

WHAT CAN EARLY MEDIEVAL HOARDS FROM PONTES TEACH US ABOUT RELIGIOUS AND EVERYDAY LIFE IN TURBULENT TIMES?

Olga Z. ŠPEHAR*
Perica N. ŠPEHAR**

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Abstract: Ancient Pontes, today Kostol (Serbia), had a very long history. It was primarily a Roman fort that protected Trajan's Bridge, which continued to play an important role even after the abandonment of the Province of Dacia since it was positioned on the northern Danubian limes. It continued to have such a function until the Roman army abandoned northern limes at the beginning of the 7th century, only to be reoccupied during the Early Middle Ages. The main topic of this paper is the content of three hoards dated to the early medieval period that consist of various agricultural tools and liturgical objects. Such interesting content of the hoards in question testifies that active church life functioned in, otherwise, agricultural community. They also testify that the local population treated the liturgical objects that belonged to the local church as treasure, as well as that they likewise treated their working tools as very valuable objects, which deserve to be buried in the same hoard as the liturgical objects during dangerous times. As such, they can tell us a lot about the religious and daily life in the turbulent early medieval period in this settlement, and its wider surrounding.

Rezumat: Pontesul antic, astăzi Kostol (Serbia), a avut o istorie foarte îndelungată. A fost în primul rând un fort roman care proteja podul lui Traian, acesta continuând să joace un rol important chiar și după abandonarea provinciei Dacia, deoarece era poziționat pe limesul dunărean de nord. El și-a păstrat această funcție până când armata romană a abandonat limesul nordic, la începutul secolului al VII-lea, fiind ulterior reocupat în perioada medievală timpurie.

Tema principală a acestei lucrări este conținutul a trei tezaure datate în perioada medievală timpurie, care constă în diverse unelte agricole și obiecte liturgice. Conținutul interesant

* Olga Z. ŠPEHAR: University of Belgrade, Faculty of Philosophy, Department of Art History, Belgrade, Serbia; e-mail: ospehar@f.bg.ac.rs.

** Perica N. ŠPEHAR: University of Belgrade, Faculty of Philosophy, Department of Archaeology, Belgrade, Serbia; e-mail: perica.spehar@f.bg.ac.rs.

al tezaurelor atestă faptul că o viață bisericească activă funcționa într-o comunitate agricolă. De asemenea, ele demonstrează că populația locală trata obiectele liturgice care aparțineau bisericilor locale ca pe un tezaur, la fel cum își considerau și uneltele de lucru drept obiecte de mare valoare, demne de a fi îngropate în același loc cu obiectele liturgice, în vremuri periculoase. Prin urmare, aceste descoperiri ne pot spune multe despre viața religioasă și cotidiană din perioada medievală timpurie, dintr-o așezare marcată de tulburări și în împrejurimile sale mai extinse.

Introduction

Ancient Pontes, today Kostol (Serbia), is situated in the area of Djerdap, on the right bank of the Danube, around 5 km downstream from Kladovo. On the right bank of the small dried-up river that once flowed into the Danube, a larger fortification was researched, of almost square shape, with the dimensions of 120 × 112 m. It was used until the 6th century. On every rampart there was a gate flanked by square towers, the inner dimensions of which were 2 × 2 m to 2.5 × 2.5 m¹. On the left bank of the same small river the remains of another, although quite smaller fortress, can be seen in the configuration of the terrain, but it was never systematically researched². The larger one is what we today designate as Pontes (Fig. 1).

