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## Where are you, Stridon?

### *Kje si, Stridon?*

*Abstract:* St. Jerome's reference to the geographical location of Stridon cannot be resolved if we do not take into account the citations in his own texts as well as the people, events and other places associated with his life. This article addresses these questions and proposes hypotheses regarding the location of Stridon. A verbal contest between Croats, Italians and Hungarians has taken place over the current Slovenian territory as to whose compatriot St. Jerome is. However, in their arguments, they have largely ignored the course of St. Jerome's life, his friendships and acquaintances, citations of geographical features, as well as heated controversy and contention. The search for the location of Jerome's Stridon is narrowing to the region between Aquileia and Emona (Ljubljana). This has so far been accepted by many scholars, referring in particular to the Letters of Jerome. This article contributes new arguments: the early presence of Christianity in this area, as confirmed by recent archaeological findings in Emona 2017–2018, the concentration of churches in the Slovenian Karst dedicated to St. Jerome. At this point, we mention the settlement of Strane on the slope of Mount Nanos (Odra), which draws our attention because of its name and other geographical features and historical events.

*Keywords:* location of Stridon, Jerome's citations, hypotheses, new archaeological research, the concentration of churches in the Slovenian Karst (Pivka), Strane (Stridonae?)

*Povzetek:* Hieronimova navedba geografske lege Stridona je nerešljiva, če ne upoštevamo navedb, ki jih sporočajo njegova besedila in ljudje, dogodki in kraji, povezani z njegovim življenjem. Ta vprašanja obravnava razprava, v kateri na vajamo razne domneve glede ubikacije Stridona. Prek današnjega slovenskega ozemlja se je v preteklosti vihtel besedni dvoboj med Hrvati, Italijani in Madžari, čigav rojak je sv. Hieronim. Pri tem so večinoma prezrli potek Hieronimovega življenja, njegova prijateljstva in poznanstva, navedbe geografskih značilnosti, pa tudi vroče polemike in nasprotovanja. Razprava glede lokacije (ubikacije) Hieronimovega Stridona se zožuje na prostor med Akvilejo (Oglej) in Emono (Ljubljana). To so že doslej sprejemali številni raziskovalci, sklicujoč se zlasti na Hieronimova Pisma. Naša razprava prispeva nove argumente: zgodnja navzoč-

nost krščanstva na tem območju, kakor potrjujejo novejšje arheološke raziskave v Emoni 2017–2018, koncentracija cerkva na Krasu, posvečenih sv. Hieronimu. Tukaj omenjamo naselje Strane (Stridonae?) na pobočju gore Nanos (Ocra), ki priteguje našo pozornost zaradi svojega imena in drugih geografskih značilnosti in zgodovinskih dogajanj.

*Ključne besede:* lega Stridona, Hieronimove navedbe, domneve, nove arheološke raziskave, koncentracija cerkva na Slovenskem Krasu (Pivka), Strane (Stridonae?)

The true location of Stridon, the birthplace of St. Jerome, remains unknown. Many researchers in various scientific fields are working to find an answer to this question or at least the direction for further research efforts. Archaeological, historical and comparative studies have nevertheless contributed evidence toward pinpointing the geographical location of Stridon. Is it possible to repeat a finding such as the discovery of a milestone along the former Roman road *Ad Malum* near Materija na Krasu (1842) (Vidrih-Perko 2006; Slapšak 1997), which revealed the presence of Rundicts in this Karst area and territorial demarcations between the contemporary populations? Perhaps a similar milestone lies discarded in a ditch or has been incorporated into the wall of a building or a church in the Slovenian Karst or somewhere nearby.

A millennium and a half after St. Jerome historical and archaeological sciences, as well as social, cultural and religious interest, joined in the search for the true location of Stridon, the birthplace of St. Jerome, translator, researcher and interpreter of the Bible. This discussion does not seek or provide an answer that would satisfy partial interests but strives to contribute to the kind of answer that interests the ecclesiastical as well as the historical and cultural public. St. Jerome contributed to the understanding and dissemination of the message of the Bible so that he himself — because of the Bible — would receive a lasting memory in the history of mankind and in European and world culture. The celebration of the 1600<sup>th</sup> anniversary of St. Jerome's death (419/420–2019/2020) was a special incentive for us, the most convincing heirs to the place of his boyhood and the search of his calling by studying the Bible and the lives of spiritual men of the first centuries of Christianity, to contribute to the recognition of the location of his birthplace Stridon.<sup>1</sup>

## 1. Jerome's Accounts

Jerome's reference to the location of Stridona in *De viris illustribus sive de scriptoribus ecclesiasticis* (*On Famous Men or On Church Writers*), written in 392 or 393, is short and concise. He presents himself as the last of the 135 cited names with the words: »Hieronymus, natus patre Eusebio, oppido Stridonis, quod a Gothis

<sup>1</sup> This question is treated by Valenčič 2007. Some of the papers from the symposium *Hieronymus noster*, which deal with various aspects of the reception of St Jerome in Slovene and Slavic culture, were published in the journal *Edinost in dialog*; see Bogataj et al. 2020.

eversum Dalmatiae quondam Panoniaeque confinium fuit (135) [Jerome, born to his father Eusebius, in the town of Stridon, which was formerly the border of Dalmatia and Pannonia, having been overthrown by the Goths«]. Enough and too little. Enough for his contemporaries, who knew his life and work at the time he spread and preserved the cultural and Christian tradition of the contemporary generations, in spite of turbulent historical, social and religious events. Not enough for the generations that followed, who could not recognize the message of his records.

Jerome's account of the geographic location of Stridon and its historical destiny is incomplete if we do not take into account the statements given by other texts and the events, people and places associated with St. Jerome. We shall address these questions in this discussion by first briefly stating the hypotheses regarding the location of Stridon as presented by their proponents. We present arguments by older and more recent researchers who have addressed this issue based on the course of Jerome's life and the statements in his works, not always and not all, *sine ira et studio* (without anger and ambition).

## 2. Enigmas Regarding the Name Stridon

Some believe that the most important mention is that of the *very name* – *Stridon*,<sup>2</sup> which is cited only by Jerome and only in one place and not by any of his contemporaries. The place has not yet been identified with certainty. It has turned out that the name alone does not suffice if we do not take into account other features that indirectly confirm the location, such as other historical events and comparisons, the mention of the demarcation between the provinces of Dalmatia and Pannonia, the year of the destruction of Stridon, etc. Consequently, some researchers rightly refuse to mention the alleged localities, be it in Dalmatia or Pannonia, which may have a similar name but do not possess the other features and circumstances of the former Stridon. None of the major researchers and scholars of St. Jerome is willing to be limited to a single statement on which to base his hypothesis.

