

SOME OF THE RAREST LATE AVAR BELT FITTINGS: STUBLINE – HAJDÚNÁNÁS TYPE

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ABSTRACT

This article presents the belt fittings of the Stubline – Hajdúnánás type. Only three such finds are known to the present authors, which come from Stubline near Obrenovac in modern-day Serbia, Hajdúnánás – Mácsi-dűlő in the Great Hungarian Plain and from the Stara Bulgaria Collection. The last fitting allegedly originates from northeastern Bulgaria. Our mounts are up to 2.5 cm tall, oval-shaped with a round ending, and perforated for rivets. Remarkably similar to one another, they can be dated to the second half of the 8th c.

Keywords: Late Avar belt fittings, Stubline, Hajdúnánás, Stara Bulgaria Collection

Introduction

Comprised of finds from more than 60,000 archaeologically studied early medieval graves, Late Avar material culture is the richest and best researched in Europe.¹ Dated chiefly to the 8th c., this wealth of finds illustrates demographic growth. Particularly numerous are belt-sets, based on which the chronology of particular pieces and contexts has been narrowed down to 25 or 50 years (Daim 1987; Zóbojník 1991; Garam 1995). This precision has to be regarded as unique and astonishing. The Late Avar belt-sets appear remarkably uniform but are not identical. While the cemeteries from this period more or less differ from one another, preserved parts of personal attire in graves “are quite standardized concerning their characteristics, types and – usually meager – value” (Szenthe 2018, 295 – 296). Scattered throughout the Khaganate, most of the types are very well studied. However, some of them consist of very few finds. This is the case of the belt fittings presented in this article, labeled by us as the Stubline – Hajdúnánás type.

Although there are several hundreds of unique belt fittings and strap-ends from the Late Avar period, and we know of the “types” represented by only two specimens each, they mostly came from the first half of the 8th c. or Jozef Zóbojník’s (1991) SS I and II phases. During the second half of the Late Avar period, to which belongs the type introduced here, belt mounts underwent a radical morphological homogenization. In this context, the Stubline – Hajdúnánás type represents an exceptional phenomenon, to some extent comparable to the rare gilded mounts and strap-ends decorated with so-called *Stäbchenranken* that are dated to the final phase of the Late Avar period (cf. Strzygowski 1917; Daim 2000).

¹ This paper is dedicated to the memory of Rasho Rashev (1943 – 2008). It was meant to be presented at the commemorative conference in Shumen in November 2023 and published in its proceedings, but the authors could not meet the deadlines.



Fig. 1. Stubline grave (after Bugarski et al. 2013, fig. 2)
Обр. 1. Гробът от Стублине (по Bugarski et al. 2013, fig. 2)

Finds of the Stubline – Hajdúnánás type

The first find of this type came from the southernmost Avar grave at Stubline near modern Obrenovac in Serbia (fig. 1). It was found together with a buckle, a propeller-shaped mount, and a belt-loop, some 15 cm below the pelvis of the deceased between his femurs. The grave has also produced several iron fittings of a wooden bucket. Apart from the sheet belt-loop, the belt parts were made out of cast bronze (fig. 2). This incomplete belt-set was not found in the usual position around the hips but lower, where a zone of darker soil was observed that possibly comes from the decayed leather belt or maybe a bag in which the belt could have been placed. Our applique is 2.3 cm tall, oval-shaped with a round ending, and perforated for rivets (Bugarski et al. 2013, 288, 292 – 294, fig. 6). As the buckle resembles those of Zábójník's types 149 and 151 from the SS III phase and the propeller-shaped mount has a direct parallel with the objects representing his type 302 from the same phase (750 – 780), our oval fitting has been assigned to the same production period (cf. Zábójník 1991, 238 – 241, 248, Taf. 29: 6, 7, 9, Taf. 31: 11, Abb. 1).