During the Roman antiquity, Pontes was an important fortification which, among the rest, protected Trajan's Bridge (*Pons Traianus*)³, one of the strategically most important structures that enabled the Roman army to incorporate Dacia within the Empire at the beginning of the 2nd century AD⁴. The role of the bridge was obviously so important that it gave the name to the fortification, as well as to the settlement⁵. After the abandonment of the Province of Dacia in 271, Pontes continued to play an important role of the liminal fortification, since the Danube River was once again restored as the natural north-eastern border of the Empire⁶. The settlement obviously kept similar role for the several centuries to follow. Discovery of coins dated to the reign of Emperor Justinian I (527–565), testify that it was active during Justinian's intensive restoration of the forts along the right bank of the Danube⁷. It continued to be in such use until the early 7th century, namely until 602, when the Roman army left the *limes* unprotected, in order to follow the newly acclaimed Emperor Phocas to Constantinople⁸. Around that time, Pontes lost its role, only to be reoccupied during the Early Middle Ages.

Results of archaeological excavations

During the archaeological excavations in the 1980s that preceded the erection of the hydroelectric power plant Djerdap II, several very important sites along the

¹ ŠPEHAR 2010, p. 31–32 with older literature, fig. 13.

² MIRKOVIĆ 1968, p. 113.

³ Actually, both fortresses, larger and smaller, protected the access to the bridge, cf. MIRKOVIĆ 1968, p. 113.

⁴ GRIFFIN 2000, p. 109–110. About the Romanization of Dacia, see the study OLTEAN 2007.

⁵ MIRKOVIĆ 1968, p. 112–114; ŠPEHAR 2010, p. 31–32, with older literature.

⁶ MIRKOVIĆ 1968, p. 114.

⁷ PROCOPIO, p. 278–279 (IV.1.33); MIRKOVIĆ 1968, p. 114.

⁸ KOVAČEVIĆ 1994, p. 122–123.

Danube River were excavated. Among them, the remains of the medieval necropolis and settlement on the former Pontes site were discovered⁹. Archaeological remains of the settlement testify that it was in use from the 9th to the 15th century, which is confirmed by small finds, particularly by several hoards discovered in the settlement itself, which are the topic of our paper, as well as by finds originating from the necropolis. The mentioned hoards are actually the most eloquent testimonies of the religious and everyday life on this site, as well as of their permanent intertwining during the Early Middle Ages.

Archaeological excavations of a larger fortress brought to light the remains of an early medieval settlement within the fortified area, covering the space of over 110 square meters¹⁰. That space followed more or less the direction of the earlier *decumanus* and stretched from the eastern gate towards the central part of the fortress. We can assume that during the early medieval period within this area, there were still sufficiently preserved remains of ancient and late antique architecture, which newcomers used to facilitate the construction of their modest dwellings. On this occasion, we will focus on two zones (squares G12–13 and L13, discovered in close vicinity of each other), where the most abundant remains of the medieval settlement were found.

Within square L13, three early medieval horizons were identified. Firstly, a house designated as House 9 was erected in the first half of the 9th century. This was a structure with one room, dug into the ground to a depth of 0.50–0.60 m, with dimensions of 5 × 3.20 m. Holes from stakes and posts were observed within the compacted earth floor, indicating that the house was made of wood. The roof was also made of easily perishable material, as no fragments of tiles were found. The interior of the house was heated by two stone stoves located along the southern wall.

After the abandonment, collapse, and leveling of House 9, House 7 was erected above it in the same manner. House 7 was dated to the second half of the 9th century. The floor of this house, also made of compacted earth, was found at the level of the demolition of the stone stoves of House 9. Although smaller in size than the previous dwelling (4.40 × 3.20 m), its interior was divided into two parts. A stone stove was found in the sleeping area, in the northwest corner of the house.

It is presumed that, after the abandonment of House 7 and the leveling of the area, Hoard No. I was buried. Its burial was most likely tied to turbulent times caused by conflicts between the Byzantine Emperor John Tzimiskes (969–976) and the Bulgarians¹¹.

After a short hiatus, House 13 was built above the same area, of which only the partially preserved compacted earth floor and stove remained. Its erection is associated with the Byzantine restoration of its authority on the Danube during the 11th century¹².