Others, among them the Croatian archaeologist and historian, academician Mate Suić (1986), tackled the linguistic features or *homophones* of the name Stridon, which begins with the characteristic consonants *s-t-r-(d)*. They sought a clue in the Latin verb *strideo*, *stridere*, which signifies squeezing, creaking, roaring, that is generated upon passing through a strait or overcoming an obstacle. Such phenomena are characteristic of the karst topography, of the passage between mountains and hills, of the transition from the plain to the hilly area, e.g., from Dalmatia to Pannonia or from Pannonia to Dalmatia. M. Suić (1986, 239-240) places Stridon in the area of Liburnia, in the hinterland of the Kvarner Bay,

<sup>2</sup> M. Suić believes that the expression 'oppido Stridonis' is the plural form of the word 'Stridonae'. This plural form is familiar in Liburnia, e.g. Šapjane, Žejane ... It is thus possible to explain the place name *Strane*, which is dealt with in this discussion.

where such natural phenomena are very pronounced. He cites toponyms such as Šapjane, Žejane, Starod ... with occasional explanations. In the vicinity of these places, along the former Roman road *Ad Malum* and *Ad Titulos* (between Aquileia and Tarsatica), there is a strong fortress *Gradina (Gradišče)*, which dominates the landscape and the passages toward the Kvarner Bay. The toponym *Šapjane* (from the Croatian *šaptati*, Slovenian *šepetati*, *piskati*) is supposed to indicate a place where the wind produces a special echo and noise. Suić has also tackled linguistic explanations and similarities. The place of *Žejane (Eu-sebiane)* is said to be reminiscent of Eusebius, Jerome's father, and his grange (*villulae*). The suffix *-ane* is also said to be a relic of Roman provenance. The author's statements are biased, for he does not mention other places in the geographical vicinity, e.g., the oldest medieval settlement in the area, the pre-parish of Jelšane (10<sup>th</sup> century AD). He also fails to mention the important prehistoric and ancient Roman fort of Sv. Katarina nad Jelšanami, which dominates the routes between Tarsatica and Aquileia, and between Tarsatica and Emona. He appears to be unaware of the presence of Christianity in nearby places (Šilentabor, Ahac; in the 6<sup>th</sup> century), nor does he mention the churches dedicated to St. Jerome in the near vicinity (Koritnice, Čelje, Nanos, Sv. Ahac, Ivanje selo), as well as the medieval locality of *Strane* in Pivka on the eastern side of the *Ocra* (Nanos), along the once important thoroughfare between *Emona* (Ljubljana), *Longaticum* (Logatec) and *Aquileia*. This was called *Via Gemina*.

Our attention is especially drawn to the settlement of *Strane* on the slope of the Nanos. The name of the place has both the characteristic consonants *s-t-r* and the suffix *-ane*. In the Middle Ages, *Strane*, together with the villages of *Studeno in Strmca*, belonged to the lordship of the Cistercian monastery of Stična (Grebenc 1973; Penko 2007, 91–93). The place, including its geographical location and area, which have been buried by a rockslide from the Nanos, are still archeologically and historically unexplored. A reminder of the rockslide is the church of St. Bric (Briccius) on the eastern slope of the Nanos at an altitude of 900 m. Churches built where similar snow-, stone- or landslides have taken place tend to be dedicated to the saint.

Much as the search for the location of Stridon in relation to the toponyms or homophones, the mention of the Roman provinces of *Dalmatia – Pannonia* and their borders or junctions has not led to a definitive answer. The borders (junctions) between the provinces shifted, such that some researchers have extended the search for Stridon to the banks of the Drava in the North and to Sirmium (Sremska Mitrovica) in the East. Some scholars have thought or expected that their authority was sufficient for the validity of a hypothesis, e.g., the archaeologist Frano Bulić (Suić 1986, 222), who defends the Dalmatian hypothesis, to be discussed below.

Fewer questions are raised as to the year the Goths destroyed Stridon. M. Suić believes that it was in 379 (Suić 1988, 241)<sup>3</sup> after the Goths had plundered the lands of the Danube after their victory over the Roman army at Adrianopolis. They

<sup>3</sup> Similarly Milotić (2006, 28); Penko (2007, 29) believes the year was 378.

came all the way to the foot of the Julian Alps (*Alpium Vallum*). From the East, they probably came via Emona and Longaticum and continued their way through Ocra (Nanos, Razdrto) or along a parallel route via Stari trg near Lož. Stridon certainly was an important place in the geographical area and lay on the transit route; otherwise, the Goths would not have stopped there on their march toward the centre of the Empire (Mandac 1995, 13). The Goths chose routes and places (*castella*) that were strategically, militarily and commercially more important. They housed »a permanent military crew that supervised the main thoroughfares« and were surrounded by autonomous military areas with warehouses in support of security personnel (Penko 2007, 45).

Some have sought Stridon, with its characteristic initial consonants *s-t-r*, elsewhere. A typical example is *Štrigova* in Međimurje (near Razkrižje), which has a rich and important tradition regarding Jerome's birthplace. The hypothesis has been defended, among others, by Melchior Inchoffer (1644) and later by the renowned Trieste historian Franc Kandler (1805–1872). The most important advocate and promoter of this hypothesis was Josip Bedeković (1688–1760), who has written a monograph on *Štrigova* and St. Jerome titled *Natale solum magni Ecclesiae doctoris Sancti Hieronymi* [Native Land of the Great Teacher of the Church St. Jerome] (Neostadii Austriae, 1752). The book has been translated into Croatian (2017)<sup>4</sup> by a group of collaborators (J. Bedeković, D. Feletar, M. Berljak, L. Logožar), who later prepared and published the anthology *Prinosi za povijest Štrigove. Štrigova – rodno mjesto sv. Jeronima* [Contributions for the History of *Štrigova*. *Štrigova* — Birthplace of St. Jerome] (2019). They argue that *Štrigova*, considering historical and archaeological evidence and local tradition, is the birthplace of St. Jerome or his parents. They refer to the fact that Dalmatia, as it then bordered the province of Pannonia, extended as far as the Mura. A wooden church was first erected at the place, dedicated to the saint who was specially venerated by the Pauline monks, for the reason that St. Jerome had written the biography of St. Paul the Hermit in Egypt (4th cent.), whose example inspired in St. Jerome enthusiasm for hermit life.<sup>5</sup> Proponents of this hypothesis refer to Pope Nicholas V (1439-1455), who in 1447 issued a bull allowing the Counts of Celje (Frederick of Celje) to bless the newly built (Gothic) church and venerate the saint. The book by J. Bedeković (original and translation) is an apology for the claim that Jerome's birthplace be-

<sup>4</sup> The translation was published under a different title: Josip Bedeković, *Knjiga o sv. Jeronimu, Iliriku i Međimurju*, Zagreb: Hrvatska akademija znanosti i umjetnosti, 2017. O sv. Hieronimu na str. 303–502.

<sup>5</sup> Paulines were founded in 1303. They had several monasteries in Croatia: Remete (1272), Lepoglava (1400), *Štrigova* (15th cent.), Sv. Helena pri Čakovcu, Sv. Petar u Šumi in Istria (1459), Kamensko near Karlovac, Olimje (1663) etc.

