing or navigating a river, or from shipwrecks.<sup>13</sup> Other circumstances of deposition might have included activities on and beside a river, such as fishing, or cutting back plants on the banks. Numerous objects also entered the water because of the undercutting of the riverbanks.

Only on rare occasions is it possible to determine how individual finds came to be in the Ljubljana. For example, the statuette of the god Apollo has a distinctly votive character (Cat. 41). The boundary stone (Cat. 44) originally stood on a bank and was washed away by the river, and the tombstone of Titus Caesernius Diphilus from *Emona* (Fig. 107) probably fell into the water by accident during unloading.

In the Barje, the steep banks and soft, deep riverbed of the Ljubljana made it unsuitable for fording at times of normal water levels.<sup>14</sup> Crossing the river was thus possible only by ferry or bridge, and the only indication for the latter comes from *Emona*.<sup>15</sup>

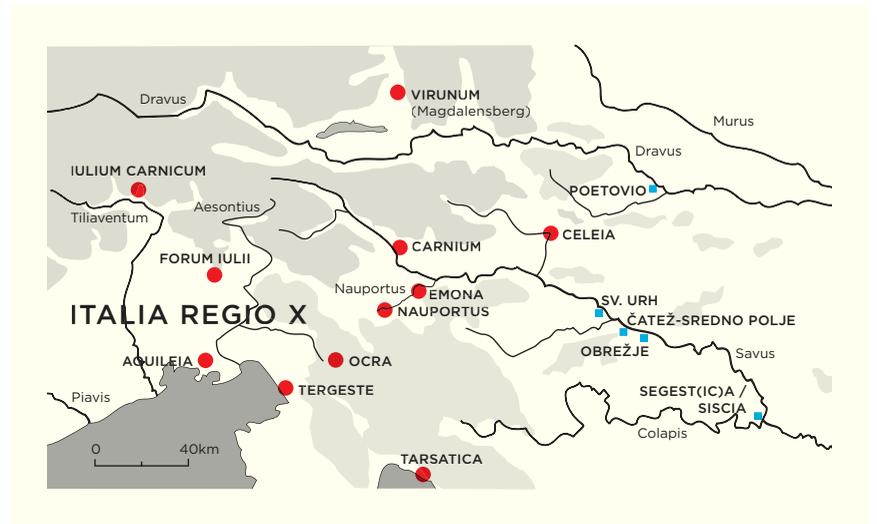


Figure 81. The Ljubljana in its wider geo-political setting in the period of the emperor Augustus.

- civil settlement
- military settlement



Figure 82. Aerial orthogonal photograph of the Ljubljansko barje (oriented roughly towards north) with the c. 4km-long section of the Ljubljanica to the east of the mouth of the Bistra stream (2). The find-spot of the boundary-stone (6) is situated just before the characteristic bend of the river. Roman finds are abundant c. from the mouth of the Zrnica stream (3) to the bend. The course of the Stara (Old) Ljubljanica (7) can also be seen. In the upper part of the photograph are isolated elevations near Bevke; the one to the south is Gradišče (8). The dirt road leads from below Gradišče to the Ljubljanica and the Kamin farmhouse (4).

1 the Ljubljanica, 2 the Bistra, 3 the Zrnica, 4 Kamin farmhouse, 5 the Borovniščica, 6 find-spot of the boundary stone (Cat. 44), 7 the course of the Stara Ljubljanica, 8 the site of Gradišče near Bevke, 9 Bevke, 10 Blatna Brezovica.

Image acquired with (aerial) digital mapping camera, Geodetski zavod Slovenije, March 2008.





A large portion of the finds from the Ljubljani-  
ca probably relates to the exceptionally impor-  
tant role of this river for transport. Prior to the  
construction of the road between *Nauportus* and  
*Emona*, the Ljubljani-  
ca was, in fact, the main link  
between Italy and the northern Adriatic, the Danube  
basin and the Balkans, as it represented the logical  
continuation of the route from *Aquileia*, across the  
pass of *Ocra* (Razdrto) to Postojna and *Nauportus*  
(Fig. 81). In his work *Geography* (4. 207 and 7. 314),  
the Greek writer Strabo described the situation  
in the second half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> century BC. In  
the 4<sup>th</sup> book, he wrote that the trade caravans from  
*Aquileia* stopped at *Nauportus* and transferred  
their cargoes from wagons to ships, which then  
continued along the Ljubljani-  
ca and Sava to the  
Danube and adjacent regions. The even earlier use  
of the route along the Danube, Sava, and Ljubljani-  
ca, and further overland to the Adriatic Sea, is  
related in the Greek legend of the Argonauts.<sup>16</sup>  
The exploitation of this navigable route along the  
Ljubljani-  
ca is also evidenced by inscribed stones,<sup>17</sup>  
by the document known as the *Tabula Peutingeri-  
ana* (Fig. 80),<sup>18</sup> and also by the discovery of a large  
Roman wooden cargo ship (Cat. 78).<sup>19</sup> The fact that it  
was found some 300 metres from the Ljubljani-  
ca itself, and that it was empty (with no cargo), sug-