The second find, tin-plated and of the same shape and size, came from Hajdúnánás – Mácsi-dűlő in the Great Hungarian Plain (fig. 3). In the publication by Rozália Bajkai it has been widely dated to the 8th c.² As stated by the author, “*Nothing similar is known from the inner territories of the Avar Khaganate, its only exact counterpart was found near Belgrade in the site of Stubline [...]*” (Bajkai 2015, 229 – 230, pl. 8: 9). The Hajdúnánás find came from the upper layer of the earth fill of a house – one of as many as 27 Late Avar dwellings at the site. The mount was therefore deposited in the final backfilling stage. A sheep's leg bone from this feature is radiocarbon-dated to the 9th c.

² In the preliminary publication, the find was dated to the end of the Late Avar period, i.e. to the 9th c. (Bajkai 2012, 34).

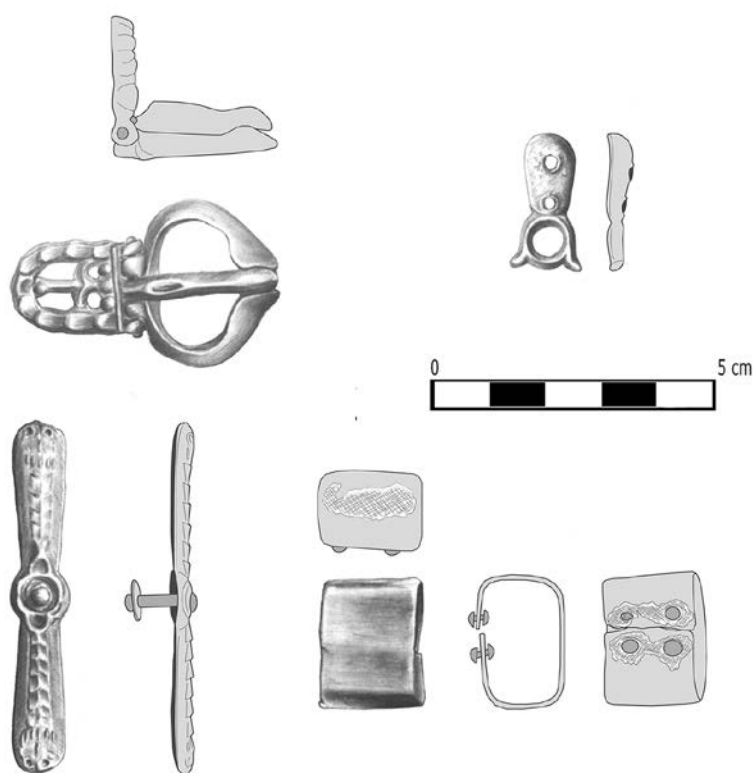


Fig. 2. Finds from the Stubline grave (after Bugarski et al. 2013, fig. 6)

Обр. 2. Находки от гроба от Стублине (по Bugarski et al. 2013, fig. 6)

(1224 ± 15 ; fig. 4).³ The fitting was almost entirely covered with patina. It is particularly important to note that the second author of this paper, who took part in the excavation as a student, vividly remembers that it was decorated with a shallowly carved grid-like pattern, even if memory could be misleading in such cases. Regrettably, the ornament – as schematically illustrated here – has vanished in the course of conservation work. Although one should not draw far-reaching conclusions from this detail, somewhat comparable is the scratched decoration on square bronze sheet fittings from grave No. 116 at Tiszafüred (Garam 1995, 21, Taf. 171: 116). More deeply engraved ornaments are widely attested on belt pieces from the last phase of the Late Avar period.

The third published find comes from the Stara Bulgaria Collection, which mostly consists of belt fittings, buckles, costume accessories and horse-harness mounts, predominantly dated between the 6th and the 11th c. “*Even though the exact findspots remain unknown, most [finds] are known to have come to light somewhere in north-eastern Bulgaria*”. The collection received a legal status in 1997. The most attractive items are displayed in the Archaeological Museum of Varna where the accessions register is kept, as well (Türk et al. 2021, 5). Among the processed finds is the 2.5 cm long cast copper-alloy mount that is pierced by two perforations along its central axis (fig. 5). Weighing 2.86 g, it has been erroneously dated to the 9th – 10th c. (Türk et al. 2021, 211, cat. No. B2292, pl. 99: 3).

