

DISSERTATIONES ARCHAEOLOGICAE

ex Instituto Archaeologico Universitatis de Rolando Eötvös nominatae



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Budapest 2018

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Short report on the rescue excavations in the Roman Age Barbaricum near Abony (Pest County, Hungary)

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Abstract

The staff of the Institute of Archaeological Sciences of Eötvös Loránd University unearthed a Sarmatian settlement and a cemetery near Abony (Pest County, Hungary) in the autumn of 2018. The preliminary results point to the area's economic importance around the turn of the 2nd–3rd century AD.

Introduction

The staff of the Institute of Archaeological Sciences of Eötvös Loránd University conducted two rescue excavations along the planned M4 motorway between 19th September and 12th October 2018 near Abony (Pest County, Hungary).¹ The excavations unearthed thirteen graves of a Sarmatian ring-ditched cemetery and settlement parts on the two sites.

As finalizing the documentation and the restoration of the field material is still an ongoing process, the present report only highlights the most noteworthy features and finds of the excavations. Fortunately, we had the chance to partially excavate a Sarmatian cemetery and a settlement from the same historical period, close to each other.

The environment of the excavations

The Roman Age settlement and cemetery are situated in the complex and heterogenous landscape of the Middle-Tisza District. The sites are north of the present-day city of Abony (Pest County, Hungary) in the Jászság micro-region,² which can be characterized by small ponds, marshes, narrow and shallow, already up-silted beds of past streams. Both sites are confined by the upper marshy beds of the Málé Stream that is also known as Csónok Stream on the maps of the Second Military Survey.³ The dry banks of the stream were suitable for habitation and to establish a cemetery. During the removing of the top-soil the up-silted beds appeared as dark, 100–120 cm thick layers, and no features were detectable near these sections of the excavations suggesting their existence and power in forming the cultural landscape in the Roman Age (*Fig. 1*). The environment of the sites shows a dichotomy of rich and productive

1 The excavations were conducted by Bence Simon (ELTE Institute of Archaeological Sciences, Department of Classical and Provincial Archaeology). We hereby say thanks to the staff of the excavations: Anita Benes (PhD student, ELTE), Szilvia Joháczki (PhD student, ELTE), Csilla Sáró (HAS-ELTE Interdisciplinary Research Group of Archaeological Sciences) archaeologists, Ferenc Barna (MA student, ELTE), Tamás Gál (MA student, ELTE) technicians.

2 DÖVÉNYI 2010, 167–170.

3 *Col. XXXVI. Sec. 52–53.*

Chernozem soil and poor meadow-solonec that is mainly suitable for animal grazing.⁴ This was probably an optimal natural environment for an economy based on both agriculture and animal husbandry, which is a characteristic feature of Sarmatians.⁵

