

THE STRUCTURE OF ROMAN IMPORT IN SLOVAKIA

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Since the time of Eggers there has been a remarkable increase of the number of Roman imports in Slovakia. While Eggers refers to 56 sites and several dozens of objects of Roman provenance, up to now more than 200 sites have yielded about 2,000 pieces of Roman goods – this number does not include coarse pottery. However, many objects come from sites where more archeological research of which may bring to light even more finds of Roman imports.

The finds of pottery are numerically the most frequent among the imported Roman material in Slovakia. They come almost solely from settlement-sites, grave-finds are rare. This applies to terra sigillata as well as to other types of pottery. Especially the settlement-sites in the southwest region of Slovakia that formerly adjoining the border of the Roman Empire have each yielded several dozens or even hundreds of fragments of ceramic vessels each. Sites with finds of terra sigillata correspond geographically more or less with sites referred to in connection with other types of Roman pottery, they only differ in their numbers. Up to the present time 1125 fragments of terra sigillata have been found at 134 sites, i.e. an average of 8.4 fragments per site. In view of the area of the territory being under consideration this number represents the highest concentrations within the whole barbaricum including the Sarmatian territory.

Finds of other types of pottery have not been evaluated quantitatively but it is obvious that there are thousands of fragments representing almost each type of pottery found in the province of Pannonia. Particularly the coarse pottery provides the best evidence for contacts between barbarians and the Roman Empire as well as for their intensity. It did not belong to long-distance trade articles and the borderland was supplied with it through Roman markets. Moreover, some vessel forms seem to have been produced by Roman potters merely to satisfy the needs and taste of customers from beyond the border. This applies first of all to so called 'Ringschüssel' – a very popular vessel shape within barbaricum. The fact that pottery has been discovered at all settlement-sites indicates its widespread use in every day life. Its various types and vessel shapes cannot be dated precisely in most cases but there is no doubt that after the building of the limes had been completed in the end of the 1st century, the amount of

Roman pottery in barbaricum began to increase. Pottery – especially glazed mortaria – represents almost the only kind of Roman ware that is found at barbarian sites up to the beginning of the 5th century.

Other kinds of Roman imports have been revealed first of all through excavations of cemeteries. However numerically frequent the finds might appear, the number of these objects does not correspond with their real distribution in barbarian environment for several reasons:

1. Bronze objects that did not get into graves were probably melted down (in case they had been broken) and used as a raw material designed for production of accessories like brooches, belt-buckles etc.
2. The Late Roman Period is characterized by the reduction of grave inventory. Roman imports almost cease to occur among the grave-goods (with the exception of richly furnished burials). Yet the finds of pottery that may be ascribed to this period provide evidence of continuing contacts with the Roman Empire.
3. The archeological research of settlement-sites and publication of finds falls behind the research of cemeteries.

Bronze vessels are the most numerous grave-finds of all Roman imports. Together with a small amount of these objects coming from settlements 356 pieces of bronze vessels have been discovered at 25 sites in the Slovak territory this is, on the average, 14.3 pieces per site (the ladle-strainer-set counts for one vessel). This is a rather high number in comparison with other regions of barbaricum. The fact that about 70% of all bronze vessels has been found in the three cemeteries situated close to each other Abrahám, Sládkovičovo and Kostolná (Kolník 1980) makes it even more exceptional. This cannot be interpreted as a coincidence, because precisely these three cemeteries are situated in the centre of so called Vannius client-kingdom in the southwestern part of Slovakia. The last one is the richest site, considering the amount of imports in proportion to the number of graves (Tab. 4.1).

In Kostolná 115 imports have been discovered in 68 graves i.e. an average number of 1.69 find per grave. The most numerous, as was mentioned above, were the bronze vessels: an average of one vessel per grave. However, only

55.9% of all graves contained imports. Among these, graves with weapons show the highest concentration of such finds suggesting that especially burials of warrior class members were furnished with imported Roman goods. The same applies also to the other two cemeteries.

Tab. 4.1 Numbers of Roman imports in three cemeteries in Southwest Slovakia

	No. of imports	No. of graves	Average number
Kostolná	115	68	1.69
Sládkovičovo	101	88	1.14
Abrahám	150	238	0.63

A slightly smaller number of imports (101) has been found at Sládkovičovo – 1.14 on average. Only 34.1% of all graves contained objects of Roman provenance. The highest number of Roman imports comes from Abrahám (150) – yet only from 15.7% of all graves, i.e. on average 0.63 object per grave.

