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The First Cohort of Cretans, a Roman Military Unit at Timacum Maius

In memory of Abram Kotik

Abstract: Archaeological investigations on the site of Niševac (*Timacum Maius*) have been conducted over a period of eight successive years by the Institute for Balkan Studies in collaboration with the Centre for Tourism, Culture and Sports of Svrlijig and the French Bordeaux-based Ausonius Institute. The 2014 campaign came up with nine Roman bricks stamped with inscriptions of the First Cohort of Cretans (*Cohors I Cretum*) built into the walls of a Roman bath. The inscriptions provide evidence for the character, chronology and history of the Roman settlement.

Keywords: Niševac, Timacum Maius, Roman bath, First Cohort of Cretans.

Archaeological investigations on the site of Niševac–Kalnica have been conducted over a period of eight consecutive years by the Institute for Balkan Studies of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts in collaboration with the Centre for Tourism, Culture and Sports of Svrlijig and the Ausonius Institute (CNRS/Université Bordeaux Montaigne).¹ Put forward at the very beginning of the excavation, the bold hypothesis that the site might be identified as the Roman settlement Timacum Maius, the first station on the Roman road connecting Naissus (modern Niš, Serbia) and Ratiaria (modern Archar, Bulgaria), was becoming more and more substantiated by the significant results of every excavation campaign (see Map below). But until 2014 no discovery was made that could shed any light on an important aspect of the site: the military organisation of Timacum Maius. All the previously made discoveries – the building with a hypocaust and wall-embed-

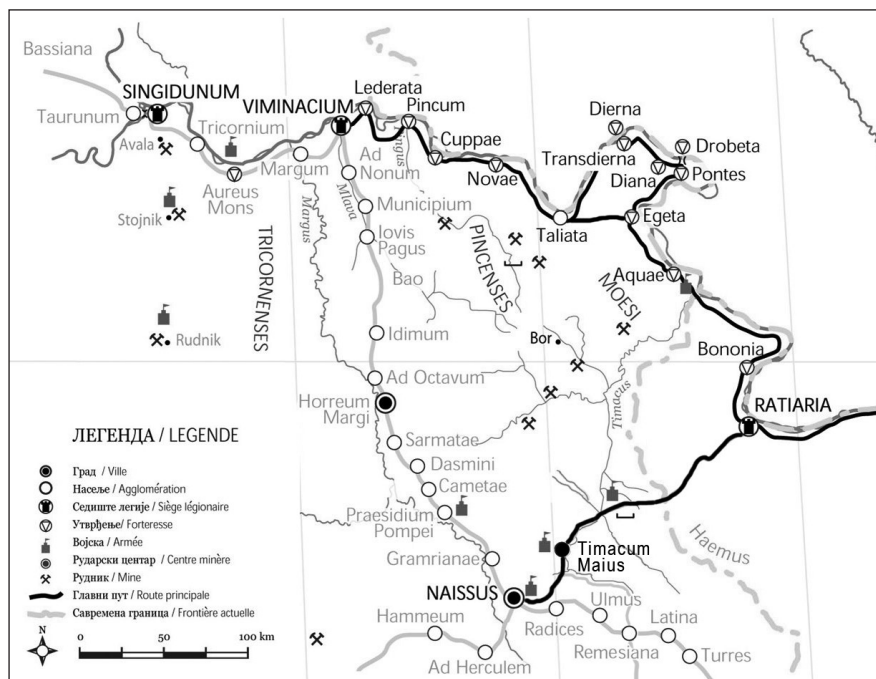
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¹ The archaeological investigation has been carried out by the Belgrade-based Institute for Balkan Studies and is funded by the Ministry of Culture and Information of the Republic of Serbia, the Municipality of Svrlijig, and the Centre for Tourism, Culture and Sports of Svrlijig. Since 2013 it has been carried out jointly by the Institute for Balkan Studies and the Bordeaux-based Ausonius Institute as part of a Serbo-French research project.