³ The radiocarbon measurement DeA-44300: HajM_16/16 was made possible through the support of the Ministry of Innovation and Technology of Hungary by way of the National Research, Development and Innovation Fund financed under the TKP2021-NKTA-24 funding scheme. The measurement was undertaken by the Isotoptech Zrt. Laboratory, Debrecen.



Fig. 3. Fitting from Hajdúnánás – Mácsi-dűlő (Documentation of the Hungarian National Museum)

Обр. 3. Апликация от Хайдунаш – Мачи-дьюль (Документация на Унгарския национален музей)

Chronology of the Stubline – Hajdúnánás type

The only object of this type that has been found in association with other belt mounts is that from Stubline, and such fittings are rare. The most similar set came from grave No. 69 at Szeged-Fehértó A, in which an analogous buckle and an identical propeller-shaped mount were found, together with the main and small strap-ends and numerous minor belt fittings from Zábójník's SS III phase and its transition to SS IV (Madaras 1995, 62, pl. 11.69: 1 – 9). As for the small mounts of our interest, similar finds are known from the latest phase of Late Avar cemeteries, e.g. from grave No. 430 at Nové Zámky (Čilinská 1966, 83 – 84, Taf. LXIV: 36), grave No. 513 at Tiszafüred (Garam 1995, 69, Taf. 223: 4), and grave No. 93 at Halimba (Török 1998, Taf. 11). The hinged variants are more common, as represented in grave No. 35 at Szeged-Kundomb, for example (Salamon, Sebestyén 1995, pl. 5: 6; cf. Zábójník 1991, Typ. 250, 269). With some reservations, one can suggest that the fittings cast in one piece slightly post-date the other variants; they could be generally dated to the latest Avar phase (SS IV of Jozef Zábójník, or 780 – 800/825).

The Stubline burial post-dates the production time span of the belt-set, which may be established between 750 and 780 or, most widely, to the second half of the 8th c. if we take into account

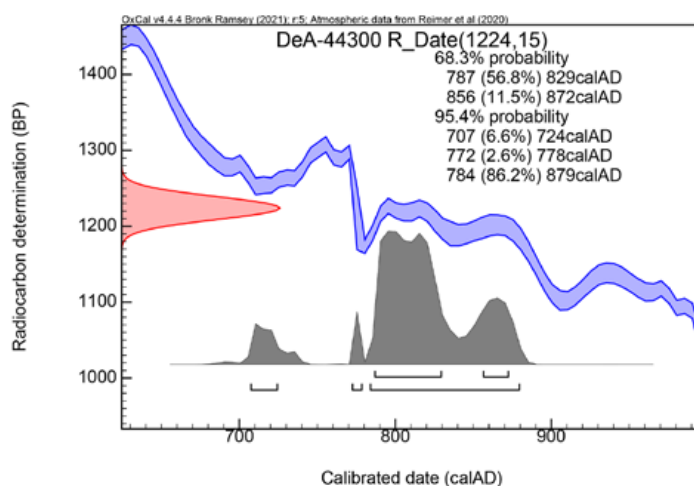


Fig. 4. Radiocarbon dating diagram for the house at Hajdúnánás – Mácsi-dűlő (Isotoptech Zrt. Laboratory, Debrecen)

Обр. 4. Диаграма на радиовъглеродното датиране на жилището от Хайдунаш – Мачи-дьюль (Лаборатория Isotoptech Zrt., Дебрецен)



Fig. 5. Fitting from the Stara Bulgaria Collection
(after Türk et al. 2021, pl. 99: 3)

Обр. 5. Апликация от колекцията „Стара
България“ (по Türk et al. 2021, pl. 99: 3)

the possibility that our mount was from the SS IV phase. This archaeological context is remarkably interesting. From an incomplete belt of a late date laid into a grave south of the main Avar area, one gets the impression that this was one of the last Avar burials. It belongs to a time of crisis in the Khaganate or even to the period shortly after its collapse, which was also the time of dissolution of Avar cultural identity. *“The young man from Stubline was buried by the Avars from the deepest periphery of the once-powerful state, or, perhaps even more probably, by the newcomers or refugees after the defeat at the beginning of the ninth century which ended the Khaganate”* (Bugarski et al. 2013, 301).