The distribution of Roman imports may represent an indicator of social differentiation in the members of society, buried in these three cemeteries. The most richly furnished graves contained five and more Roman imports, especially bronze vessels. However, objects of Germanic provenance are more numerous. The fact, however, that mentioned cemeteries are characterized by cremation graves and, moreover, that the richest among them contain weapons does not allow to label them as chieftains' graves. In the territory of Slovakia such graves are situated outside large cremation cemeteries and they are exclusively inhumation graves.

Among other kinds of imports, brooches are the most frequent. Fifty-seven sites have yielded 253 items – that means 4.4 per site. Other types of Roman imports are not so numerous (Tab. 4.2).

Tab. 4.2 Number of various Roman imports in Slovakia

	No. of pieces	No. of sites	Average number
Terra sigillata	1,125	134	8.4
Bronze vessels	356	25	14.3
Brooches	253	57	4.4
Glass vessels	70	31	2.3
Glass beads	60	25	2.4
Militaria	29	13	2.2

Tab. 4.2 does not include categories that do not exceed 15 pieces – such as silver vessels, noric-pannonic belt-sets and pottery lamps to mention the most important ones. Only small numbers of various types of jewelry and other artifacts have been found, although some of them represent unique examples of craftsmanship. This applies especially to

bronze tripods, a massive golden bracelet and an alabaster vase.

In view of the size of the Slovak territory, the concentration of Roman imports in Slovakia is considerable. Moreover, most of the finds are concentrated in the southwestern part of Slovakia, that means close to the border of the Roman Empire. In connection with this fact the above-mentioned data become even more interesting.

However, the evaluation of Roman import in terms of political geography of modern states may not be quite correct. It is better to focus on archeological cultures or ethnic groups. In this respect, the attention should be directed to the territory of Southwest Slovakia, the centre of the area settled by Germanic Quadi. The question is whether the concentration of objects of Roman provenance in this area is connected with the proximity of the limes or whether there are also other factors playing a role in the distribution of Roman import within this territory. It seems that the phenomenon could be enlightened if the following facts are considered:

1. The comparison of regions adjoining the limes leads to the conclusion that Roman imports were not distributed equally among them. With the exception of the southwestern part of Slovakia, there is only a small area situated opposite the legionary fortresses of Novaesium and Colonia Agrippina, where a significant concentration of bronze and glass vessels can be observed (Kunow 1983, 174, 178, 179; Lund-Hansen 1987, 185). The proximity of the border itself does not inevitably imply the concentration of imports.
2. Long-distance trade was directed to the centres of barbarian power or to client-kingdoms. The existence of such formations provided the barbarians an access to Roman markets and enabled them to profit from the long-distance trade.
3. Considerable amounts of imported goods imply a high population-density. This applies also to the territory of southwestern Slovakia. It has been proven by finds of numerous sites from prehistoric periods. Favourable circumstances – fertile plains and abundance of water sources – resulted in a considerably high population-density.
4. One of the most important trade routes – the Amber route – led across the territory of the Quadi.
5. Rivers running from the barbarian territory into the Danube provided an advantageous connection with the Roman Empire.
6. Legionary fortresses (Carnuntum and Brigetio) situated in close proximity to this area represented at the same time big centres of production and commerce.

In comparison with other regions adjoining the border of the Roman Empire, the unique simultaneous coexistence of all of these factors had brought about a considerable increase concentration of Roman imports in the southwest of Slovak territory.