ded flues (*tubuli*), a section of a main road running through the settlement, sewers, a portion of a bath (*thermae*), and plentiful and diverse small finds (pottery, including fine terra sigillata ware, coins, jewellery, weapons etc.) – were indicative of a sizeable Roman settlement which had been founded in the mid-first century and continued without a break until the Hunnic invasion of 441, when it had been ravaged and burnt down, as had been the nearby city of Naissus. Yet, what remained unknown was which military unit had been garrisoned there, taking part in the construction of public and military structures (Petrović & Filipović 2008: 29–43; Petrović & Filipović 2009: 25–30; Petrović & Filipović 2013: 35–50; Petrović, Filipović & Miliivojević 2012: 73–112; Petrović, Filipović & Luka 2014: 97–142).

During the 2012–14 campaigns a considerable portion of a Roman bath which had survived modern soil amelioration works done on the left bank of the Svrljiški Timok River was unearthed (fig. 1). It is 11 m by 9 m in area and oriented north to south, with minor deviations. It consists of two pools and two rooms with a hypocaust heating system. Both pools are damaged by heavy machines, one beyond the possibility of a more detailed reconstruction, while the surviving part of the other measures 7 m by 3 m. Neither of them was directly heated, but their use as warm baths (*tepidaria*) may be assumed from the fact that the adjacent rooms had hypocaust heating.

Embedded in the thickness of the exterior walls of the two rooms furnished with hypocaust systems were circular-sectioned clay flues (*tubuli*) connected with the subfloor cavity. The floor of both rooms, which collapsed into the cavity, was coated with hydrostatic plaster about 30 cm thick. Both the waterproof plaster and the hypocaust seem to suggest that those were hot baths (*caldaria*). The subfloor cavity contained portions of the collapsed ceiling, fragments of window glass, well-preserved *pilae* stacks which had supported the floor, traces of purple-painted wall plaster, remains of massive clay box flues, but also the stokehole of the furnace (*praefurnium*). The assumed use of the two rooms as hot baths seems to be corroborated by the vicinity of the furnace. The bottom of the subfloor cavity was paved with pebbles which kept the heat, thereby enhancing what we would call today energy efficiency. This type of paving is rarely found in Roman baths. The entirely preserved furnace chamber with thick ash deposits was discovered on the outer south side of the bath. The bath must have contained other rooms typically found in Roman baths but they will remain unknown as a result of the damage it sustained by modern land improvement work. The explored surviving portion provides a number of details which nonetheless allow some conclusions about the function and quality of the structure. The small finds recovered from the bath (pottery, animal bones, metal finds such as a silver pendant with bird motifs, and coins) indicate that the building



Map of the Roman roads in central and eastern Moesia Superior

lost its original function in the fourth century and was probably used as a dwelling instead.

The 2014 campaign was a turning point. Namely, the date of the bath was elusive since the discovered coins provided only a tentative *terminus post quem*. But in just a few days at the final stage of the campaign we discovered nine bricks bearing the stamps of the First Cohort of Cretans, and in the walls of the bath (figs. 2 and 3) The stamp inscriptions read: *Cob(ors) I Cret(um)*. This auxiliary unit of the Roman army had been created in pre-Flavian times and had some five hundred soldiers, infantry and cavalrymen. It was transferred to Upper Moesia between AD 78 and 80 and took part in Trajan's Second Dacian War, as suggested by the epigraphic evidence from *Apulum* (*CIL* III, 1163), *Sucidava* (*AE* 1975, 726, 2), *Banatska Palanka* (*AE* 1912, 78) and *Drobeta* (*CIL* III, 1703, 2; Marcu 2004: 13–14), and military diplomas from Dacia (from AD 110: *CIL* XVI 163, and AD 114: *RMD* IV 226). It was transferred back to Upper Moesia under Hadrian and in the second and third centuries was stationed in *Egeta* (modern Brza Palanka)