In preparation of the commemoration of the 1600<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of St. Jerome (2019) the Croatian scientific institutions (HAZU and its outstations) published a translation of Bedeković's book and organized a symposium on Bedeković's work and on compatriot St. Jerome. The Church and societal events at the time were supposed to confirm the belief that the saint belonged to their place as well as to revitalize veneration and pilgrimages to the restored church of St. Jerome at *Štrigova* that had been forbidden or hindered after World War II. The church has been in the process of renovation since 2000, including the important paintings of the baroque fresco painter, Tirolean and Pauline monk Ivan Krstnik Rengar (1700–1753).

longs to Croatia and not to Hungary or Styria, rather than presenting evidence for its true location (2017, 78).

In the Western flank, staunch advocates claimed that *Zrenj* (*Sdregna*, also *Stridone*) near Oprtalj/Buzet in northern Istria was the birthplace of St. Jerome. Proponents of this Italic/Istrian hypothesis thus wanted to emphasize Jerome's Romance (Italic/Istrian) origins. The hypothesis was a response to the Dalmatian (Croatian/Slavic) hypothesis and cited as evidence, in addition to the name of the place, the cemetery church dedicated to St. Jerome, other devotional markers, and a rich tradition among the local people. Among proponents of this hypothesis were the historian and humanist Flavio Biondo (Flavius Biondus, 1392–1463),<sup>6</sup> Domenico Vallarsi (1771) and Peter Stanković (1771–1852; 1824)<sup>7</sup> (Milotić 2006). Vallarsi placed the birthplace of St. Jerome a little north of Zrenj, in the area between Aquileia and Emona, which then belonged to Italy. Biondo mentions the Istrian towns (*civitas, oppidum*) Buje, Momjan, Oprtalj, Grožnjan, Buzet, which were then under the administration of Koper, among them also the *oppidulum* – little town of *Sdrigna* (*Sdregna*), where St. Jerome was supposedly born. Biondo as well as other proponents of the Istrian (Italic) hypothesis were aware of the fact that the Glagolitic alphabet and Slavic worship had been widespread in these places for some two centuries, which was disturbing for some from the ethnic viewpoint.

The association between Zrenj and St. Jerome is comprehensively discussed by Ivan Milotić (\*1982), a lawyer and researcher of the Istrian past, in the monograph *Zrenj i sveti Jeronim* [Zrenj and St. Jerome] (2007). Milotić is careful not to mislead the reader that Zrenj is Jerome's birthplace. He describes Jerome's life in a transparent and critical way, referring to renowned authors such as F. Cavallera, A. Vaccari, M. Suić, J. Bratulić and others. Although in Istria, in addition to Zrenj, there are several churches dedicated to St. Jerome, Milotić does not refer to this fact in confirmation of Zrenj as Jerome's Stridon (Milotić 2006, 20–22).<sup>8</sup> When presenting the »Istrian hypothesis« advocated by older authors, he states that his purpose »is not to prove or disprove a hypothesis of Jerome's birthplace« (59–60) but to point out the fact that there are close ties between Zrenj and St. Jerome, which were created by a historical and religious tradition that cannot be denied. He cites the proponents of the various hypotheses, especially the Dalmatian (Croatian/Slavic) and Istrian (Italic) hypotheses, showing their one-sidedness and shortcomings. When he strives for a comprehensive insight into Jerome's life, references in his works and events in his life, he is most convinced by the archaeologist and historian Mate Suić (1986) that the birthplace of St. Jerome is Liburnia, a region in the hinterland of Kvarner.

<sup>6</sup> Flavio Biondo, *Italia illustrata sive descriptio XIV regionum Italiae*, Basileia, 1559. The book was published in 1474 after Biondo's death. (Milotić 2006, 61–66)

<sup>7</sup> Pietro Stankovich, *San Girolamo il dottore massimo dimonstrato evidentemente di patria Istriano - Apologia*, Trieste, 1829.

<sup>8</sup> The author does not mention St. Jerome's churches at Klana and at Rijeka, which are not part of Istria.

The controversy over the location of Stridon has thus focused mainly on the Dalmatian and Istrian hypotheses. The key issue is that Jerome belonged to Italy, that he was, therefore, an Italic (Italicus) and not a Dalmatian, i.e., a Slav. Some see a link between Jerome and Aquileia in the inscription at the entrance to the church of Aquileia, where Jerome was supposed to have been baptized; the inscription reads: »Divo Hieronymo qui in hac sancta ecclesia lavacrum gratiae suscepit et fidem.« [To St. Jerome, who in this holy church received the laver of grace and faith.] (De Leo 2007, 477) However, Jerome was baptized during his first stay in Rome (in 366).

The claim of Jerome's Italic origin was strongly opposed by the Split humanist and renowned spiritual writer Marko Marulić (1450–1524). In his time, the veneration of St. Jerome in Dalmatia was widespread due to the use of the Glagolitic alphabet and the belief that Dalmatia was his homeland. The title of Marulić's treatise *In eos qui beatum Hieronymum Italum fuisse intendunt* [Among Those who Consider that Blessed Jerome Was an Italic] (Milotić 2007, 68) is already telling. Marulić was inspired by St. Jerome to compose poems of biblical stories and spiritual instructions (*Davidias, Judita, Suzana, De imitatione bene vivendi, Vita divi Hieronymi*, etc.). Most researchers then and later sought the location of Stridon in Dalmatia or its vicinity. That is why they considered Jerome a 'Dalmatian'. The first to call Jerome a Dalmatian, in a contemptuous context, is Palladius Galata, bishop of Henelopolis in Bithynia, in his work *Historia Lausiaca* (+431). Palladius states: »Some priest, Jerome« and »Some Jerome, Dalmatian« (*Patrologia Graeca* 34).

This question has more recently been dealt with by the Croatian archaeologist Frano Bulić (1846–1934), who established himself as a researcher of the Roman Salona (Solin, Split). Bulić was an undisputed authority in the field of archaeology and convinced many with the theory that Jerome's birthplace was somewhere in Dalmatia or vicinity. Without scruples, he referred to the famous saying attributed to Jerome: »Parce mihi, Domine, quia Dalmata sum!« (Lord, forgive me for being a Dalmatian). Jerome neither said nor wrote these words, although some still refer to them today. An important role regarding Jerome's presumed Dalmatian origin was played by the Slavic liturgy and Glagolitic alphabet, widespread in Dalmatia and on Dalmatian and Istrian islands, which was attributed to St. Jerome.<sup>9</sup> More on this below.

Bulić believed he had found the crowning proof for the location of Stridon on the Grahovo Polje, on the Roman road to Bosnia, in the inscription on the milestone that had been found around 1860 near Knin. Its inscription was recorded by the military commander and amateur archaeologist Stjepan Petković and interpreted by the lawyer Josip Alačevich. For Bulić, finding a milestone referenced to Stridon in its text was indisputable proof that he had discovered Jerome's birthplace. He published his hypothesis as early as 1898 and more extensively in various langua-

<sup>9</sup> For an interesting study of Jerome's friend Bonosus and the beginnings of monasticism in the Adriatic islands, see Ciglenečki and Bobovnik 2021. Parallely, Sales-Carbonell (2021) makes a compelling study of the origins of monasticism at the other end of the Mediterranean Sea.

ges on the 1500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Jerome's death (1920; 1984 [1920]). It turned out to be a forgery; the milestone with the noted inscription was mysteriously »lost.« Its transcription and interpretation are unconvincing. The case went *ad acta*, and the scientific persuasiveness of its advocates was shattered. M. Suić (1915–2002) recognizes that Bulić was very knowledgeable of the literature on this issue and was able to present the conflicting hypotheses regarding the location of Stridon systematically, but disagrees with him (Suić 1986, 217–218).