⁹ GARAŠANIN, VASIĆ, MARJANOVIĆ-VUJOVIĆ 1984, p. 44; MARJANOVIĆ-VUJOVIĆ 1987b, p. 135–136; ŠPEHAR 2010, p. 31–32; POPOVIĆ 2015, p. 121; ŠPEHAR 2017, p. 65–68, with older literature; ŠPEHAR 2022, p. 137 with older literature.

¹⁰ GARAŠANIN, VASIĆ 1987, p. 81, Plan I; MARJANOVIĆ-VUJOVIĆ 1987a, p. 117.

¹¹ In earlier literature, this Hoard is labeled with the letter B for 1983, cf. MARJANOVIĆ-VUJOVIĆ 1987b, p. 135.

¹² MARJANOVIĆ-VUJOVIĆ 1987a, p. 117–119, fig. 4–5.

The next zone with intensive traces of use during the early medieval period is represented by squares G12–13, where several pits were discovered, as well as two hoards: Hoard No. II and Hoard No. III, not far from the previous one, that was stored in a completely preserved *pitos*¹³.

Early medieval hoards: content and interpretation

Hoard No. I was placed in an oval-shaped pit, with a longer axis of 0.36 m and a depth of 0.19 m. The contents of the hoard consisted of a bronze jug, around which were placed one iron ploughshare, two identical iron axes one of which was fragmented, a fragmented tool designated as a mattock, as well as a tool where the insertion part and the working surface are on the same level, which could be designated as a scraper or a chisel (**Fig. 2**)¹⁴. Researchers noted that during this discovery, an axe for which there is no illustration, hooks, and a larger number of fragments of iron fittings for a shovel were also found¹⁵. Based on available analogies, the discovered tools are designated as early medieval and dated between the middle of the 9th and the late 10th or early 11th century¹⁶.

Hoard No. II consisted of a bronze fully cast biconical hanging censer, which had three vertically arranged circular loops on the edge, through which hanging chains were threaded, as well as an iron oval buckle with a broken thorn, an iron harness, and several iron agricultural tools (**Fig. 3**)¹⁷. The harness had a rectangular loop with an identical horizontally placed opening for a strap, while the tools consisted of two sickles with an insertion thorn and a fragmented scythe¹⁸. The discovered tools in this hoard are also designated to the early medieval period, roughly dating to the 9th to 10th centuries¹⁹.

The most carefully buried was Hoard No. III, as it was placed in a completely preserved *pitos*. The reason for this lies in the fact that it consisted exclusively of items that had a religious purpose. Namely a liturgical book, the most precious of all stored liturgical items, was hidden here, as indicated by the discovery of nine different bronze circular and longitudinal elements, that were parts of a bookbinding tied to the book by small nails (**Fig. 4**). The book itself is not preserved. The *pitos* also contained a hanging bronze censer, judging by the illustration made from a bronze sheet. It had a conical recipient on a base, perforated along the edge at three points. Three bronze chains, evenly distributed through small circular openings, were threaded and converged at a bronze hook. Chains are partially preserved²⁰. The censers and the bookbinding, as well as the discovered tools, are not chronologically sensitive, and therefore cannot give more precise dating of these hoards.

The content of all three described hoards can tell us a lot about everyday life as well as about the religious life of the community that inhabited former Pontes

¹³ GARAŠANIN, VASIĆ 1987, p. 81, fig. 12–14.

¹⁴ MARJANOVIĆ-VUJOVIĆ 1987b, p. 135–136.

¹⁵ MARJANOVIĆ-VUJOVIĆ 1987b, p. 135, fig. 2–3.

¹⁶ BUGARSKI, IVANIŠEVIĆ 2013, p. 142–145; ŠPEHAR 2017, p. 202–207.

¹⁷ GARAŠANIN, VASIĆ 1987, p. 81, fig. 14.

¹⁸ GARAŠANIN, VASIĆ 1987, p. 81, fig. 12–14.

¹⁹ CURTA 2011, Cat. no. 83; ŠPEHAR 2017, p. 202–207.