The calibrated date of the Hajdúnánás house, which also produced Late Avar wheel-thrown pottery sherds (fig. 6), is roughly the 9th c. One of the latest radiocarbon dates in the Avar sample, it would fit into the newly-proposed Late Avar 5 period or the last phase of cemeteries in which men were buried without belts or with single and/or damaged belt mounts (Szenthe et al. 2023; cf. Daim 1987, 155 – 160; Garam 1995, 416 – 420). The Stubline grave certainly belongs to this horizon (Bugarski et al. 2013, 295). To put aside the occasional problems with radiocarbon dating in early medieval archaeology (Robak 2024) and the obvious need for larger samples (Szenthe et al. 2023, 486), we have no reason to doubt the Hajdúnánás C14 date. Still, it does not apply to the production date of the mount (SS III or SS IV), which is provided by the Stubline belt. In return, it resolves the time when the house pit was backfilled. The mount from the Stara Bulgaria Collection is not illustrative in this respect since it lacks an archaeological context.

Discussion and conclusions

To summarize, we know only three finds of the Stubline – Hajdúnánás type, which puts them among the rarest Late Avar belt fittings, at least regarding the SS IV phase. Given the extremely rich sample from this period, we do not expect many more finds of this type to come to light in the future, and we cannot explain why they are so few in number. Although our finds come from distant territories, they are remarkably similar to one another. Different from related small mounts of the Late Avar period, they constitute a distinctive type of fittings produced in the second half of the 8th c. However, both the finds from Stubline and Hajdúnánás came from later contexts. While the Great Hungarian Plain is rather well known for Avar sites, this is not the case of modern-day Serbia south of the Danube and Sava rivers. The finds from the area across these rivers – including the mount from Stubline – could represent traces of temporary Avar stay or of the population that fled after the collapse of the Khaganate. The interpretation of these finds is more challenging than that of related finds from the Avar main lands, but they certainly complete the archaeological picture of the area in the Early Middle Ages (Bugarski 2008; Bugarski et al. 2013; Бугарски, Церовић 2021).

This group of finds reveals that the latest Avar-type belt pieces had wider distribution than before, spreading primarily to the northwest but also to the south. Theoretically, the reason for the appearance of Late Avar groups beyond their political borders, and in particular for the occurrence of their belt fittings south of the Carpathian Basin, could also lie in the transformation of their economy and changes in foreign affairs, as the expansion of Avar material culture seems to precede political collapse. In the later 8th c., Abbasid gold coins appeared in the south of the Carpathian



Fig. 6. Wheel-thrown pottery from the house at Hajdúnánás – Mácsi-dűlő (Documentation of the Hungarian National Museum)

Обр. 6. Керамика на крачно колело от жилището от Хайдунанаш – Мачи-д్యольо (Документация на Унгарския национален музей)