On the occasion of the 1500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Jerome's death (1920), many scholars responded to Bulić's claims and rejected his hypothesis for various reasons. Ferdinand Cavallera (1922), an excellent scholar of Jerome and publisher of his works, firmly rejects Bulić's hypothesis, finding that any search for Stridon outside the triangle Aquileia — Emona — Tarsatica, outside the region of the Julian Alps, is unconvincing. Alberto Vaccari (1922, 150), a biblical scholar and editor of the new Vulgate, responds to individual Bulić's claims by citing Jerome's texts and comparisons, although he still calls Jerome a 'Dalmatian'. Roko Rogošič (1928, 275) rejects the writings and interpretations by Petkovič/Alačevich as a forgery and suggests St. Peter at Pivka (on the Karst) as a possible location, which is given support by an expert on Istrian saints, the bishop and historian Dragutin Nežić (1985, 264–277). The lawyer Miroslav Premrou refers to the statements in Jerome's works (1921, 235–246). The patrologist Franc Ksaver Lukman summarizes Rogošič's statements (1941), while the historian Rajko Bratož (1990, 348–353) accepts Matej Suić's (1986) Liburnian hypothesis, given the then known data, which I comprehensively and critically discusses in the monograph *Sveti Hieronim – mož s Krasa* (2007). Recently, Francisco Moreno (1989), Josip Bratulić (1990), Regine Pernoud (1996), Rajko Bratož (1993), Ivan Miličić (2006), Josip Stanko Škunca (2017), Leo De Pietro (2007)<sup>10</sup> and others have also written about Jerome. M. Mandac abandons the further search for the location of Stridon but still gives Jerome the nickname 'Dalmatian' (1995), even in the title of his book. All of the above touches upon the issue of the location of Jerome's Stridon and, in part, address his life and work, especially translation and theology, which have left lasting traces in European and world culture.

A similar unknown as the name Stridon is Jerome's statement that the place *once (quondam)* lay on the *former (quondam)* border between Dalmatia and Pannonia. The border between the provinces stretched from Liburnia (Kvarner) in the North to Sirmium (Sremska Mitrovica) in the East. Some scholars were looking for Stridon even along this extensive frontier, all the way to its Eastern edge. The former Dalmatia did not always have the same borders, and today's borders are more misleading than helpful in resolving the position of Stridon. In the North, the former Dalmatia also included Liburnia, an area called *Dalmatia supra mare* (according to Farlatti), which included the hinterland of Kvarner or even today's Pivka (Mons Odra). D. Nežić disputes that St. Jerome would be from Istria or from

<sup>10</sup> De Pietro (2007, 13) cites: »Born at Stridon, an unknown place in the Roman Empire, not far from Aquileia.«



the region of *Venetia - Histria (Regio decima)*, which nevertheless »I would be happy to list« as a recognizable locus at the time, if it were true. He believes that Stridon lies »somewhere in the area around Sv. Peter na Krasu« (today's Pivka). In Jerome's time, this was the edge of Roman Dalmatia. »Somewhere here was Stridon, the birthplace of St. Jerome... His living contacts with the Church people in Aquileia and Emona (Ljubljana) speak in favor of this, while he does not know or name Salona (Solina) and its bishop at all.« (Nežić 2000, 161–162)

Thus, a verbal contest raged over the current Slovenian territory between Italians, Croats and Hungarians, especially between Croats and Italians, as to whose compatriot St. Jerome was. In doing so, they ignored the course of St. Jerome's life, friendships and acquaintances, citations of geographic features, as well as controversies and contentions, which were not few. They ignored the statements in Jerome's writings and other scientific comparisons (Rogošič 1928, 296–270).<sup>11</sup> Some rightly believe that even if the name and location of Stridon were to be found and the location were too distant from the Julian Alps, one should not be considering it as a candidate for Jerome's Stridon (F. Cavallera).

### 3. For a New and More Comprehensive Approach

The modest data on the location of Stridon, as cited by Jerome himself in *De viris illustribus*, have drawn the attention of researchers to other statements of his. Jerome was a Roman and a cosmopolitan who knew the Roman Empire, fed on Roman and Greek culture; he met and corresponded with many people of the time, while maintaining a keen memory of his birthplace, Stridon. In his *Letter to Heliodorus* he complains, »My heart stops when I ponder how things are going wrong today. For twenty years and more Roman blood has been spilled day after day between Constantinople and the Julian Alps ...« (*Letter* 60.16)

The medieval Split historian Archdeacon Tomaž (Thomas Archidiaconus, 1201–1268) approached the location of the birthplace of St. Jerome with more evident citations. In his work *Historia Salonitana* he locates Stridon in Liburnia, in the hinterland of Kvarner, in the so-called upper Dalmatia (*Dalmatia supra mare*) (*Historia Salonitana*, 55; 410). Tomaž states: »Dalmatia is a coastal region that stretches from Epirus /.../ to the Kvarner Bay; inside it lies Stridon, which was on the border between Dalmatia and Pannonia. This was the homeland of Blessed Jerome, a great teacher.« (Milotić 2006, 32) Some believe Archdeacon Tomaž, a renowned medieval historian, had reliable historical sources at his disposal to claim this with such certainty. His work has been obscured over time by patriotic and biased opinions, which are still widespread today. Veneration of the saint, as well as disputes over his birthplace, were especially widespread during the Crusades (in the 13th century) and upon the transfer of the relics of the saint from Bethlehem to Rome

<sup>11</sup> The author states that »osobito malo pisaca obaziralo na same Jeronimove spise« [few writers even considered Jerome's writings] (Rogošič 1928, 296–270).

(Rupnik 1929, 52–53), to the church of Santa Maria Maggiore (Saint Mary Major or Mary of the Snows), where they still rest today. At that time St. Jerome was often portrayed by painters and sculptors, and his life was presented by writers (Milotić 2006, 14; 18). Most of the churches dedicated to St. Jerome in Slovenia date to the Middle Ages, to the time of (late) Gothic style, which took hold in Slovenia with a century-long delay. The churches on our soil decorated with Templar crosses and memorials, such as at Dutovlje on the Karst (St. George), at Slap near Vipava (St. Matthias), at Strane on the Pivka (Sv. Križ), remind us of the pilgrimages to the Holy Land and the defence of pilgrims against robbers.