²⁰ GARAŠANIN, VASIĆ 1987, p. 81, fig. 15–16.

during the Early Middle Ages. Although the content of Hoard No. III is indeed very indicative for understanding of the religious life in this area, the presence of items intended both for liturgical and various economic activities in Hoards Nos. I and II is actually quite interesting in this respect. All mentioned tools suggest the predominant agricultural activity of the local population, including cultivating larger fields (suggested by the ploughshare), grain production (sickles), as well as wood processing (axes). On the other hand, diverse items of liturgical purpose suggest the existence of the local church, which is not yet discovered on the site²¹. For example, both censers were intended to be hanged on chains as is testified by three perforations on the rims of both of them. The censer found in the Hoard No. III, as is already mentioned, had even partially preserved chains and a hook. Such usage of the censer is typical for the church interior, within which it would be hanged and carried. The same can be said for metal bookbinding, obviously originally intended to decorate some unpreserved liturgical book. The purpose of the book with bookbinding was, most probably, to be placed in a well-visible place within some still undiscovered church.

Among the described finds, researchers paid the most attention to the biconical jug discovered within Hoard No. I (Fig. 5). It is around 0.20 m tall and decorated with various motifs, incised and cast²². Its arched handle was decorated by casting. In its upper part, the head of a panther or a lion/lioness with an opened jaw was cast, while on the lower part there is a head of a ram or a lamb. Above the head of a panther (or a lion), the small bird was cast. On the other hand, the body of the jug was incised with floral and geometrical motifs in the form of friezes that run along its whole perimeter. Floral motifs include vines and ivy leaves. Along the rim of the jug, also along its whole perimeter, a partially altered Greek text of the third verse of King David's Psalm, "the voice of the Lord is upon the waters" (Ps. 29:3), is incised, more precisely the part of the sticheron read during the sanctification of water, primarily during the Epiphany²³. Because of its relatively religiously neutral decoration and an inscription of clearly Christian character, the jug was variously dated²⁴. Some recent research suggested that, although it was positively discovered within the early medieval horizon, the jug was most probably originally a Late Antique product with strong Dionysiac iconography. The most familiar are the motifs of vine and ivy leaf, the sacred plants in the cult of Dionysus, but the representation of a panther (or lion) can also be understood as Dionysiac motif, closely tied to his triumphal return from the Orient²⁵. The cult of the pagan god actually survived throughout the Late Antiquity, but it lost its clear religious implications and became the reflection of a classical *paideia* in otherwise Christianized context²⁶. Despite its most probable

²¹ ŠPEHAR 2017, p. 190.

²² NIKOLAJEVIĆ 1989, p. 2454.

²³ ŠPEHAR, VRANEŠEVIĆ 2023, p. 147, 152.

²⁴ Ivana Popović offers dating to the late 6th or early 7th century, cf. POPOVIĆ 2015, p. 127. M. Beghelli and J. Pinar Gil think that it was one century later, cf. BEGHELLI, PINAR GIL 2019, p. 426. Some authors offer the possibility of later dating, MARJANOVIĆ-VUJOVIĆ 1987b, p. 136; ŠPEHAR 2022, p. 189.

²⁵ HENRICH 1999, p. 479–482.

²⁶ ŠPEHAR, VRANEŠEVIĆ 2023, p. 149. The change that the meaning of Dionysiac

Late Antique provenience, the jug was definitely "Christianised" during the Early Middle Ages when the text of the 29th Psalm was incised along its rim. The fact that it was a later addition is clearly visible by the irregularity of the letters in comparison to the decoration of the jug, especially to the incised friezes of floral and geometrical motifs²⁷. It seems that the older vessel was somehow discovered or preserved, and then reused in a completely different setting, changing from, most probably, private house item to religious and liturgical item. We can conclude that it was used in the church, as well as mentioned censers and today lost liturgical book.