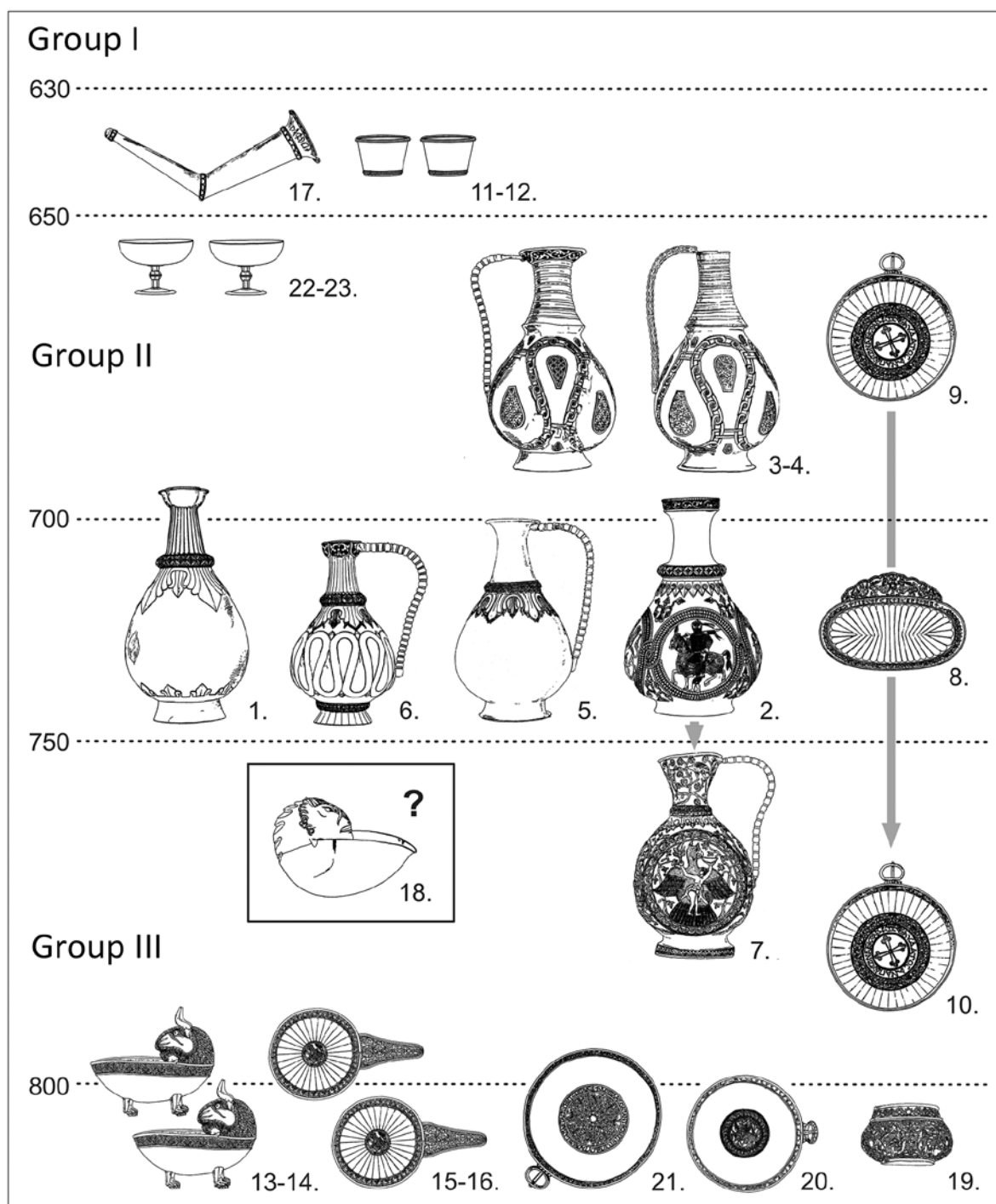


Fig. 7. Chronology of the Nagyszentmiklós/Sânnicolau Mare hoard (Author: G. Szenthe)

Обр. 7. Хронология на съкровището от Надсентмиклош/Сънниколау Маре (Автор: Г. Сентхе)

Basin (Bugarski 2022), and at the same time, Byzantine jewelry and high-quality belt mounts occurred again in greater numbers in Avar graves (Szenthe 2021). The intensification of southern (Byzantine and perhaps Bulgarian) contacts of the Khaganate is even more conspicuous when the chronology of the Nagyszentmiklós/Sânnicolau Mare gold hoard is considered (fig. 7), as four or five out of the seven latest vessels in the hoard are genuine Byzantine products (Garam 2002, 104 – 106; contra: Bálint 2010). The spatial distribution of some lower-quality Late Avar artifacts reflects the same pattern.

