

Faceted spearheads from Sisak (ancient Siscia), Croatia

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The Roman spears and javelins present certain issues as far as typology and chronology are concerned. In contrast, for example, to the pilum, which is highly typical and therefore easy to determine, the spears and javelins, with the exception of certain types, are generally fairly difficult to determine with certainty as Roman, unless they were found in a clear archaeological context. This observation primarily applies to the leaf-shaped spears, which count as the most widely distributed type of that weapon ever since prehistory. Their simplicity and frequent lack of characteristic typological details do not facilitate the conception of an unambiguous and definite typology. The basic shape of the leaf-shaped spearhead prevents it from the start from having a limitless number of variations. Further, as it depends on the skill and ability of the craftsman and on the available technology and momentary needs of the user, it is extremely difficult to establish clear chronological and typological criteria for that artefact class. Leaving decoration aside, the technology of production of the leaf-shaped spearheads and javelins is very simple and requires neither a highly skilled craftsman nor a well furnished workshop. Considering that every craftsman, even a semi-skilled one, could make a simple spear or a javelin even in a very modest working conditions, it is obvious that spearhead forms were conditioned not only by military-tactical factors but also, perhaps even more often, by the technological ones, which may not be clearly recognizable to the present-day researchers. Considering all this, most often than not the Roman leaf-shaped spearheads cannot be determined typologically in a very precise manner, although sometimes certain regularities can be established among the finds originating from the same context. Be as it may, the dating depends primarily on the context of the find.



Map 1. Position of the ancient Siscia

Nevertheless, one may distinguish certain types with distinctive typological features which appear to have been in use only during a certain period and can thus be dated and categorized with far more certainty. Such are exactly leaf-shaped spearheads with faceted sockets. The latter feature is not to be considered as typical only for one period of Roman military history, since one encounters such spear sockets both during the Hallstatt period as well as in the 7th and 8th centuries AD as well. As a matter of fact, due to those finds, spears with faceted sockets were long time considered as typical for certain Germanic populations during the early Middle Ages, but more recent research – especially the study of finds from Wartau (Fig. 2: a) - has shown that similar spearheads with faceted sockets appear by the end of the Late Iron Age in the Alpine region and are spread further by Roman troops and/or Roman military activities. A particularly high concentration of such spears is to be found in Slovenia, mostly in securely dated funerary contexts, like in Verdun (Fig. 2: b), Bela Cerkev / Strmev, Polhov Gradec as well as in rivers, such as in the Ljubljana near Vrhnika. Furthermore, research has shown that analogous spearheads are to be found in Sanzeno and Gravelona Toce as well as in Oberammergau. Few specimens have been found in the Danube region but only one was discovered in an unambiguous archaeological context – the early Roman grave 44 from the Karaburma necropolis in Belgrade – a burial of what appears to have been a local warrior elite member who sided with the Romans. All of those finds are not to be dated before the mid 1st century BC, while the latest finds likely belong to the first decades of the 1st century AD, and are certainly not to be dated after the Julio-Claudian period. Besides dated finds from secure archaeological context, more similar spearheads from the Rhine area were recognized as possibly analogous to the aforementioned group of spearheads. Be it as it may, the study of securely dated spears with faceted sockets has shown that their bearers were most likely Roman auxiliary soldiers.

Further east from Slovenian sites not an insignificant number of such spearheads was found in Sisak, the ancient Siscia/Segestica (Fig. 1). Since those are accidental finds discovered during the dredging of the Kupa river, we cannot claim with certainty that they belonged to Roman auxiliaries, but obvious parallels can be drawn and we can assume with a high degree of certainty that they were indeed used by Roman soldiers. Considering the importance of the military garrison in Siscia during the Julio-Claudian time, particularly so during the Augustan period – the city was the main Roman military base in south-western Pannonia for several decades and witnessed huge concentrations of troops during Tiberius' Pannonian war and Bato's uprising – such finds are hardly surprising.