To this also testifies the fact that, during the Middle Ages, every functional church must have been equipped with at least one liturgical set, which could be more or less luxurious depending on the resources of the community²⁸. One of the most important visual testimony about what such liturgical set consisted of is an early medieval Stuttgart Psalter dated to the 820s or 830s (Fig. 6). One of its miniatures depicts a church interior during the liturgy, with the most important liturgical items. Among them are a jug, a book, a censer, a chalice, and a paten. This depiction makes the Stuttgart Psalter a very important source of data about the appearance, usage, and materials for the production of those liturgical items. It seems that most of those items were discovered in the three mentioned hoards, except for chalice and paten.

Conclusion

The discovery of two censers, a jug with a Christian inscription, and metal parts of bookbinding, most likely from the Holy Scriptures, indicate the existence of a larger Christian community in this area that functioned sometime between the 9th and 11th centuries. Such dating suggests that it is reasonable to assume that the today undiscovered church in Kostol was most likely part of the Bulgarian church organization²⁹. Namely, the eastern part of present-day Serbia, where the Kostol site is located, was in the hands of the Bulgarians in the mid-10th century, since the Bulgarian border of that time was situated along the Morava River³⁰. In tracing possible ubication of the church, one must have in mind that within the fortress of Pontes in square F11, thus near the discovered hoards, a medieval wall made of bricks bonded with mortar was uncovered. Since, according to the researchers, early medieval houses gravitated towards this wall³¹, remnants of a church associated with liturgical items found in the discovered hoards might be sought here. Supporting this line of thought is the fact that walls made of solid construction material in the Early Middle Ages in this area are not characteristic of residential architecture, but rather of fortifications or sacred architecture. It is also testified by the remains of excavated wooden houses from Pontes, described in this text. Therefore, it can be assumed that the said brick wall indeed belonged to some

iconography survived during the Christian Late Antiquity is most clearly visible in the text of "Dionysiaca" of Nonnus of Pannopolis, cf. ACCORINTI 2016; BERNABÉ, GARCÍA-GASCO 2016.

²⁷ ŠPEHAR, VRANEŠEVIĆ 2023, p. 152–153.

²⁸ BEGHELLI 2017, p. 262–263.

²⁹ ŠPEHAR 2022, p. 135 with older literature.

³⁰ KOMATINA 2015, p. 37–38.

³¹ GARAŠANIN, VASIĆ 1987, p. 81.

important public building, most probably to a church, the prelates of which, for example, could obviously understand the value of a late antique jug, transforming it into a liturgical item.

The presence of early medieval tools in the described hoards is also very interesting. Namely, the overall finds of early medieval tools in the central Balkans are rare, as only a few reliably dated early medieval tool hoards have been recorded³². The practice of storing tools as the most valuable possession, which not so wealthy inhabitants of the central Balkans possessed, is primarily known from the late antique period³³. Early medieval hoards from Pontes, thus, point to the revival of this practice: it seems that in the difficult times of intense Byzantine-Bulgarian conflicts, older practice of placing tools in hoards and burying them was revived once again. The content of Hoards Nos. I and II clearly testify about the predominantly agricultural population that, among the rest, used the said church as the sacred focus of their faith. But other early medieval finds discovered on the site of Pontes raise a very important question of the strength of that faith among the local population.

Namely, several early medieval cult-purpose pits were archaeologically explored within an early medieval settlement discovered outside the former ramparts of Pontes. Those were most likely the remains of the so-called foundation sacrifice, performed before the construction of a building. In one pit, the skull of a sheep was buried together with two ceramic vessels, surrounded by stones, while in another the complete skeleton of a sheep was discovered. Particularly interesting is House 4, evidenced by a bell-shaped pit found beneath it which, judging by all indications, immediately preceded the construction of the house. In the pit, the skeletons of two dogs were discovered oriented along the southwest-northeast axis, with their heads placed opposite each other. The dogs were laid on a structure made of two rows of stones, between which were discovered fragments of early medieval ceramics dated to the 9th and 10th centuries, a ceramic weight, and two circular plates made of the same material, and an astragal. Clear traces of burning were observed on the stones used to form the structure, which likely indicate a ritual purification by fire. Above the dogs, a covering made of one row of stones was then formed, among which fragmented early medieval ceramics from the same period were noted, along with another ceramic weight. Judging by all indications, the pit located beneath House 4 was supposed to provide protection to its inhabitants, in accordance with non-Christian beliefs³⁴.