on the Danube (*AE* 1966, 336 = *AE* 1968, 453) with the assignment to guard the strategic intersection of two Roman roads: Trajan's famous *limes* road which connected the forts along the Iron Gates section of the Empire's border on the south bank of the Danube and the road which ran further inland and, circumventing the large river bend and the Iron Gates, led from *Taliata* (modern Gornji Milanovac) and across the ore-rich south slopes of Mt Miroč with the stations *Gerulata* and *Unum*, to Egeta (Petrović 2015: 274–278). Until the latest discoveries, the only known epigraphic evidence for the First Cohort of Cretans in the interior of Upper Moesia was an inscription from Naissus (*IMS* IV, 34 = *AE* 1964, 262). The inscription, which is in Latin and informs us of a certain *Tiberius Claudius Valerius*, a veteran of the First Cohort of Cretans born in *Hierapytna* (modern Ierapetra) in Crete, dates from the last decades of the first century but is not earlier than Vespasian's age. The veteran lived in Naissus towards the end of the first century, apparently before his cohort was pulled into Trajan's Dacian campaign. The presence of a veteran in Naissus at that particular time is indirectly indicative of the city's significant growth because retired soldiers usually settled in one of the main centres of a province, not far from the place where they had served. Naissus certainly had a military camp and a civilian settlement at the time, but the considerable number of inscriptions on the bricks of the First Cohort of Cretans recovered from the bath at Timacum Maius gives grounds to assume that the cohort, or at least a part of it, was stationed there, not far from Naissus. If it was, a first-century military fort may be expected to be found in the area of the site. Archaeological excavation of the nearby fortress known as *Svrljiški grad* (Fortress of Svrljig) might provide an answer to this question. Namely, apart from many chance finds, this fortified site has yielded an inscription of a *strategos*, *Tiberius Claudius Theopompus*, who dedicated an altar to a local deity of his native land, Thracian Denteletika, a region centred on *Pautalia* (modern Kystendil) in western Bulgaria (*IMS* III/2, 101 = *SEG* 45, 953; Petrović & Filipović 2013: 37–42). The altar has been dated to a period between AD 46 and 54, and indirectly suggests that the fortress was in use in the mid-first century. Theopompus could have reached Timacum Maius using the local road Kystendil–Bela Palanka–Niševac (*Svrljiški grad*), i.e. Pautalia–Remesiana–Timacum Maius, which intersected with the main road from Naissus to Ratiaria, i.e. to the Danube (Petrović & Filipović 2013; Petrović & Grbić 2014: 96).

The inscriptions of the First Cohort of Cretans from Niševac/Timacum Maius, which seems to have formed a whole with *Svrljiški grad*, provide evidence for the character, chronology and history of the Roman settlement. The Roman unit, or at least a detachment of it, could have been stationed at Timacum Maius to secure the important intersection of

