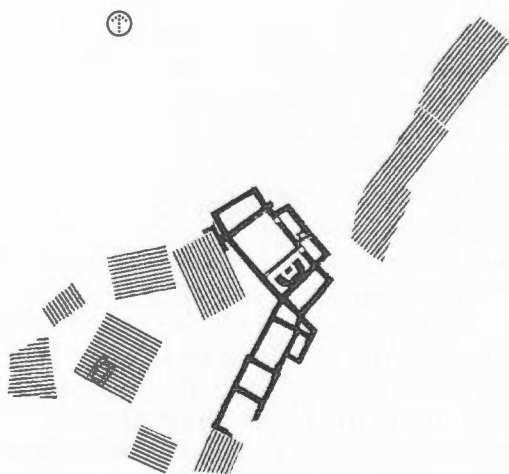


Archaeological Site of Ajdna

IRN 564

Location	Potoki near Žirovnica
Time of origin	6th century
Time of restoration	Since 1981
Chief Conservator	Milan Sagadin and assistants Ivan Bogovčič, Jernej Hudolin, Franc Vardjan
Visits	Access from the village of Potoki or from the valley of Završnica

The settlement picture of the territory of Slovenia in late Antiquity had radically changed in comparison with the period of high Antiquity. Elevated and well protected locations were attractive for settlement, while the settlements on the plains stagnated and fell into decay. The background of such changes was the severe crisis of the Roman Empire which had escalated since the civil wars of the 3rd century. The brief periods of consolidation during the reigns of Emperors Diocletian (284–305) and Constantine (306–337) could not halt the process of disintegration of the state. Wars that were important for the fate of Slovene territories after the wars of succession between Constantine's sons were: the war between Constantius and Magnentius (351 and 352), the invasion of the Eastern Goths (380), the battle between Theodosius and Eugenius at Ajdovščina (394), invasions of the Western Goths (around 410) and the invasion of the Huns (451/452). The domination of the Eastern Goths at the beginning of the 6th century appeased the country, yet it was concluded by Byzantine-Gothic wars



▲ Ground plan of the settlement (Scale: 1mm = 1m).

◀ Bird-shaped clasp, 5th–6th century. “Left to their own resources the inhabitants fled to remote, inaccessible places...”

which instated new rulers – the Lombards. Their domination ending in 568 was relatively tranquil, yet it was followed by a new wave of devastation during the settlement of the Slavs. Left to their own resources the inhabitants fled to remote, inaccessible places or moved to Istria and Italy.

Intense investigation of settlements of that period during the last 30 years discovered the exceptional range of changes in the settlement picture of the south-eastern Alpine region. There are over 50 known late Antiquity settlements on eleva-



Archaeological excavations in 1996. "Intense investigation of settlements of that period discovered the exceptional range of changes in the settlement picture of the south-eastern Alpine region..."

tions only in Slovenia, and their number is still increasing. Most of them were stone-built, fortified settlements inhabited in subsequent phases, in accordance with political changes that caused new waves of immigration from settlements on the plains. Several temporary shelters were also discovered, without stone-built artefacts. Their locations usually showed traces of previous, mostly prehistoric settlements.

The settlement of Ajdna overlooking the village of Potoki (1,048m above sea level) occupied the most prominent and highest location of all. Its exposed position demonstrated the extremity of living conditions of the population of that period, which additionally facilitated the estimation of the living conditions in flat lands. The need for security evidently prevailed over all other needs. Ajdna displayed a number of characteristics common to all settlements of that kind. The very arrangement of the buildings was typical by itself. The main location on the settlement terrace was occupied by an old Christian church building. That was a clear indication of the importance attributed to the Christian Church after the disintegration of all state structures in late Antiquity. Lack of space and ingenious adaptability to the configuration of the terrain typical of all similar

settlements were even more discernible in the case of Ajdna; on account of that Ajdna can be considered as a model settlement.

The settlement was spread on three large terraces, and 20 to 25 structures can be discerned on each of them from the configuration of the terrain. It seemed that the oldest remnants of settlement were concentrated on the lowest terrace: some findings from the 1st and 2nd centuries, and one dated as belonging to the prehistoric period. Structures from the 5th and 6th centuries were located around the larger main building



Presented remnants of the old Christian church. "The church was presented to such an extent that it can again serve its original purpose..."

containing the water tank. That was a typical element of such settlements and an illustration of the living conditions in them. The main building of the middle terrace was, as stated, the church. The upper terrace was long and narrow, and there was only a long series of minor structures on it, probably concluded by remnants of another water tank on the northern side. A long row of connected residential dwellings were typical features of such settlements, and they indicated a return to the ground plans of prehistoric settlements (e.g. Most na Soči). The archaeological site of Ajdna was completed by the exceptional mountain ambience, therefore the hill was declared a natural monument.

Systematic archaeological research began in 1976 when the first trial boreholes were initiated by Andrej Valič from the Gorenjski Museum in Kranj. The old Christian church was discovered in the first year and it was excavated in several stages in 1983, after the excavation of the entrance shed. An additional 5 structures have been completely excavated so far, apart from the church, and two further ones only partly excavated.