Having that in mind, several suggestions can be made. One of them is that the "pagan" custom of foundation sacrifice predated the establishment of a strong Christian church organization. The population that practiced such traditions was, according to the available information, inhabited outside earlier ramparts. Yet, the strengthening of the presumably Bulgarian administration and church organization may have influenced the inhabiting of the local population within the ramparts, maybe as the protection during the Bulgarian-Byzantine turmoil³⁵. But, having in

³² ŠPEHAR 2017, p. 202–207.

³³ ŠPEHAR P. 2021, p. 213.

³⁴ GARAŠANIN, VASIĆ, MARJANOVIĆ-VUJOVIĆ 1984, p. 45–46; ŠPEHAR 2017, p. 68; ŠPEHAR, ZORIĆ 2022, p. 999 with older literature; ŠPEHAR 2022, p. 135–136.

³⁵ The presence of Bulgarians in this part of Serbia is evidenced, among other things, by the

mind the overall level of the research of Pontes site, this statement must remain hypothetical. Yet, another possibility also seems plausible and that is that the local priests didn't forbade all the older traditions, among them foundation sacrifices, since it was obviously important for the local population and not in direct conflict with the liturgical services performed at the church nor with Christian rituals performed outside it. In such an atmosphere it was quite acceptable to use a Late Antique jug with pagan Dionysiac motifs as a liturgical item on the Epiphany.

Whatever the reasons for the occurrence of non-Christian practices on the site, the content of the preserved Hoards Nos. I, II, and III clearly testify that for the local agricultural population, the most important items for their everyday life were their tools and liturgical items. The tools enabled them to produce food for their needs or for trade, as well as to process the wood, whether as building material or as a material for other items. Liturgical items were considered necessary for all the most important rituals performed in a church. Whoever buried those hoards obviously hoped to return to this settlement and to continue daily agricultural activities and religious life, since praying and participating in liturgy (that implied the use of all the necessary liturgical items) was considered the only guarantee for the Lord's blessing, especially in the turbulent times, which the Early Middle Ages in this area clearly was³⁶.

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necropolis at the Ravna site near Knjaževac, where finds from the Bulgarian cultural circle were discovered within burials where pagan rituals were practiced, as well as in settlement layers with characteristic ceramics of Bulgarian origin found at the Zlata site. Cf. JOVANOVIĆ, VUKSAN 2005; ŠPEHAR 2017, p. 114–117; MILOSAVLJEVIĆ 2021; ŠPEHAR 2022, p. 114, 166 with older literature.

³⁶ ŠPEHAR O. 2021, p. 24.