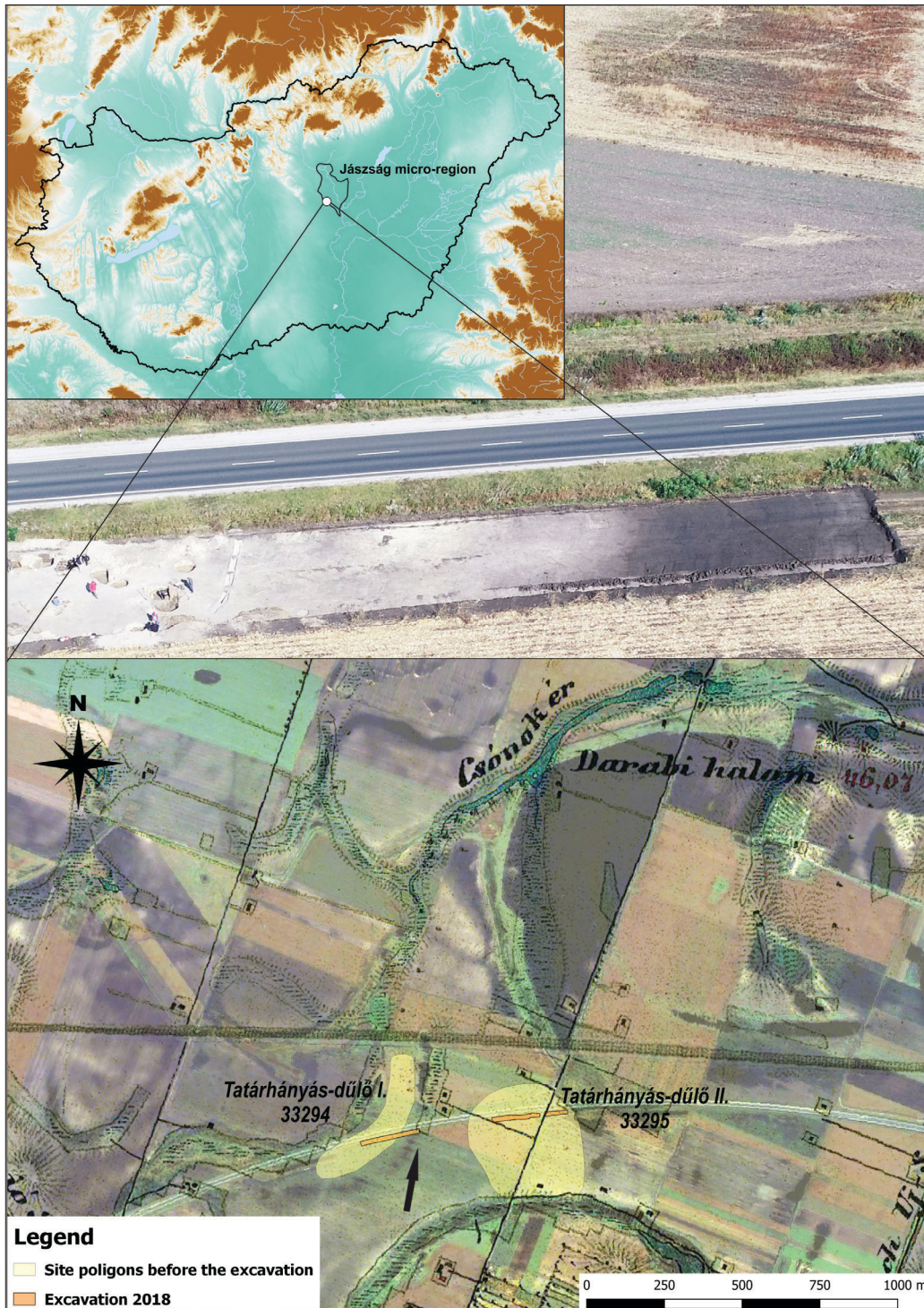


Fig. 1. Location of the excavations on synchronized Google Earth™ and Second Military Survey maps, with a drone photo of the up-silted channel of the Málé Stream (black arrow showing the direction of the taking).

4 DÖVÉNYI 2010, 169. Also on the natural environment of Cegléd and Abony see: DINNYÉS 2011, 6–7.

5 VÖRÖS 1998, 63–64.

There are only a few traces of historic human landscape forming in the area. Interestingly the Hungarian name of the field (*Tatárhányás*), where the sites are located, points to burial mounds. Based on this observation, it seems possible that *tumuli* were erected above some of the Sarmatian graves, which were recognizable until the last few centuries.⁶

Tatárhányás-dűlő I – settlement (Fig. 2)

The site was identified by István Dinnyés in 2002 on a field-walking in connection with the preparation of the preliminary archaeological documentation for the construction of the new section of Highway 4, which was to by-pass Abony from the north. In 2003 he conducted a rescue excavation on the site during which he opened 2956 m². They unearthed ditches and pits, altogether 79 archaeological features that could be dated to the 2nd–3rd century AD.⁷ In 2007 Róbert Kalácska excavated the site.