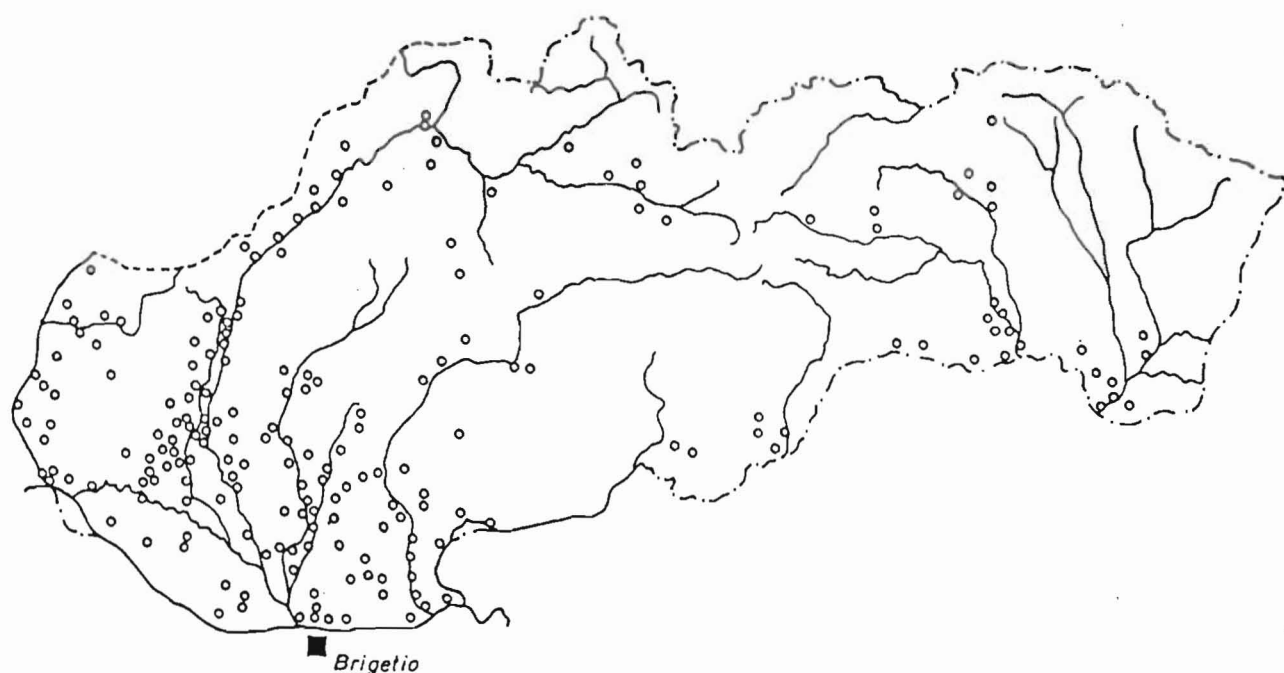


Fig. 4.6 Sites with Roman import in Slovakia.

As regards the ways of distribution of Roman imports most modern archeologists admit accept that what is referred to as exchange and trade is in fact only a manifestation of various ways of distribution of artifacts revealed by archeological methods. Therefore some authors prefer the term 'displacement' to the word 'trade' (Needham 1993, 162).

Though the above-mentioned problem is outside the scope of this paper I would like to direct attention to one of its aspects, using modern economic criteria in the study of barbarian communities. Behavior of these communities did not always correspond with rational or economic principles. It was influenced by various rituals as also the ethnologic literature proclaims. Ritually conditioned commercial links can be assumed to have existed in barbarian society during the Roman Age, especially in its earlier phases. Such relations must have been exposed to changes, mainly due the economic influence of the Roman Empire. These changes can be expected to have impinged first of all upon the borderland, in the course of the life of two or three generations. In the territory far beyond the frontier the changes must have occurred later and their intensity decreased with the distance from the border. This does not only apply to the use of Roman coins but the changes affected the whole of life of barbarian society and thus also the traditional relationships within barbarian communities.

One such traditional links is represented also by the reciprocal exchange of gifts, residues of which can still be seen even in modern societies. A thorough analysis of this phenomenon was published by a French sociologist Maus (1970, orig. 1924) some 70 years ago. The exchange of gifts was presumably also practised between Roman and

barbarian authorities whenever their negotiations took place. This mechanism of 'displacement' will have been especially relevant within the border of barbarian territory: it could have been one of the ways that enabled the Roman goods to move over considerable distances. It is, however, difficult to prove that fact by archeological means. In view of the wide-spread custom of reciprocal exchange observed in numbers of communities studied by ethnologists, the role of the direct commercial contacts between Roman merchants and barbarians seems to be overestimated to some degree.

Even if there is evidence for the presence of Roman merchants in a Germanic context (according to Tacitus' reports) their activities took place mainly in centres of barbarian power or along the long-distance trade routes. A dense network of trade routes in barbaricum used by Roman merchants is not presumed to have existed, though the distribution of some Roman imports would be in favour of this idea. In my opinion the Romans offered their goods in some local centres situated in the first contact zone and from there they were distributed by other means. The reciprocal exchange of gifts – within one community or in relation to its interaction with other communities is presumably the most common mechanism. It is not so important to find out exactly which events were connected with such an exchange of gifts. This could hardly be ascertained by archeological means. In case of regular gatherings, the reciprocal exchange might have reached a considerable volume. According to Renfrew (1993, 9) such gatherings have been observed in almost every human community. However, there are also other ways of interaction of bigger or smaller communities that could

have resulted in an exchange of gifts. I do not propose this to be the only means of distribution of Roman products within barbarian territory. But it is surely one of the possible alternatives for the uncritical use of modern economic principles in the study of barbarian communities.

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