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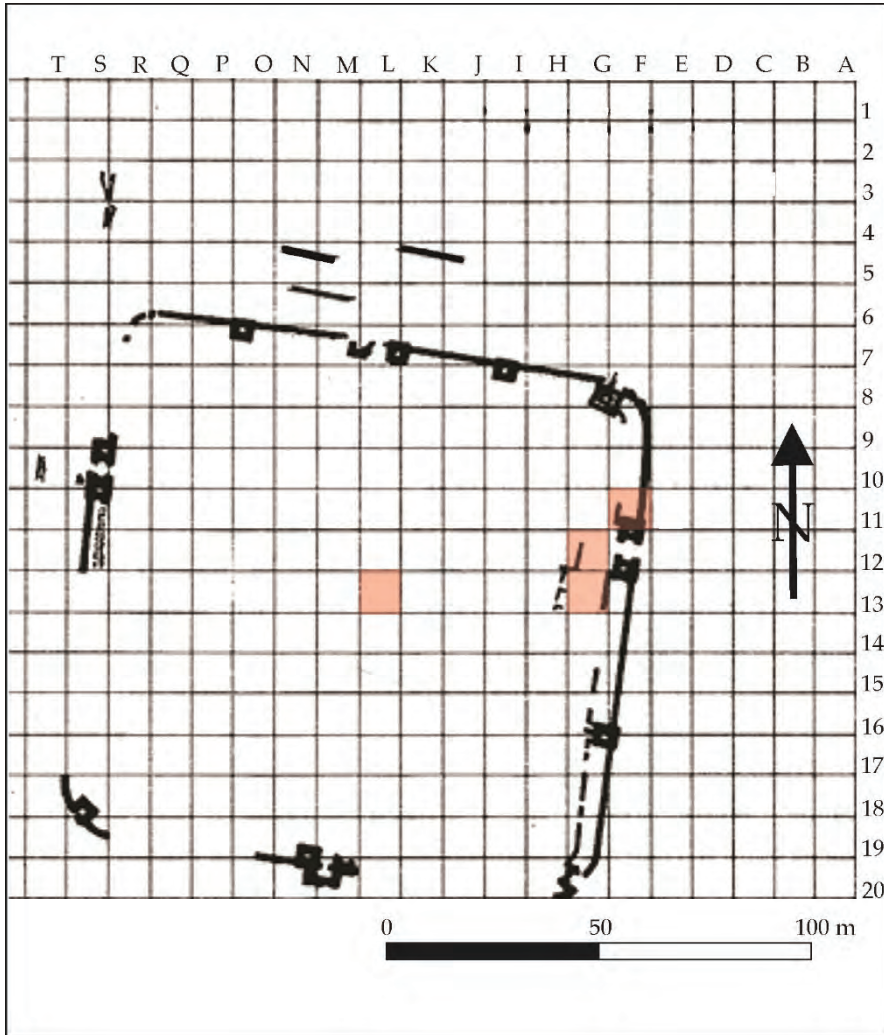


Fig. 1. Ground plan of Pontes castrum with marked quadrants containing early medieval finds (after GARAŠANIN, VASIĆ 1987, p. 105, pl. 1).



Fig. 2. Content of Hoard No. I, drawings and photo (after ŠPEHAR 2017, p. 187, fig. 43/B, without scale).

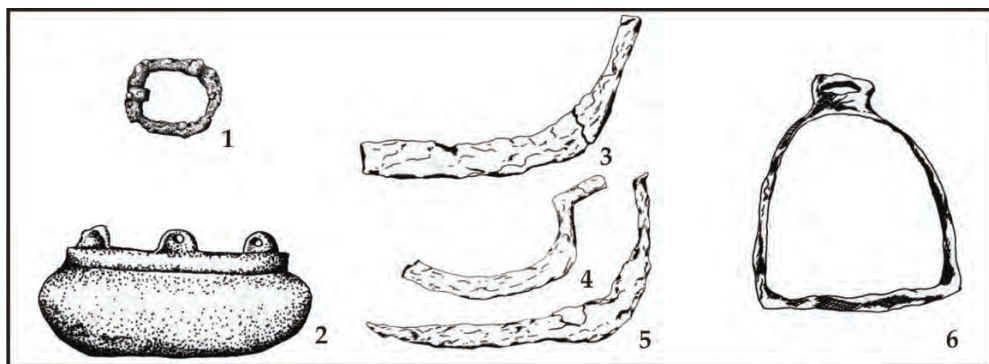


Fig. 3. Content of Hoard No. II, drawings (after ŠPEHAR 2017, p. 187, fig. 43/Г, without scale).