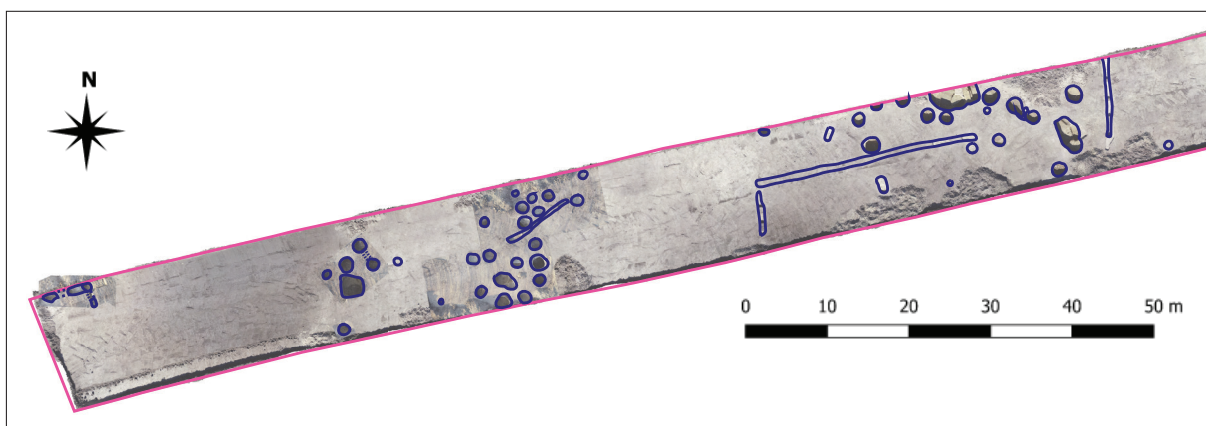


Fig. 2. Map of the Sarmatian settlement in Tatárhányás-dűlő I (33294).

The Institute of Archaeological Sciences of Eötvös Loránd University conducted the large-scale excavation on 2814 m² as subcontractor of the Ferenczy Museum Center on commission of the Budavári Estate Development and Operation Office between 26th September 2018 and 12th October 2018. During the campaign 67 features were identified, which proved to belong to a Sarmatian settlement, as it had been previously expected. The top-soil removal was conducted from the eastern side of the track where a 25 m wide strip of black humus appeared as mentioned above (Fig. 1, photo). The yellowish subsoil was at 40–45 cm below surface where the features of the settlement appeared. 35 meters from the western side of the opened area, the top-soil became dark and thick again in which no features were found. Still in this black humus, right next to the north-western corner, some settlement features were also unearthed, but it was hard to tell their filling and the humus apart. We found no trace that the agricultural cultivation had damaged the archaeological features.

Sarmatian settlement features, which were decisively beehive-shaped pits, appeared in four groups on the excavation. The eastern group was terminated by a ditch from the east, where three large pit-complexes were unearthed. It was not possible to determine whether they were originally formed as a whole or they have been expanded over time. Their filling con-

6 DINNYÉS 2011, 7.

7 DINNYÉS et al. 2004.

tained a variety of archaeological finds, pottery and animal bones. From one of these complexes a *terra sigillata* bowl came to light which can be dated to the late Severan Age.⁸ Many pits were situated in their environment, which produced the same type of material. This group was confined by a north-south-oriented ditch, which did not cross the whole opened area. Besides this a shallow ditch of an uncertain age and different filling ran in the middle of the track.



Fig. 3. The excavation of the settlement from the air.

The features of the second group can be found after another 20 meters to the west. This section is dominated by round, smaller, but more densely grouping pits (Fig. 3). Besides them a pit was located on the southern side of the excavation, which was extended with a compartment on one side. This could have been used as a pen for domestic animals or as a storage facility.⁹ Between the pits a west-east running ditch was unearthed, and sherds of a large vessel were collected from its filling.