Our attention is now drawn to the connection of St. Jerome with the Glagolitic alphabet. Rabanus Maurus (784–856) wrote about Jerome's authorship of the Glagolitic alphabet in his work *De inventione linguarum* (Patrologia Latina 112, 1579–1584), which experts on the origin of the Glagolitic alphabet strongly reject (SNS 2021). Veneration of St. Jerome is closely associated with the use of the Glagolitic alphabet and (old) Slavic liturgy, which was widespread on the Kvarner islands, in Istria and Dalmatia, and the neighbouring regions. Catholic Rome opposed this practice for fear of a recurrence of the schism between the West and East (in 1054). It saw Latin liturgy as a counterweight to Slavic liturgy, which was already established not only in the Christian East but also among neighboring Slavic nations (Croats, Macedonians, Czechs, Moravians, and also in the nearby Slovenian regions of Primorje and Goriška). The establishment of the Glagolitic alphabet was met with trials and opposition, for example, the action at the Split Parliament in 925, the prohibition of liturgy in the national language in 1060, and the order to priests in the countryside to master Latin much as priests in the cities did. (Bogović 2004, 247–260)

The effort to preserve the Glagolitic alphabet and the veneration of St. Jerome reached an important point in 1248. The Croatian historian Franjo Šanjek has stated that the belief the Glagolitic alphabet was invented by St. Jerome took hold in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries. Bishop Filip of Senj in 1248 addressed Pope Innocent IV (1243–1254) a letter in defense of the Glagolitic liturgy by stating that it was a 'letter of Jerome', to which the Pope did not object out of respect for the saint. The authority won; later, many also referred to it. The Croatian historians Josip Buturac and Andrija Ivandija believe this was a 'pious lie' (*pia fraus*). (Valenčič 2007, 79) Regardless of the stated reasons, both the Glagolitic alphabet and St. Jerome received confirmation, which was an incentive to preserve religious, cultural and ethnic affiliation, which in turn has an important place in Croatian cultural and religious history. Thus the Glagolitic alphabet played a vital role in the religious and national development, both then and now, in Dalmatia and Istria, on the Dalmatian and Kvarner islands, on the Northern Croatian border belt and even in the Slovenian lands (Naldini 2001).

Now we direct our attention to the many churches dedicated to St. Jerome in the area between Aquileia and Emona and the immediate vicinity, for example, Nanos - Ocra (altitude 1019 m), Koritnice near Knežak, Čelje near Prem, Bošamarin near Koper, Topolovec near Sočerga, Ivanje selo near Rakek, Petkovec in

Rovte, Kozana in Goriška Brda, Ahac (later dedicated to St. Jerome and today to St. Joachim) at Jasen near Ilirska Bistrica, Branica (later dedicated to St. Catherine of Alexandria), Jagršče near Tolmin (in ruins), on Loza (in 'borscht') near Slavina (unidentified location). In addition to the churches, it is worth mentioning the chapels and votive signposts dedicated to the saint in settlements or along pilgrimage routes, as well as depictions (paintings, sculptures) in other settings (Valenčič 2020, op. 40).

On the occasion of the 1600<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Jerome's death (419/420–2019/2020), the Diocese of Koper prepared and revived pilgrimages to the churches on its territory mentioned above (Koritnice, Čelje, Kozana, Bošamarin, Topolovec and Nanos), which showed the still enduring tradition of veneration of the saint. Among them, the church on the Nanos stands out, as it has preserved a rich pilgrimage tradition in spite of inclement weather conditions and the post-World War II hostile attitude toward faith. (Valenčič 2020)

There are several churches dedicated to St. Jerome in the Croatian Istria and vicinity as well: Zrenj near Oprtalj, Nova vas, Hum, Vižinada, Muntić, Kavran, Otok sv. Jerolima (Brioni), Rijeka and Klana near Rijeka (Medved 2020). Should Istria perhaps also be included in the search for the birthplace of St. Jerome? Scholars such as D. Nežić, I. Milotić, M. Suić and others make no references to this fact.

The concentration of churches dedicated to St. Jerome in the Slovenian Karst and in Istria is not accidental. It was the ecclesiastical authority — the local bishop, who also consecrated or blessed the church, the diocese, or the patronage over the parish — that decided to which saint a given church was to be dedicated. We do not have detailed information on the locations mentioned above. It is not known how much influence the believers had in these cases if any. We can assume that pre-existing influences, such as the veneration of a saint at a given place or in the surrounding area, oral and written tradition, pilgrimages, answered prayers, as well as events in the Church and broader society, e.g., the Crusades, the pilgrimages to the Holy Land, the spread of infectious diseases, were crucial to the erection of a church and the veneration of a saint. Perhaps this is the reason why churches dedicated to St. Jerome were erected in turbulent and critical times, in secluded places, at the edge of settlements, in cemeteries, so that they do not stand out in terms of size or furnishings.

Researchers and the general public are less familiar with the facts we cite below as important factors in finding the location of Jerome's Stridon. The well established and recent archaeological findings reveal the early presence of Christianity in the area of the Slovenian Karst (the Pivka and Bistriško) in late antiquity. The Romanesque-Gothic church of St. Martin at Šilentabor (also known as Šilen Tabor) near Zagorje na Krasu harbours archaeological artefacts from late antiquity (6<sup>th</sup> century) in the presbytery. The church of St. Achatius above Ilirska Bistrica, which is in ruins, also contains artefacts from the 6<sup>th</sup> century. Both sites date back to the 7<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> centuries B.C. These were independent agrarian communities (Šilen Tabor, Knežak–Šembije, Trnovo – Dol. Zemon), which were interconnected, as recently

obtained LIDAR images and archaeological excavations show. The area maintains continuity of settlement until late antiquity and beyond.

Christian artefacts have been found in the Škocjan Caves and the nearby Ajdovščina above Rodik. This area also shows the later continuity of settlement and the early establishment of Christian centres with the founding of pre-parishes from the 10<sup>th</sup> century onwards. Janez Höfler lists Slavina, Hrenovice, Trnovo and Vipava as the oldest pre-parishes in this area, as well as Jelšane, Knežak, Vreme, Tomaj, Hrušica..., which were founded a few centuries later, all of which maintain connections with the past. (Höfler 2001)

Due to its geographical location and its features, the broader territory of the Pivka and Karst was an important junction of the East-West and North-South routes, which enabled trade, military campaigns and migration of peoples. From pre-historic to Roman times and in later periods, the places witnessed migrations of peoples, destructive campaigns and military conquests. In connection with Istria, this area is known for its many fortifications (*castellum*). (Marchesetti 2020) A. Penko notes that considering the densest concentration of early and late Roman sites found in the area of the Nanos or Ocra–Razdrto and »considering the rich folk tradition and the location on the ancient Roman route between Aquileia and Emona, it is possible to look for the ancient Stridon in the very area of the settlement Strane« (2007, 67; 107–140).