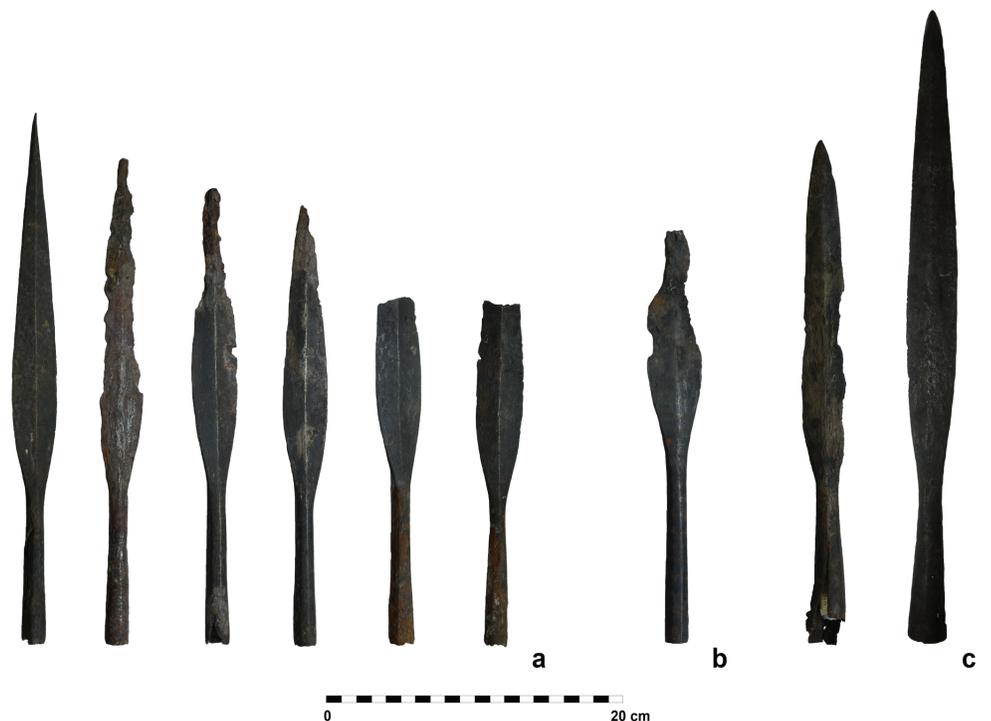


Fig. 1 Spearheads with faceted sockets from Sisak (Archaeological museum in Zagreb)

At least 9 spearheads with faceted sockets from the Kupa river in Sisak are kept in the holdings of the Archaeological museum in Zagreb, while one specimen is in possession of the City Museum in Sisak. From a typological point of view, most of these spearheads belong to a rather homogenous group – their length being usually between 30 and 35 cm. Their blade is leaf-shaped and has a rhombic cross-section, with an average width between 3,1 and 3,4 cm. The length of the socket corresponds approximately to one third of the total length, while the socket diameter varies between 1,6 and 1,7 cm. The specimen shown in fig. 1: b somewhat differs by the length of the socket and the width of the blade (4 cm), while an elongated blade is recorded in two specimens (fig. 1: c), only one being significantly longer than the others – 41 cm (its socket diameter is 2,7 cm, which would imply a much larger shaft than the average recorded size).

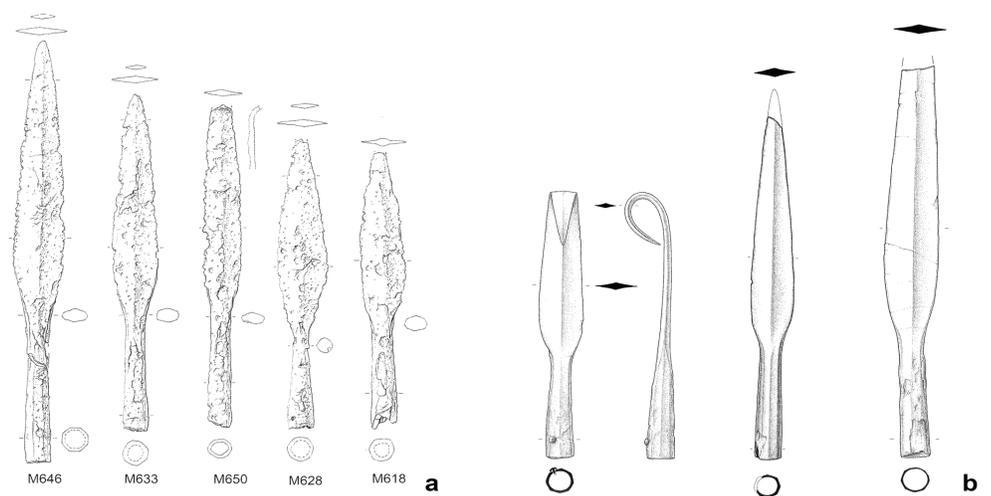


Fig. 2 Spearheads with faceted sockets from: a) Wartau-Ochsenberg (CH), b) Verdun near Stopiče (SI)

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