Ten meters to the west, among round pits, a smoker/dryer facility was uncovered with its two beehive-shaped pits connected with a red burnt flue. The adjacent round pit's slag also attests to the everyday production of the settlement. Next to these features the deepest and largest pit of the excavation was situated. From its filling a bone skate and pieces of a Drag. 37 form *terra sigillata* bowl were found.

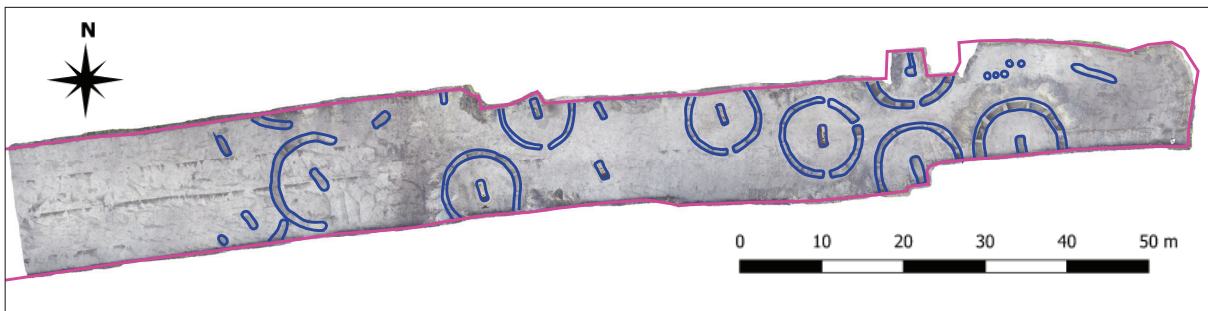


Fig. 4. Map of the Sarmatian cemetery in Tatárhányás-dűlő II (33295).

At the western end of the excavated track, features of a similar smoker/dryer facility were uncovered as described above. A pear-shaped oven and its working pit was also found in this group. The wall and the cooktop of the oven was so severely ruined that its original form was hardly recognizable. We first believed it to be a smoker, but no pit appeared to the south.

8 Drag. 37 form bowl from Rheinzabern, product of Mammilianus. I hereby say thanks to Barbara Hajdú (BHM, Aquincum Museum) for her help in the identification of the vessel.