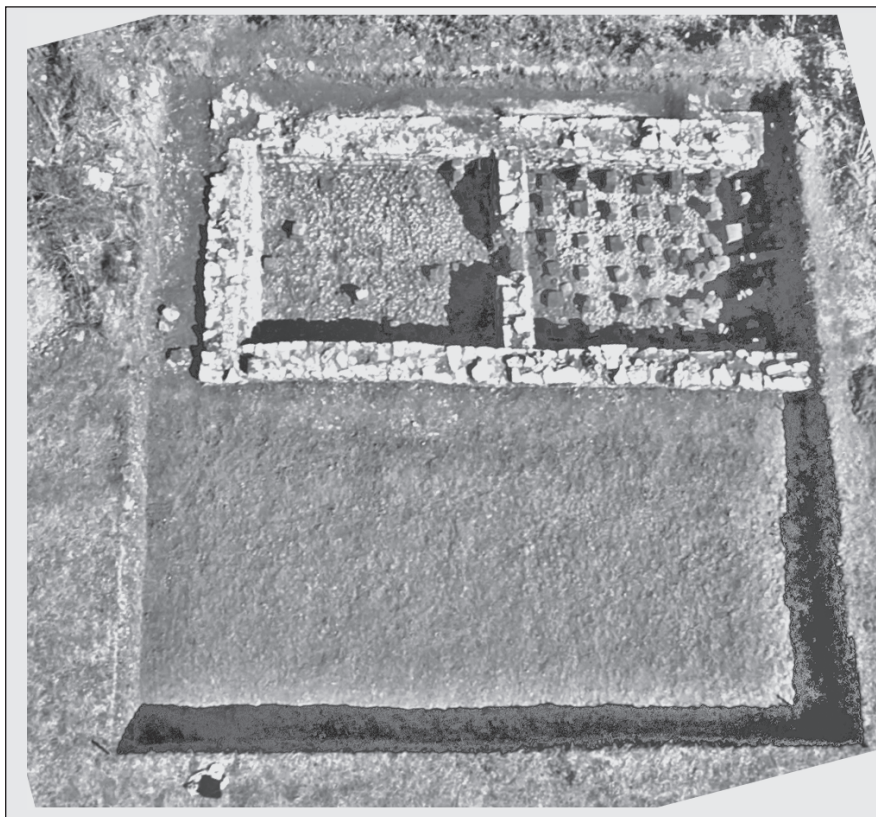


Fig. 1 Aerial view of the Roman bath in Timacum Maius

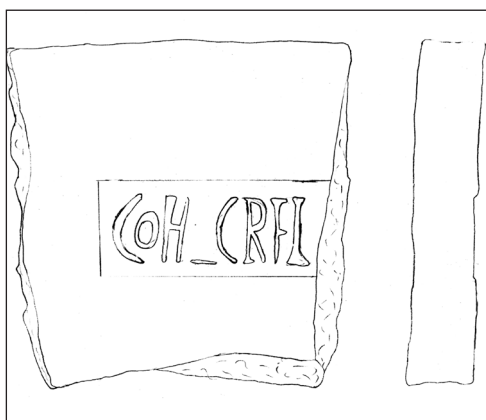


Fig. 2 Brick stamp of the First Cohort of Cretans (*Cohors I Cretum*)

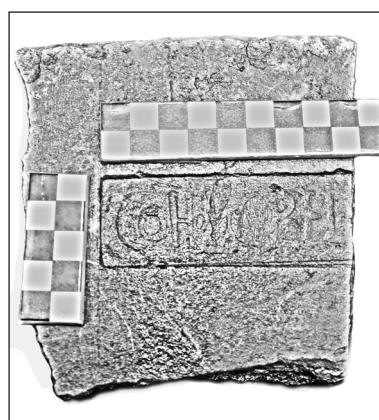


Fig. 3 Stamped brick *in situ*

the Roman roads running from Pautalia and Naissus. As we have seen, it would subsequently be on a similar assignment at Egeta on the Danube. It seems reasonable to assume that the First Cohort of Cretans was engaged in building major military and civilian structures, including the discovered bath. Timacum Maius could have also had a brickyard, and structural remains of the type may be expected to be found in the future.

By way of conclusion, it should be emphasised that the presence of the First Cohort of Cretans in Niševac/Timacum Maius, currently evidenced by a larger number of stamped bricks, is one of the main proofs that the site actually was the first station on the Roman road Naissus–Ratiaria. The settlement and the excavated structures are of an early date, from the last decades of the first century. The settlement was closely connected with the nearest large centre of the province, Naissus, based on the abovementioned inscription that points to a place of veteran settlement.

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Abbreviations

AE – *Année épigraphique*, Paris.

CIL – *Corpus inscriptionum Latinarum*, Berlin.

IMS – *Inscriptions de la Mésie Supérieure*, Belgrade.

RMD – *Roman Military Diplomas*, London.

SEG – *Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum*, Leiden – Amsterdam.

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