The principal building of the settlement was the old Christian church. It belonged to the type of Aquileian architecture which was common in the 5th and 6th centuries in the entire region belonging to the church organization of the Patriarchate of Aquileia. It was a simple building with a rectangular floor plan, divided at one third of its length into the higher eastern part (presbytery) intended for the clergy, and the lower western part (nave) for the congregation. There was a lean-on shed in front of the entrance. A semi-circular bench for priests leaned on the eastern wall of the presbytery, together with a prominent throne for the holder of the service. A stone-built altar stood in

front of the bench with a clearly visible opening for the reliquary.

Investigations proved that the church in its present appearance was constructed in two or three phases. The first building with a lean-on wooden shed on the western side was almost destroyed in an unknown disaster. In the second phase it was built with somewhat thinner walls; the shed was abandoned, the main entrance on the axis of the church was walled-in, and another room was added on the northern side with the entrance through it. The room was divided into two parts, and the passage between them was built up in the third phase. The second phase can be dated on the basis of the central grave next to the walled-in entrance as belonging to the first half of the 6th century. There were 11 graves discovered in the church itself, in the entrance shed on the western side and in both side rooms on the northern side. Those were the so-called privileged burials and not the burial ground of the entire population of the settlement, which has not been discovered yet. Two late Antiquity construction phases were discernible in residential dwellings to the south-east of the church and on the lower terrace.

Minor finds indicated that the inhabitants of Ajdna lived on the cultivation of land, stock-breeding and very intensely with the production of iron. The settlement had preserved trading contacts with the Mediterranean; they imported wine and oil.

The conservation and presentation of the structures on Ajdna were very difficult on account of the exposed location and harsh mountainous climate. In the first stage the opinion that the excavated architectural remnants should be filled in almost prevailed. The expert commission supervising the works demanded that the structures presented be covered by roofs adapted to the surroundings, and the authenticity of the walls be preserved to the utmost during the restoration. Numerous data were not known, e.g. concerning the original height of the walls, the window openings, numerous architectural details, etc. On account of that the conservation and presentation were limited to the existing state of affairs. Due to their relatively well preserved condition the structures were still discernible and even usable.

Physical and chemical analyses of old mortar were performed before the beginning of the restoration, and the most appropriate sand quarry was selected in the neighbourhood on the basis of the results. An experimental wall was subsequently built at the location and various kinds of mortar were used for it. After a year of observation the decision was taken to strengthen the interior of the original walls with concrete and to use the so-called extended mortar on the fronts. New foundations were made for the structures of late Antiquity and drainage was fixed around them to prevent humidity and consequently frost. The better preserved fronts were thoroughly cleaned by jets of water, and the incisions between the stones were refilled with new mortar. Less visible fronts were copied on plastic films at a scale of 1:1 and subsequently dismantled. The interior of the walls was cleared of humus, roots and disintegrated mortar. Visible parts

of the walls were subsequently reassembled so that each stone was placed in its original position, precisely according to the drawing on the film. The interior of the wall was filled with concrete, and horizontal and vertical ties were inserted into it connected with the ties in the foundations. The crown of the wall was heightened a little, which prevented the crumbling of stones from the original parts of the wall, and metal supports for the roof connected with ties were installed into it. The construction of the roof was calculated for extreme weather conditions and its material (shingles) was adapted to the surroundings so that the heightened part would function as an independent extension, and not as a reconstruction of the original roof that was not known. The floor in the church was restored with the discovered original technology. The bench for priests and the altar were only cleaned and strengthened with new mortar. All works were thus performed in accordance with the basic principle: to preserve the utmost authenticity and simultaneously to secure the maximum strength of historical structures.

All the constructions presented at Ajdna so far were renovated according to the described method. However, an exception had to be made in the case of the structure with the water tank on the lower terrace. The building was namely located directly on top of an older one and the water tank was additionally installed in the south-eastern corner, which prevented the dismantlement of the walls. The decision was reached to clean out the interior of the walls through injection tubes, and finally to strengthen the walls by injecting appropriate mortar into them. The restoration is still in progress.

Three further residential dwellings have been presented so far at Ajdna, apart from the church. They were all covered with roofs and now serve as shelters for visitors. The church was presented to such an extent that it can again serve its original purpose. It can be said that people took to it: church services are held there at least twice a year. In the church entrance the history of the settlement, its discovery and restoration are presented on six boards. Plans were made for the display facilities of other buildings, and the expert commission confirmed them. The decision reached by the commission was that further excavations of the entire settlement would irreparably destroy the exceptional ambience at Ajdna, therefore the investigations were stopped at the present stage. The restoration works are taking place on the lower terrace at present. The surrounding area of the structure with a tank should be archaeologically researched. The excavations will not reach the edge of the terrace so as not to damage the border of the forest and consequently initiate erosion.

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Literature

MILAN SAGADIN, *Ajdna nad Potoki*, Kulturni in naravni spomeniki Slovenije, Zbirka vodnikov, 190, Ljubljana, 1997.