9 Cf. VÖRÖS 1998, 61, Fig. 10. a.

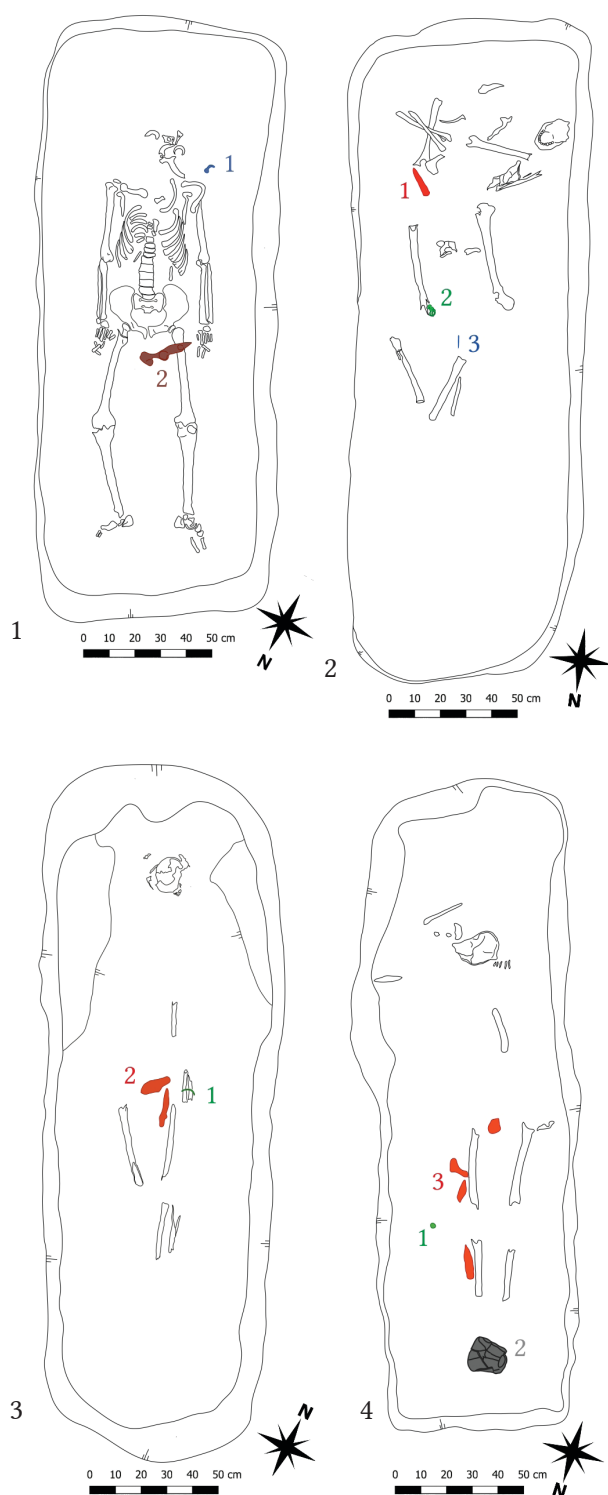


Fig. 5. Abony-Tatárhányás-dűlő II (33295). 1 – male grave with: 1 – iron *fibula*, 2 – iron object (knife or buckle?), 2 – male grave with: 1 – iron knife, 2 – bronze belt buckle, 3 – bronze garment accessory, 3 – grave of a child with: 1 – bronze bracelet, 2 – iron objects (one knife), 4 – grave of a child with: 1 – Roman coin, 2 – pottery vessel, 3 – iron objects.

None of the excavated features could be defined as a dwelling. Not only the features, but the find material seemed to be industrial and household waste which is underlined by the animal bones, coarse and wheeled fine pottery ware, imported *terra sigillata* and on one occasion the slack and the bone skate. Based on the material the site is dated to the 2nd–3rd century, which corresponds to the results of past excavations.

Tatárhányás-dűlő II – cemetery (Fig. 4)

The site was also identified by István Dinnyés in 2002 on the same field-walking campaign that I have mentioned above. He also had the chance to lead an excavation on the site in 2003 opening a 7883 m² surface, during which a 2nd–3rd century Sarmatian cemetery and a few settlement features were unearthed.¹⁰ In 2004 part of the site was opened with the same results,¹¹ therefore the same was expected of this year's campaign.

We performed the large-scale excavation between 19th September 2018 and 2nd October 2018 opening a 250-meter-long area of 3122 m² to the south of Highway 4, as a result of which we identified 49 features. The planned track was divided by a north-south running agricultural dirt-road. The eastern side in accordance with this, produced only one pit of an uncertain age. This can be explained by the thick (100 cm) dark earthen layers of the up-silted channel of the Málé Stream mentioned above. We proceeded with the removal of the top-soil from the east to the west. The archaeological features appeared in the yellow subsoil around 40–45 cm below surface on the dirt-road's western side.

10 DINNYÉS et al. 2004.

11 GULYÁS 2005. The publication of the excavations: GULYÁS 2011.

In this section, after 20 meters to the west, the chain of the ring-ditched graves lined up until they ceased 30 meters before the western borders of the opened area. The cemetery surely extends farther to the south.