In the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Romans built a system of fortified Alpine checkpoints (*Claustra Alpium Iuliarum*) in the Eastern part of this area to defend the empire, which ran from Tarsatica through Studena and Klana in Croatia and Babno polje and Prezid to the North across the present-day Slovenian territory to Carinthia; to the West was the strongest fortress *Gradina* (562 m) near Starod. The system of Alpine checkpoints also required an adequate hinterland for supplies, defence and support (material, military, settlement) (cf. *Castra–Ajdovščina, Ad Pyrum–Hrušica* at 858 m above sea level). Archaeologists have yet to focus on the area between Tarsatica and Emona, where there were orderly and interconnected agrarian communities (Šilen Tabor, Knežak–Šembije, Trnovo), as shown by recent LIDAR images (2017). This area, especially its Eastern part — Dolenji Zemon, Jelšane, Podgraje, st. Katarina —, researched by the lawyer and renowned amateur archaeologist Franc Poklar (1919–2021), is largely unexplored.<sup>12</sup> Due to its geographical location, proximity to Alpine checkpoints and local features, this area lent a strong backdrop and support to the Alpine checkpoints defence system.

In addition to the already known archaeological finds in Roman Emona, such as the baptistery with mosaics in the centre of Ljubljana (the Zgodnjekrščansko središče [Early Christian Center], discovered in 1962), additional archaeological excavations took place in 2017–2018 along the Northwestern part of the former Emona (now Gosposvetska ulica), which have also confirmed the strong presence of Christianity in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> century. The findings include a room (chapel) with

<sup>12</sup> Poklar's historical and archeological studies have been published in local newspapers and are accessible in the library Knjižnica Makse Samsa in Ilirska Bistrica.

mosaics, 45 sarcophagi, one of which is fully preserved and contained the remains of a prominent middle-aged person with a preserved glass bowl of Eastern provenance with grapevine ornaments and Greek text, and around 300 skeletons buried *ad sanctos*. This was undoubtedly a Christian community with which St. Jerome communicated.<sup>13</sup> Two of the preserved letters by St. Jerome remind us of his connection with Emona: the *Letter to the Virgins in Emona* (10) and the *Letter to the Monk Anthony* (12). Jerome scolds Anthony for not replying to the ten letters he had sent him. Researchers conclude that Jerome was not received benevolently in Emona due to his ascetic rigour and demand, which can also be inferred from his similar conduct in Aquileia, in the Calchidian desert and later in Rome which in turn is to be ascribed to his fiery character.

#### 4. Jerome's Birthplace – Stridon

So far, we have critically assessed the various hypotheses about St. Jerome's birthplace, referring to the name Stridon, with the characteristic consonants *s-t-r*, to the argumentation and critical tradition of individual hypotheses, and the veneration of the saint, confirmed by the numerous churches dedicated to St. Jerome at the junction between the Roman provinces Dalmatia and Pannonia. Historians and archaeologists have tried in vain to discover any indication of the place in other historical records of the time or confirmation in archaeological excavations. We summarize the findings so far.

The references to the toponym Stridon, a similarly written or sounding (homophonic) name of the place, have not provided a convincing answer. Štrigova in Medžimurje is distant from the then and present Dalmatia and even more so from Jerome's citations. Zrenj (Sdregna) near Oprtalj/Buzet in Istria, despite its rich tradition, has no convincing justification, as Jerome would without hesitation have listed Istria as his birthplace, which was then part of the province of *Italia-Histria* (*Regio X*). The location of Stridon on Grahovo polje in Bosnia or even farther to the East near Sirmium is unconvincing, which raises many new questions. The border (junction) between the provinces Dalmatia and Pannonia, both of which bordered on *Italia-Histria*, extended from the river Raša in Istria to Sirmium (now Sremska Mitrovica), has changed and does not constitute the borders of either then or now. To the four hypotheses described by Bulić (Dalmatian, Pannonian, Italic, neutral) (1984, 241–270; Valenčič 2007, 72–154), we could add others, depending on the scholars who would propose them. In this uncertainty and confusion, it is not surprising that some have abandoned any further search for the location of Stridon (Mandac 1995, 13).

The neutral (Liburnian) hypothesis of F. Bulić has never been at the forefront, although the most convincing evidence supports it. It was proposed in the 13<sup>th</sup>

<sup>13</sup> These findings were also communicated by an article in the Slovenian edition of the journal *National Geographic* (February 2019).

century by the Split historian Archdeacon Tomaž (Thomas Archidiaconus), who located Stridon in Liburnia, in the hinterland of the Kvarner Bay, in the extreme North of Dalmatia (*Dalmatia supra mare*). The hypothesis is supported by many of the researchers already mentioned above, such as F. Cavallera and A. Vaccari. The academician M. Suić (1986), an archaeologist and historian, places Stridon in Liburnia, in the area of the settlements of Žejane, Šapjane, Mune, Pasjak, the fortress Gradina, and Starod, all located along the important Roman thoroughfare between Tarsatica and Aquileia. The historian R. Bratuž considers the hypothesis the most convincing to date (1990), which has also been stated by Miroslav Premrou (1921), Roko Rogošič (1928), Fran Ksaver Lukman (1941), and Dragutin Nežić (1985). This location has also been cited, but not argued, by Pope Benedict XVI (audience 7 and 14 October 2007).<sup>14</sup> It has also been cited by other recent authors, such as Ivan Milotić (2006) and Josip Stanko Škunca (2018). The monograph *Saint Jerome - a Man from the Karst* (2007) locates Stridon slightly north of Liburnia, on the Slovenian Karst, in the geographical area between Aquileia and Emona today's Pivka. The hypothesis is related to the Liburnian, so we call it the Liburnian-Karst hypothesis. More evidence supporting this hypothesis is presented in detail in the monograph *Saint Jerome - a Man from the Karst* (2007), supplemented by recent archaeological findings in Emona and the Karst/Pivka (2017–2018). Evidence includes the events and characteristics of Jerome's life and the citations in his writings.

The search of the location of Jerome's Stridon thus narrows to the area between Aquileia and Emona (Ljubljana). This has so far been argued and accepted by many researchers, who have referred to the statements in Jerome's works and the relations with the events of his life. Our discussion also refers to these statements. Researchers of Jerome's birthplace tend to suggest that Stridon be sought in the territory between the former Roman cities of Aquileia and Emona. The distance from the coastal Aquileia through the Karst or Castra (Ajdovščina) in the Vipava Valley, Odra (Razdrto) or Ad Pirum (Hrušica), Longaticum (Logatec) to Emona does not exceed 200 km. This area is familiar to us Slovenians, so we can make an important contribution in identifying the location of Stridon.