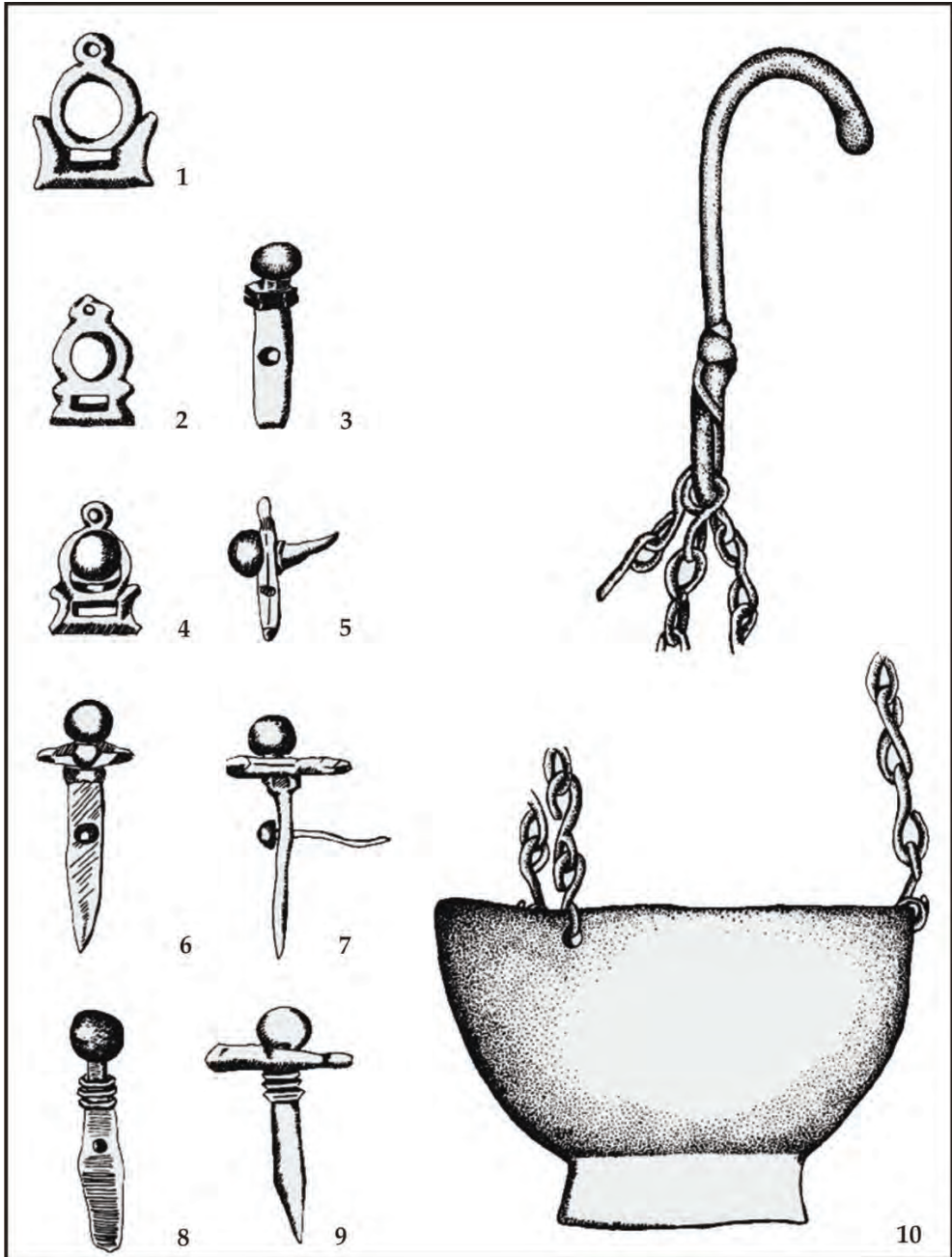


Fig. 4. Content of Hoard No. III, drawings
(after ŠPEHAR 2017, p. 187, fig. 43/B, without scale).



Fig. 5. Bronze jug from Hoard No. I (after POPOVIĆ 2015, p. 122, fig. 1a, without scale).



Fig. 6. Miniature with the representation of liturgical items, Stuttgart Psalter, 9th century (photo in public use).