We identified 13 graves, of which 8 were terminated by a ring-ditch. The orientation of the graves was identically south–south-east, and an entrance on the ring-ditch also faced this direction. The graves of the cemetery were perturbed or robbed not later than a few hundred years after the burial. We managed to unearth articulated remains only in one case, although the deceased's skull was missing (*Fig. 5.1*). Despite of their disturbance, the way of the disposition could be determined. The deceased were laid on their backs with their skulls directed to the south.

Based on the find material, mainly beads, four graves contained remains of women. From one of these graves a duck-shaped brooch was also uncovered. We unearthed six male burials in which knives and other iron objects were common. We can list an iron brooch, a bronze *fibula* with folded foot, and a bronze and iron belt buckle among the garment accessories (*Fig. 5.2*). Two graves belonged to juveniles. One deceased wore bronze bracelets on the arms and was furnished with some iron objects (*Fig. 5.3*), while the other contained a silver coin in bad condition, also iron objects and a pottery vessel at the feet (*Fig. 5.4*). Curiously, not only the juvenile, but two other graves contained coins too. Unfortunately, we cannot tell the date of their minting before restoration. Next to the graves on the western section of the excavation, six features, a ditch and five smaller pits were unearthed without any significant material.

The cemetery coincides with the results of István Dinnyés and Gyöngyi Gulyás, as we found a Drag. 37 form *terra sigillata* bowl originating from the factory of Pfaffenhofen in one of the ring-ditches,¹² and also a small round glass plate depicting the head of a woman from a Sarmatian woman's grave. The object is definitely of Roman origin, and it best resembles the hair-styles of Faustina Minor or Iulia Domna, maybe dating it from Marcus Aurelius to the late Severan Age (*Fig. 6*).¹³



Fig. 6. Abony-Tatárhányás-dűlő II (33295). Imported Roman glass plate from a female grave.

Historical and topographic background

Based on the imported Roman pottery the settlement and the cemetery could be dated to the last quarter of the 2nd and the first quarter of the 3rd century AD. This period coincides with the era when Roman and Barbarian economic relations became tighter and the export of Roman pottery was at its peak.¹⁴ The colony of Aquincum was one of the main hubs in this trading network. Many of the trading routes started here to cross the Barbaricum from Pannonia to

12 We found vessels in two ring-ditches and both were in the northern part of the ditch, suggesting their ritual burial. Cf. GULYÁS 2011, 139.

13 I hereby say thanks for the opinion of Dávid Bartus (ELTE Institute of Archaeological Sciences) and István Vida (HNM Coin Cabinet Department).

14 GABLER 2011a, 49, Tab. 7, 2.

the province of Dacia. The epigraphic evidence also highlights the importance of the city, near which *beneficarii consulares* were out-posted to control the border traffic.¹⁵ The provincial governor's office also employed an *interpres Sarmatarum*¹⁶ and an *interpres Germanorum*,¹⁷ who were engaged in commercial and political state affairs with the barbarian tribes neighbouring the frontiers of Pannonia.¹⁸