At this point, it is worth mentioning the settlement of *Strane*, which has not been properly researched so far and attracts our attention from several aspects. In addition to the settlements of Strmca and Studeno, the settlement of Strane belonged to the lordship of the Cistercian monastery of Stična (1162). It lies on the Eastern slope of the Nanos (at an altitude of 700 m), on the former amber and latter main road between Aquileia and Emona, near Šmihel under the Nanos, one of the major strategic and archaeological localities on the Pivka. Above Strane are the archaeological sites *Dolgi grič*, *Divji skedenj* and *Pod Rjavo steno*. The settlement of Strane dominates over the entire Pivka and Odra, a natural passage to the Southwest toward Tergesta and Aquileia. The settlement location had a suitable hinterland for the provision of the inhabitants (arable land, rich water sources). The church dedicated to the Holy Cross (1704) dates to the Middle Ages. Folk

<sup>14</sup> Both speeches by Pope Benedict XVI are published in Slovenian translation in Frančiček 2020.

tradition also refers to Jerome's yew, one of Slovenia's oldest and best-protected trees (Rupnik 2000, 196–200). The name – *Strane* – is also reminiscent of the connection with Stridon. The configuration of the land — paths, mounds, demolished walls — is a challenge for archaeologists, to which they have not yet responded. Whatever artefacts have been found in the past, by Austrian archaeologists in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, by Italian archaeologists in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and occasionally by amateur researchers and seekers of 'hidden treasures', have ended up in foreign depots or private hands.

## 5. Updates and Starting Points

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The amendments to the Liburnian or the Liburnian-Karst hypothesis are based on Jerome's life and mentions in his writings, as well as on recent archaeological findings and comparative studies, which are enumerated below. Jerome's statements are exhaustively referred to by M. Premrou, who already in 1922 responded to Bulić's publications (*Civiltà Cattolica* 1921; reprinted in *Arhivi* 2014).

(1) Jerome describes his birthplace as a fortified town (*oppidum*) that provides residents with security from enemy attacks. The location of the town, probably the acropolis, considers the natural features that determine its internal design and strength. Stridon is organized by a hierarchical order (rural aristocracy, wealthy landowners, servants). The owner (settlement) also owns the *granges* (*vilullae*) for leisure activities (*otium*), which complement the trade and other economic activities (*negotium*) of the owners, which is confirmed by the fact that Jerome's family can afford to hire servants. His father's estate is apparently large so that Jerome hopes that, despite the enemy's destruction of the place, there is still some inheritance left to be sold. In the *Letter to Pamachius*, Jerome states that »he was compelled to send his brother Paulinianus to his homeland to sell the half-ruined properties that had been spared from the barbarian hands, and the income of our parents« (*To Pamachius* 66.14). The location and configuration of the Pivka and Karst landscapes provide indisputable possibilities for the existence of such estates (a plain with smaller hills and protected settlements (*castellum*), rich water sources, access to routes...). Jerome's family can afford a domestic teacher who provides the children — Jerome, his brother Paulinianus and sister, possibly also friend Bonos — with basic education and a general, including Christian, upbringing.

(2) Jerome is critical of his fellow Stridonians/Stridoners. In the *Letter to Cromatius* (7,5), he complains: »In my hometown, where ill-breeding is at home, the belly is god and one lives with abandon: the richer one is the holier.« The town is therefore ruled by 'ill-breeding' and 'prosperity'. In spite of the hostile environment, Eusebius' children receive the upbringing and spiritual education that prepares them for life in the world of that time. It is not clear to which Christian centre Stridon gravitates. M. Suić believes it is Tarsatica, so he calls Jerome a »citizen of Tarsatica« (*građanin Tarsatike*); however, Jerome never mentions Tarsatica (Suić

2986, 213). As expected by their parents and themselves, Eusebius' adolescents go out into the world to receive proper preparation for the tasks of life.

Jerome spends his playful childhood years in Stridon, his youth in Rome and then in Aquileia, where he establishes lasting friendships and matures for the challenges of adult life. Stridon also plays an important strategic role; otherwise, the Goths would not have stayed there on their way to the centre of the Empire, looting and demolishing it in the process. Due to the situation in the family — relations with Aunt Castorina, his sister's easy life, the seducer priest Lupicinus and other tensions, possibly also due to his own strictness and ascetic demands that others refuse to accept — Jerome is reluctant to return to and stay in Stridon. However, he still follows its fate with pain. In the *Letter to Heliodorus* he states that »every day from Constantinople to the Julian Alps Roman blood is shed in Thrace, Macedonia, ... Dalmatia, and all the Pannonias (*Dalmatiam cunctasque Pannonias*), which are plundered and destroyed by the Goths and Sarmatians« (Premrou 1921, 237).

(3) Stridon was located along the route between Aquileia and Emona, as confirmed by other evidence. Aquileia was an important administrative, military, naval, commercial and religious centre in this part of the Roman Empire. It gathered like-minded Christians seeking spirituality and asceticism, whom Jerome called the 'choir of the blessed' (*chorus beatorum*). Apparently Jerome felt good among them and later maintained written contact with many. They include Bishop Valerian, his successor Bishop Chromatius, then Rufinus, Eusebius and Bonos (a friend from Stridon), Deacon Julian, Elder Paul from Concordia. During his stay in Aquileia, he probably also contacted Emona — with the virgins of Emona and the monk Anthony, to whom he wrote several letters.<sup>15</sup> His *Letters to Anthony* and *Letters to the Virgins of Emona* confirm that Jerome had personal contact with them. He was at home with the Christian community of Emonians but probably broke up with them because of the strict ascetic precepts and demands he advocated (Premrou 1921, 294). Recent archaeological discoveries on Gosposvetska ulica in Ljubljana (Emona) in 2017–2018 confirm the strong presence of a Christian community in this area.

(4) Jerome thanks the clerics of Aquileia — Deacon Julian — for encouraging the younger sister (name unknown) in Christ, the 'fruit of Saint Julian', who had gone astray, to convert and is now »steadfast in what she has begun« (*Letter to Julian* 6.2). It is not clear whether this is about a religious or a moral matter, behind which was probably the priest Lupicinus, the »Iberian serpent« (6.2). Looking back on her misguided youthful steps, he remembers, »how slippery is the path of youth, on which he also slipped.« He begs his friends to ask Bishop Valerian »to encourage her with a letter« (*Letter* 7.4). There is no doubt that Stridon had to be somewhere near Aquileia for Aquileian clerics to take care of its faithful. This task could have been performed by those who knew the sister and lived near Aquileia.

<sup>15</sup> In the *Letters to Anthony* (12.3) he writes: "I have already sent you ten letters ... full of courtesy and requests, while you are too lazy to budge. The Lord talks to his servants; you, brother, do not give your brother a word."



(5) In his *Letter to Pamachius*, Jerome complains that the monasteries in Bethlehem have run into material trouble. Therefore, he »was compelled to send my brother Paulinianus to our homeland to sell the half-ruined family properties that escaped the barbarian hands, and the income of our parents, so as not to stop work for the saints and be ridiculed by gossips« (*Letter* 66.14). He also mentions the matter in his *Letter to Rufinus*, in which he writes that »Paulinianus has not yet returned and hopes that he will see Bishop Chromatius in Aquileia.« Scholars of Jerome's life rightly conclude that Paulinianus would not have wasted either time or material resources on an unnecessary journey if Stridon were very distant from Aquileia. The request to Paulinianus to pay a visit to Bishop Chromatius confirms that there was a bond of acquaintance and friendship.