gests that it had been deposited during one of the  
many floods on the Barje, probably when it was  
no longer fit for cargo-transport. A large ship such  
as this, which could have been turned around on  
the river only at a tributary,<sup>20</sup> would not have been  
left to decay on the river. As in previous and subse-  
quent periods, hollowed-out tree-trunks were also  
used for shipping in the Roman period.<sup>21</sup> Naviga-  
tion along the river is also reflected in the numer-  
ous tools connected with shipping, axes and sickles  
used to clear plant growth from its banks.

The decline in the frequency of finds from the  
Ljubljani-  
ca from after the Augustan period most  
probably reflects a reduction in river traffic. Major  
military activities connected with the conquest  
and pacification of the (later) province of Pan-  
nonia were over in the late Augustan period, and  
at approximately the same time, a road was built  
along the fringe of the Barje between *Naupor-  
tus* and *Emona*.<sup>22</sup> Thus the importance of the  
Ljubljani-  
ca as a transport route was reduced with  
the construction of this road, as it no longer made  
sense to load Italian cargoes onto ships destined  
for *Emona* and further overland (*i.e.* for *Celeia*,  
*Poetovio*, and beyond). However, for many of the  
cargoes destined for the Balkans, the route along  
the Ljubljani-  
ca and Sava was still the most appro-

Figure 83. The cult of *Ae-  
cornia*, the most important  
indigenous local goddess in  
the *Emona* basin, and prob-  
ably also the patroness of  
the marshes (among other  
attributes), reflects close con-  
nections between the inhab-  
itants of the Barje region,  
in both the Roman period  
and earlier. Three stones  
with votive inscriptions to  
*Aecorna* were found in 1820  
at Castle Hill (Ljubljanski  
grad) in Ljubljana. Either  
they were brought there from  
the vicinity of *Emona*, or a  
shrine dedicated to the god-  
dess was located on the hill,  
which has a fine view of the  
entire Barje region. There was  
also a shrine to *Aecorna* at  
*Nauportus*.



Figure 84. Aerial orthogonal photograph of the Ljubljana in the area near Zalog, oriented roughly south. A Roman fort is situated at Gradišče (6), on the elevated area between the Ljubljana (2) and the highest terrace of the River Sava (3). In the lower left part of the photograph, the rivers Sava (4) and Kamniška Bistrica (5) as well as their confluence are visible.

1 Zalog, 2 Ljubljana, 3 the Sava terrace, 4 the Sava, 5 the Kamniška Bistrica, 6 Gradišče.

Image acquired with (aerial) digital mapping camera, Geodetski zavod Slovenije, March 2008.

priate and least expensive. Also, the Ljubljana was very suitable for local shipping from the Barje region to *Emona*, particularly, for example, for the transport of limestone from Podpeč, which constituted an important building material for *Emona*.<sup>23</sup>

The concentrations of riverine finds in the vicinity of Vrhnika and Ljubljana are not surprising. The only certain Roman settlements along the river, *Nauportus* and *Emona*, were situated on firm ground on the margin of the Barje, at the beginning and end of the navigable route through the marshes. The distinct density of Roman (and earlier) finds in the Bevke section of the river suggests the existence of an earlier settlement, probably at Gradišče near Bevke, with a presumed port and ferry roughly in the area of the present-day Kamin farm (Fig. 82: 4, 8).<sup>24</sup> In the Podpeč area, where firm ground extends all the way to the Ljubljana, and where Roman quarries were located, a small settlement with a wharf may also be expected. On the

plateau at Zalog, situated above the former confluence of the Rivers Ljubljana and Sava, a Roman fort controlled this strategically important area (Fig. 84: 6).<sup>25</sup>

