

**Dr. Tatjana CVJETICANIN**, director

National Museum – Belgrade, Serbia & Montenegro

## **EXAMPLE FROM SERBIA OF SAVED CULTURAL GOODS: accidents or strategy**

***(SAVED CULTURAL GOODS: accidents that happen)***

One of the saved archaeological objects, which now belongs to preserved vast cultural heritage of Serbia and is safely kept in a museum represents a golden Avarian belt, found nearby Sremska Mitrovica. It was discovered in July 1992 during illegal archaeological excavation, using a metal detector, and was soon after sold to an antiquarian dealer through a middle man. Thanks to quick and well organized police action, its department for organized crime, the main participant and his accomplices were arrested and criminal charges for illegal archaeological excavations and illicit trafficking were filed. A custodian from the National Museum was called to undertake the professional expertise of its value and importance as a cultural good.

The Avarian belt consists of 16 pieces - buckle, pseudo-buckles, large tongue-like plate, clasp-belt plate, circular belt plate, belt plate for attachments and armor-like pendant, all of 1,088.43 kg of gold, lavishly decorated by casting, stamping, hammering, open casting, pseudo granulation, and with inlay of glass-paste imitating semi-precious stones. It was made probably in the first half of the 7<sup>th</sup> century and it is assumed to have originated from a grave of a some prominent person, most likely one from a khagan family (I. Popovic, *Golden Avarian Belt from the Vicinity of Sirmium*, Belgrade 1997). It represents one of the most important finds from the so-called first phase of Avarian ruling in this part of Serbia - Voivodina valley, one of the exceptional pieces in comparison to previously known finds primarily by elements of its manufacture and decorative motives applied.

It seems that this is an example of systematic and well organized care for cultural goods, of a fine, high-quality watch out for unlawful excavations and illegal trafficking. Police action was based on the Law on cultural goods and Criminal Law, involving experts from the field of archaeology and cultural protection, i.e. the National Museum as the central institution for protection of movable heritage, and one especially in charge among other goods, for archaeological material.

But is it really the result of a clear concept for security protection of cultural heritage and strategic and operational concepts in the protection of cultural goods management as well as developed institutional security network? Certainly, Serbia is well aware of a high risk for cultural heritage from different sources and elements, crime actions assessed as one on the top of the list. The Law on cultural goods (cultural heritage) of Republic of Serbia, written in the beginning of the 1990-ties and in power since 1994, is paying close attention to unlawful excavations and thefts, considering illegal trafficking and smuggling of cultural goods as a consequent actions, but not really a priority. The 1990-ties were time for understanding the concept of the preventive protection and time of introducing a new category of the cultural goods, which are those who have a status of pre-protection or beforehand protection. Those are objects, mostly archaeological and numismatic ones still not discovered, still preserved in earth, and considered to be the state property, but also monuments and other permanent structures considered to

be of cultural value but still under assessment. The understandable concept for professionals working in the field of heritage protection, but not so simple for police actions and particularly for successful legal actions, that is prosecutions of justice department. Even nowadays, the National Museum in Belgrade is still frequently answering questions concerning a right definition of cultural goods with beforehand protection or preventive protection.

Archaeological treasures in Serbia are numerous, and especially endangered were and still are sites from the Roman period – impressive structures of Roman towns Sirmium, Viminacium, Romuliana, etc. The system of heritage protection includes institutes for protection of immovable heritage (16 offices), network of museums in Serbia (more than 120) and two inspectors from the Ministry of culture - one for archaeological excavations and one in charge of monuments. Police, customs and juridical representatives are also included. And what happened was that the National Museum in Belgrade, during the period 1994-1999 was hardly ever called to estimate cultural and scientific value of objects seized by the police or the customs; that the police and the prosecutors were fighting seriously for a system to recognize the theft of cultural goods as aggravated burglary, that most lawbreakers were unknown persons, that offenders were punished lightly after long trials. The legislature was and still is more concerned with institutions, organizations and other bodies, than with offenders who are outside institutions.

Additionally, immediately after the Law on cultural heritage was introduced new destabilizing factors added risk for cultural goods. Poor economical situation, new social values in a community undergoing through complete destruction of almost everything considered to be a quality of civil society, criminals regarded as heroes, small thefts as a normal way of surviving, extreme corruption, and above all fresh understanding of the organized crime of potential market values of cultural goods, all resulted in an increasing number of illegal excavations and of smuggling primarily of archaeological and numismatic material, but also various works of art, religious objects, archive documents, rare books, especially from war/armed conflict territories. Serbia has also become a part of the international illicit trafficking network, route for smugglers from the Near East, Turkey, Bulgaria, etc. Skillful workshops for forgeries have developed. Stealing from museum collections increased in number and even armed robberies have been registered (in Arandjelovac in 2001 – 16 paintings of Paja Jovanovic, in Belgrade in 2005 - watches from Tito's collection, in Novi Sad in 2006 - 4 paintings of foreign European artists). And still without real evidence.

And statistics could speak about a lot and for all of us: in 2003 in Serbia among criminal acts related to cultural goods there were 29 aggravated burglaries, 3 cases of illegal excavations and 9 cases of customs offenses, and stolen were from 15 religious edifices, 2 museums, 3 galleries and other places 1159 objects, mostly decorations and medals (994), but also 51 paintings and 15 icons. In 2004 from 10 museum were stolen 12,806 objects, mostly numismatic material, archaeological objects but also several paintings and graphics, 13 religious edifices were burglarized, and 7 archaeological sites were illegally excavated while 966 objects were seized. From 2000 to 2005, the National Museum was called to give an expertise in 54 cases, chiefly for prosecution purposes (28) and after the police actions (20 cases), and only 4 for the needs of custom officials. It seems that authorized professionals took hold of a situation and that cooperation in between different subject of heritage security system has been evolving. But are the lawbreakers arrested, prosecuted and adequately punished, and is there really a government policy regarding protection of cultural heritage or that is the result of practical policies of different organizations and institutions involved, supported by

individuals aware of the great risk of endangerment, disappearance and devastation of heritage.

And here we go back to golden Avarian belt. On December 22, 1992, criminal charges against three people were filed. On February 18, 1999, the trial finally ended with a 3-year parole sentence for each of them. Nowadays newspapers are full of accusations from one of the offenders that golden Avarian belt is not any more in the country, that officials sold it, and that he was just a victim of conspiracy while trying to save the belt. He is a hero, his word should be trusted upon, and representatives of the state - in this case the National Museum, are clearly breaking the law. He claims that we replaced original belt with the fake one, and he knows that he could make a lot of money if that is put on a market. And journalists are selling their newspapers. And no one is responsible.

The golden Avarian belt found its place in a museum collection. Almost 13 years later it seems that it was almost accidental, and that successful salvation story is just a story of a great luck and persistence of individuals willing to persuade law.