(6) In a commentary on the prophet Zephaniah (1.2), Jerome mentions in addition to Illyricum and Thrace the land of birth as the third land. He states: »The witness is Illyricum, the witness is Thrace, the witness is the land in which I was born, where everything but the sun and earth, the growing thorns and dense forests, is destroyed« (»Testis Illyricum est, testis Thracia, testis in quo ortus sum solum«) (Premrou 1921, 237). The provinces of Dalmatia and Pannonia both touched Italy at their junction. However, Jerome is not an 'Italicus', nor is he a Dalmatian or a Pannonian. D. Vallarsi (*Opera*, X, 1, 5, etc.), the publisher of Jerome's works and a scholar of Jerome's life, already states that Stridon should be sought in the area between Aquileia and Emona towards the Julian Alps and near the Odra (Nanos), where Dalmatia and Pannonia touched, and this is Liburnia. It is surprising how the later seekers of Jerome's Stridon ignored the clear statements by Vallarsi. Other personal, domestic and patriotic views prevailed.

(7) In the area of the Karst (Pivka) and its vicinity, there is an intense concentration of churches dedicated to St. Jerome not found elsewhere, namely: Mount Nanos (at an altitude of 1018 m; its existence is attested at the latest in 1350), Koritnice near Knežak, Čelje near Prem, Ivanje selo near Rakek, Petkovec above Logatec, Bošamarin near Koper, Topolovec in the Slovenian Istria, Kozana in Goriška Brda, Kontovel near Trieste. Some churches, dedicated initially to St. Jerome, were later dedicated to another patron saint, namely at Jasen near Ilirska Bistrica (first to St. Achatius and later to St. Joachim) and in Gornja Branica in the Vipava region (to St. Catherine); the church at Jagrščice is in ruins.

The pilgrimages organized in the Diocese of Koper in 2019 on the 1600<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of St. Jerome to the churches dedicated to him showed that the tradition was more alive than expected. Neither the ravages of time with the overgrowth on landslides and the surrounding area nor the various weather disasters nor the post-World War II unfavourable conditions to pilgrimages could suppress it. The tradition also reflects other local components, such as prayers for intercession for health and happy childbirth, hand and face washing in a nearby stream, etc., to which were added various legends expressing general contents, such as the pilgrimages by the saint, his stories and sermons, signs in stone, the transfer of a church or chapel, friendship with wild animals, etc.

(9) The presence of Christianity in this territory is attested by the late antique Christian churches at Šilen Tabor above Zagorje on the Pivka and at Ahac near Ilirska Bistrica (both from the late antiquity (6<sup>th</sup> century); the latter is in ruins). Other sites, such as the finds at Ajdovščina above Rodik and in the Škocjan Caves, also testify to the presence of Christianity. (Slapšak 1997, 19–64) The deposits lie in an important transit area between the East and West, marked by the defence, trade and military routes, and the *Claustra Alpium Iuliarum* (Alpine checkpoints), built by the Romans in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries for the defence of the Empire against the peoples coming from the East. The checkpoints are visible in many places between Tarsatica and Emona, and recently (2017–2018), other archaeological traces of early settlements and Roman roads from this period have been discovered in this area, as well as visible traces of the inner defensive wall (*Claustra Alpium Iuliarum*) between Ahac and Trnovo (Ilirska Bistrica), which runs through Ahac, Trnovo (Stražice) and Knežak toward Šilen Tabor and Nanos–Hrušica (*Ocra-Ad Pyrum*). (Jurešič 2015) There are also other archaeological sites and Roman roads in the immediate vicinity, which confirm the possibility of various activities (trade, handicraft, farming) performed by servants for their masters, such as preparation of firewood, land cultivation, knitting socks for winter, creating a suitable environment for children's games, etc. The Karst area enabled an important passage from the East to the West and vice versa, which also opened up opportunities for military campaigns.

The early settlement and presence of Christianity continued well into the Middle Ages with the establishment of pre-parishes, which to this day carry out their mission. Pre-parishes Slavina, Hrenovice, Trnovo, Vipava etc., were the mothers of later parishes and Christian centres, which preserve the Christian and cultural traditions of the past centuries to the present day.

Surprisingly, the veneration of St. Jerome persisted even though there was no important centre (diocese), institution, or person that would be the bearer of this tradition. Aquileia as well as many neighbouring Istrian dioceses, lost their historical role, and any influence of the central Slovenian area cannot be detected. It is therefore surprising that veneration of the saint began and has been maintained in this territory.

(10) The archaeological heritage of these places is vibrant but unexplored. This is especially true for the Bistriška, which borders the territory of today's Croatia that from the archaeological and historical standpoint forms a unit with the Slovenian region. This has already been noted by F. Poklar, a lawyer, amateur archaeologist and historian, who has collected substantial historical and archaeological data. The situation is better in the Pivka/Karst, presented by Andreja Perko in the book *Naše korenine* (2007). Along the former Roman road linking Aquileia and Emona and during the construction of the expressway at Razdrto (Ocra), rich traces of the past were discovered in several places. The Eastern side of the Ocra (Nanos) remains unexplored and is calling for archaeological exploration. This is especially true for the village of *Strane*, with the church of the Holy Cross, which preserves the memory of the Crusades, and the old Jerome's yew, protected as a cultural

heritage and with many archaeological sites from the Iron Age to late antiquity. The village's existence is attested to as the property of the Cistercian monastery at Stična in 1162. Here ran the former Amber, then Roman and then Mast road, which connected the continental area with the Mediterranean. The ancient village dominates the Pivka, and above it are three archaeologically unexplored sites that are begging archaeological research.

## 6. In Conclusion

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I summarize some well-known and some lesser-known facts that support the hypothesis that Jerome's Stridon should be located in the area between Aquileia and Emona.

The Diocese of Koper, whose territory, according to current knowledge, harbors the place of St. Jerome's birth Stridon, prepared in 2019 a resounding series of pilgrimages to the churches dedicated to the saint within the diocese and published a memorial anthology *Sveti Hieronim in naš čas [Saint Jerome and Our Time]* (2020). In this territory between Aquileia and Emona lay important strategic and military as well as trade and migration routes between the Western and Eastern parts of the Roman Empire, which are only partially archaeologically and historically known to the world public. LIDAR images (2017) of Šilen Tabor, Knežak-Šembije and Trnovo (2017) perceive three autonomous agrarian communities with intermediate territories. The area of Ajdovščina above Rodik, which covered the routes between Tarsatica and Aquileia, had a similar character (Slapšak 1997). Conditions have so far not been conducive to archaeological and historical research in this area. Archaeological artefacts found in this area in the 19<sup>th</sup> century have ended up in depots in Vienna and those from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in Trieste. We hope that both the symposium on the 1600<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Jerome's death and the revived pilgrimages have provided new impetus for exploring his Stridon. In this way, like Jerome in his time, we will be able to contribute to the treasury of knowledge about the time and place, the people and the identity of the peoples and nations that were or still are involved in the story.

Although it is the task of archaeological science to contribute to the confirmation of various hypotheses, it is also the task of the hypotheses to indicate to archaeology where to stick the shovel.



Photo 1: The map of churches dedicated to St. Jerome.

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