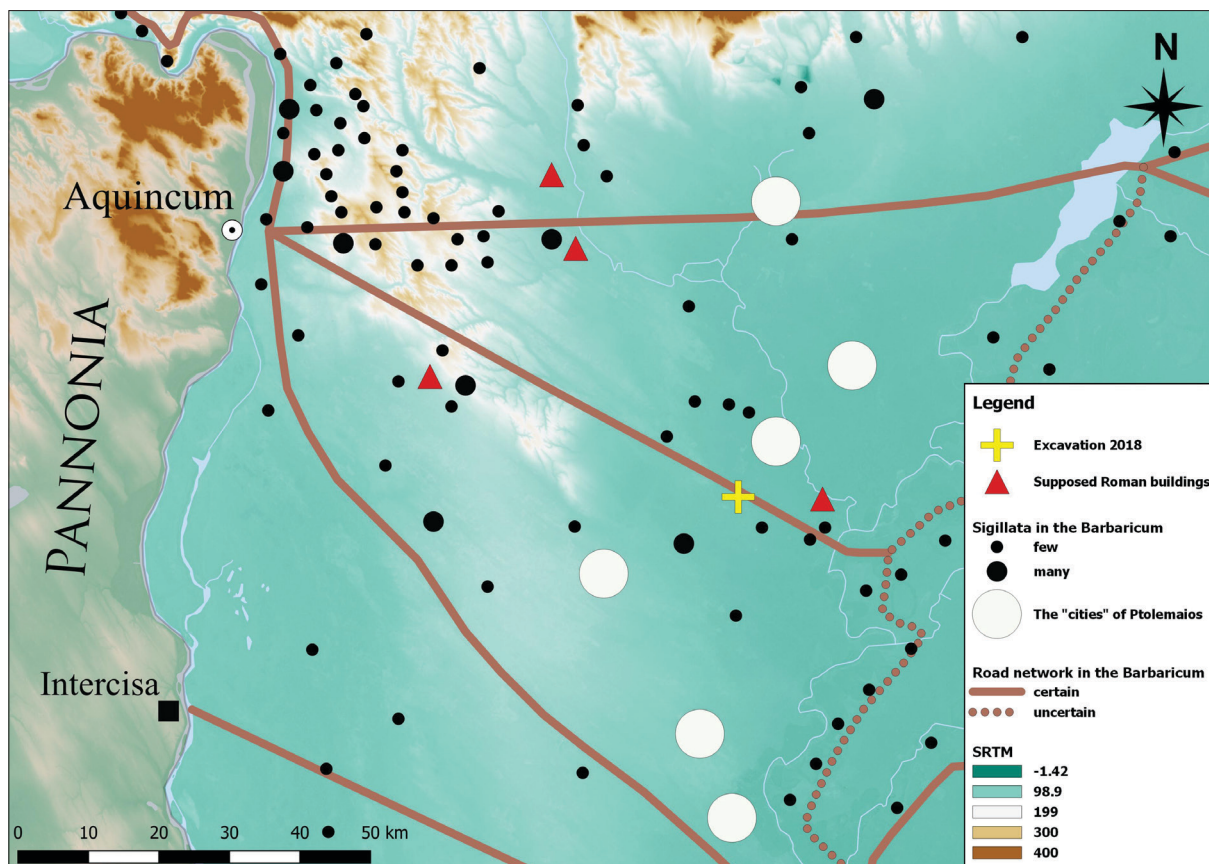


Fig. 7. Position of the excavations in the Roman Era Barbaricum (Map based on GABLER 2011a, 3. Tábla).

One of the main trading routes ran close to the settlement and cemetery excavated during the autumn campaign (Fig. 7). This road started somewhere near the late Roman fort of Contra Aquincum (Március 15-e Square, Budapest) and it was running south-east towards the crossing on the Tisza River near Szolnok. Roman buildings, probably road stations are supposed to be situated in Üllő and near Szolnok¹⁹ which assisted the Roman traffic in the Barbaricum. Along the road many Sarmatian sites were excavated,²⁰ which produced many imported Roman material also pointing to its importance in the late 2nd–3rd century.²¹ In this context, the Roman import material from the excavated area is not surprising and underlines the Severan Age Sarmatian settlements' economic importance near Abony and Cegléd.

15 GABLER 2011a, 44.

16 CIL III, 14349,05. = Epigraphik-Datenbank Clauss/Slaby ID (http://db.edcs.eu/epigr/epi.php?s_sprache=en): EDCS-32400042

17 CIL III, 10505. = Epigraphik-Datenbank Clauss/Slaby ID (http://db.edcs.eu/epigr/epi.php?s_sprache=en): EDCS-29500182

18 MAIRS 2012.

19 VADAY 1998, 124.

20 From the past excavations near Abony and Cegléd the *terra sigillata* material was published (GABLER 2011b).

21 GABLER 2011a, 47.

Catalogues

CIL: Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum

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