If the fitting from the Stara Bulgaria Collection was actually found in the region of Varna, we could perhaps see the finds of the Stubline – Hajdúnánás type too as illustrating Avar contacts with the Balkans. On the other hand, it is impossible to build reliable models with such a paucity of information. Some stray, Late Avar finds have previously been reported from the area of present-day northeastern Bulgaria; only a few such items have been recovered from graves (e.g. ИНКОВА 2005; Daskalov 2017). The region of Varna is otherwise better known for the finds of the so-called Vrap – Velino group (Werner 1986; Daim 2000; Fiedler 2008, 218 – 220; Szenthe 2014).⁴ In this context, a large presence of Late Avar type material culture in modern northeastern Bulgaria (cf. Türk et al. 2021) is yet to be proved through archaeological excavations. Moreover, there are very few Late Avar type finds even in what is now southern Romania, which is much closer to the Avar core territories (Curta 2022, 7, n. 7, fig. 1). In broader terms, most of the Avar belt pieces from the areas south of the Khaganate belong to the latest phases (SS III and particularly IV, or the Late Avar 3 and 4 phases by Szenthe et al. 2023). These finds have been collected by Rasho Rashev (cf. Рашев 2008, табл. LXV, табл. LXVII – LXXI). Out of the 67 depicted mounts, only seven can be dated to the first two phases of the Late Avar period. As some finds of an earlier date could have been used for a longer period of time (also in phases 3, 4 and even 5), it may be concluded that the Late Avar type mounts reached these territories rather late. The same can be observed in the Serbian Danube region (Bugarski 2008; Бугарски, Церовић 2021).

To conclude, we were only able to identify the new type of Late Avar belt fittings and to acknowledge how rare it was and how strange its spatial spread appears to have been. On the other hand, based on regional distribution patterns, we can tentatively deduce that political and economic relations between the Avars and the Balkans transformed in the final stage of the Khaganate.

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⁴ Interestingly, only distant parallels of the Vrap – Velino type mounts occur in the Carpathian Basin. It seems that the contacts between this region and the eastern part of the Balkan peninsula were not intensive during the first half of the Late Avar period. Their routes might have led through Transylvania, where some objects of the Vrap – Velino type have been found, e.g. in burial mounds at Someșeni (e.g. Werner 1986, 31, Abb. 4).

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НЯКОИ ОТ НАЙ-РЕДКИТЕ АВАРСКИ КОЛАННИ АПЛИКАЦИИ: ТИПЪТ СТУБЛИНЕ – ХАЙДУНАНАШ

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РЕЗЮМЕ

Статията представя особено редки коланни апликации, които принадлежат към типа Стублине – Хайдунанаш. Само три такива находки са известни на авторите на статията. Те произхождат от Стублине, близо до Обреновац, днешна Сърбия, от Хайдунанаш – Мачи-дюльо в Голямата унгарска равнина и от колекцията „Стара България“. Смята се, че последната апликация произхожда от Североизточна България. Апликациите са с височина до 2,5 см. Имат овална форма със заоблен край и отвори за нитове. Забележително сходни са една с друга, сякаш са произведени в една работилница. Тези апликации могат да бъдат датирани във втората половина на VIII в.

Първата находка произхожда от най-южния аварски гроб в Стублине, близо до днешния Обреновац, Сърбия (обр. 1). Открита е заедно с тока, витлообразна апликация и гайка за колан на около 15 см под таза на покойника. С изключение на пресованата гайка, останалите части от колана са излети от бронз (обр. 2). Тази частично запазена коланна гарнитура не е открита на обичайното място около бедрата на покойника, а по-надолу, където се наблюдава зона от по-тъмна пръст, вероятно идваща от разложен кожен колан или може би от чанта, в която изглежда е бил поставен коланът. Токата наподобява тези от типове 149 и 151 по Й. Забойник от фаза SS III, а витлообразната апликация има пряка аналогия сред предметите, представящи тип 302 по същия автор, и са от същата фаза (750 – 780 г.). Поради това разглежданата овална апликация е определена като принадлежаща към същия производствен период. Макар и с известни резерви, може да се предположи, че изцяло летите апликации са малко по-стари от другите варианти; те също могат да бъдат датирани и в най-късната аварска фаза (SS IV по Й. Забойник).