## Notes

- 1 The swamps mentioned by the Roman historian, *Tacitus* (*Ann.* I. 17. 5), as one of the causes of the rebellion in the summer of AD 14 at *Nauportus*, where detachments of three Pannonian legions were garrisoned, might well refer to the Barje (Šašel 1959, 118; Šašel 1970; Šašel Kos 1995, 237). Analyses of seeds from the excavations at Vrhniko in 2005 suggest that there were wetland areas in the vicinity of the settlement (T. Korenčič, in: *Nauportus* between the Adriatic and Danube. Exhibition, Vrhniko - Ljubljana, 2006–2007).
- 2 In the central Barje, overland routes could primarily use natural dykes along the banks of the Ljubljana (Gaspari 2003, 47). Along the eastern fringes of the marshes, near Babna Gorica, there are remains of a secondary Roman road, which probably led to Ig (Vuga 1985, 31–32; Šašel 1959, 117), whereas the main *Aquileia–Emona* road ran along the northern fringe (Horvat 1990, 167).
- 3 Šašel Kos 2002.
- 4 Gaspari 2002a, appendices 10–15.
- 5 Istenič in this volume, pp. 86–91.
- 6 In addition to the quoted catalogue numbers also a collective find of coins dating to the second half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century (*FMRSI* I, 155/6) and individual coin-finds (*FMRSI* I, 155/45; *FMRSI* III, 84; *FMRSI* IV, 88, 91, 92, 103, 109/1, 115).
- 7 Cf. Istenič in this volume, pp. 86–91, Cat. 44–82.
- 8 For example, the Rhine (Klein 2000; Schalles, Schreiter 1993; Künzl 1993), the Saône (Dumont 2002, 172–190); the Danube (Wirth 2000, 88–89; Wehrberger 2001, 55–56; Vujović 2001), the Moselle (Fontaine 2001; Gilles 2001), the Sava and Kupa (Hoffiller 1910–1911; Hoffiller 1912; Miškiv 1998; Šarić 1985), and the Cetina (Milošević 2003).
- 9 The reasons for the appearance of Roman finds in rivers have been significantly illuminated by a systematic archaeological study of the Saône (France). There, the majority of finds come from the vicinity of fords, where objects entered the water from structures on the banks (warehouses, trans-shipment points, etc.) which had been subsequently undercut, from deliberate (votive) depositions, and from ships and boats which frequently ran aground at fords (Dumont 2002, 165–190, 213–216).
- 10 Dumont 2002, 119, 174, 180, 215.
- 11 Müller 2002, 56–70.
- 12 Cf. Dumont 2002, 187–188; Šašel Kos 1994; Šašel Kos in this volume, p. 92; Milošević 2003, 15, 18 (upper ill.), 26; for an overview of cult sacrifices see Müller 2002, 19–31.
- 13 Cf. Šarić 1985.
- 14 Gaspari 2003, 46, 47. For the necessary conditions for fords, see Dumont 2002, 29–30, 214.
- 15 Cf. Istenič in this volume, p. 105.
- 16 Šašel Kos 1990; Šašel Kos in this volume, pp. 120–124.
- 17 Inscriptions from *Emona* mentioning an association of boatmen and a sailor in the Pannonian navy (Šašel Kos in this volume, p. 94, Fig. 93, 94), three votive inscriptions to Neptune from *Emona* (Šašel 1968, 568; Šašel Kos 1994, 109), and one from Bistra (Šašel Kos 1990, 149–150). The difficulty of traversing the rapids at Fužine is reflected in an altar with a votive dedication to the local deity *Laburus* (Šašel Kos 1999b, 52).
- 18 Vuga 1985, 32.
- 19 Gaspari in this volume, pp. 116–119.
- 20 The ship was 30 metres long, and the Ljubljana is no wider than 30 metres.
- 21 Erič 1994, 74–75.
- 22 At present, the only evidence for the dating of this road is a statement by the 4<sup>th</sup>-century Roman writer, Festus (*Breviarium* VII 51, 10–13). He mentioned that the road had been built over the Julian Alps during the reign of the emperor Augustus. His note refers to the road that, leading over the Hrušica (*Ad pirum*) pass, connected *Aquileia* to *Nauportus*. This was shorter than the earlier route over the Razdrto pass (Šašel 1975–1976, 435–436, 449). It is presumed that the *Nauportus–Emona* road was built soon after it reached *Nauportus*. Its construction was perhaps one of the causes of the rebellion by Roman soldiers at *Nauportus* on the death of Augustus in AD 14.
- 23 Gaspari 1998b, 33.
- 24 Cf. Vuga 1985, 34; Šašel Kos 2002, 373–374; Gaspari 2002a, 227, 253–254.
- 25 Mikl Curk 1968; Mikl Curk 1986.