Втората находка, покрита с калай и със същата форма и размер, произхожда от Хайдунанаш – Мачи-дюльо в Голямата унгарска равнина (обр. 3). В публикацията на Р. Байкай тя е датирана най-общо в VIII в. Находката от Хайдунанаш е намерена в горния слой на запълнителя на жилище – едно от 27-те късноаварски жилища на обекта. Следователно апликацията е депозирана там в последния етап на засипването. Кост от крак на овца от тази структура е датирана чрез радиовъглероден анализ в IX в. (1224 ± 15 ; обр. 4). Апликацията е почти изцяло покрита с патина. Особено важно е да се отбележи, че вторият автор на тази статия, който е участвал в разкопките като студент, ясно си спомня, че апликацията е била украсена с плитко връзан мрежест орнамент. За съжаление, орнаментът – тук илюстриран само схематично – е изчезнал в хода на консервационните работи. По-дълбоко гравирани орнаменти са широко засвидетелствани върху коланни апликации от последната фаза на късноа-

варския период.

Третата публикувана находка е от колекцията „Стара България“, която се състои предимно от коланни апликации, токи, аксесоари за костюми и апликации за конски сбруи, датирани предимно между VI и XI в. „Въпреки че точните местонахождения остават неизвестни, за повечето [находки] се знае, че са открити някъде в Североизточна България“. Колекцията получава легален статут през 1997 г. Сред обработените находки е и дългата 2,5 см лята апликация от медна сплав, с два пробити отвора по централната надлъжна ос (обр. 5). Погрешно е датирана в IX – X в.

Гробът от Стублине се датира след периода на производство на коланните гарнитури, който може да бъде установен между 750 и 780 г. или най-общо към втората половина на VIII в. – ако вземем предвид възможността разглежданата апликация да принадлежи към фаза SS IV, а не към SS III по Й. Забойник. Калибрираната дата на жилището от Хайдунаш, от което също произхождат фрагменти от късноаварска керамика на колело (обр. 6), е приблизително IX в. Все пак трябва да се отбележи отново, че това не се отнася за датата на производство на апликацията, а има отношение към времето на засипване на жилищната яма.

Докато в Голямата унгарска равнина има множество известни археологически обекти от аварския период, същото не може да се каже за земите на днешна Сърбия, разположени на юг от реките Дунав и Сава. Находките от района отвъд тези реки биха могли да са следи от временно пребиваване на авари или от население, избягало след разпадането на хаганата. Тази група от находки разкрива, че най-късните коланни апликации от аварски тип са имали по-широко разпространение от преди – прониквайки предимно на северозапад, но също и на юг. Теоретично, причината за появата на късните аварски групи извън техните политически граници може да се крие и в трансформацията на икономиката в късната фаза на хаганата, както и в промяната във външната политика, тъй като експанзията на аварската материална култура изглежда предшества политическия колапс. В късния VIII в. абасидски златни монети се появяват южно от Карпатския басейн и в същото време византийски накити се появяват отново в по-големи количества в аварските гробове. Засилването на южните (византийски) контакти на хаганата е още по-забележимо, когато се вземе предвид хронологията на златното съкровище от Надсентмиклош (обр. 7), тъй като четири или пет от седемте най-късни съда в съкровището са с доказан византийски произход.

Апликацията от колекцията „Стара България“ не е показателна в това отношение. Трябва да отбележим, че това е една от многото (късно)аварски находки, публикувани в каталога. Тези предмети не произхождат от археологически разкопки, а районът на Варна по принцип не е известен с наличието на аварски находки, а с тези от т. нар. група Врап – Велино. Нещо повече, дори в днешна Южна Румъния, която е много по-близо до основните територии на аварите, има много по-малко късноаварски находки, отколкото в Североизточна България. С други думи, трябва да се подхожда с резерви към териториалния произход на представените находки, включително и на разглежданата апликация. Присъствието на останки от късноаварската материална култура в днешна Североизточна България, както се предлага в публикацията на колекцията, предстои да бъде доказано чрез археологически разкопки.

Ключови думи: късноаварски коланни апликации, Стублине, Хайдунаш, колекция „Стара България“