

FROM THE VICUS TO THE HOUSE OF THE PAINTER

Archaeological research in Aquincum Civil Town in the past 20 years (2000–2020)

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Unlike the legionary camp and the Military Town, the area of Aquincum Civil Town was not built up after the Roman Period, and, therefore, it is available for research with the exception of two traffic corridors that have existed for hundreds of years and the residential area and a factory (Gasworks) on the outskirts of the present-day city. Therefore, our understanding of the settlement has continuously evolved for 130 years now and knowledge continued to accumulate in the past 20 years. Moreover, modern development projects, authenticating excavations, and the review of archaeological assemblages that had been brought to light earlier yielded a wealth of new information, which in some cases fundamentally changed our perception of the Civil Town's topography and chronology.

Key words: Aquincum, Civil Town, chronology, defensive structures, excavation, strip house

THE TOWN'S HISTORY IN A NUTSHELL

The antecedents of Aquincum Civil Town came to existence in the last quarter of the 1st century AD, along the east-west road that ran in the direction of the Danube through Solymárvölgy (LÁNG 2011a, 30; 2020, 74–82). The first, initially rural settlement, a civilian *vicus*, had semi-subterranean pit houses, narrow alleys, and timber-framed buildings organised in a fixed pattern that followed a consciously planned spatial arrangement of plots, which later continued to determine the street network in the town's northeast quarter. As Aquincum became a provincial capital in the first decades of the 2nd century AD, the emphasis shifted to the north-south main road (the *limes* road), to which the road system was adapted, and the defences, aque-

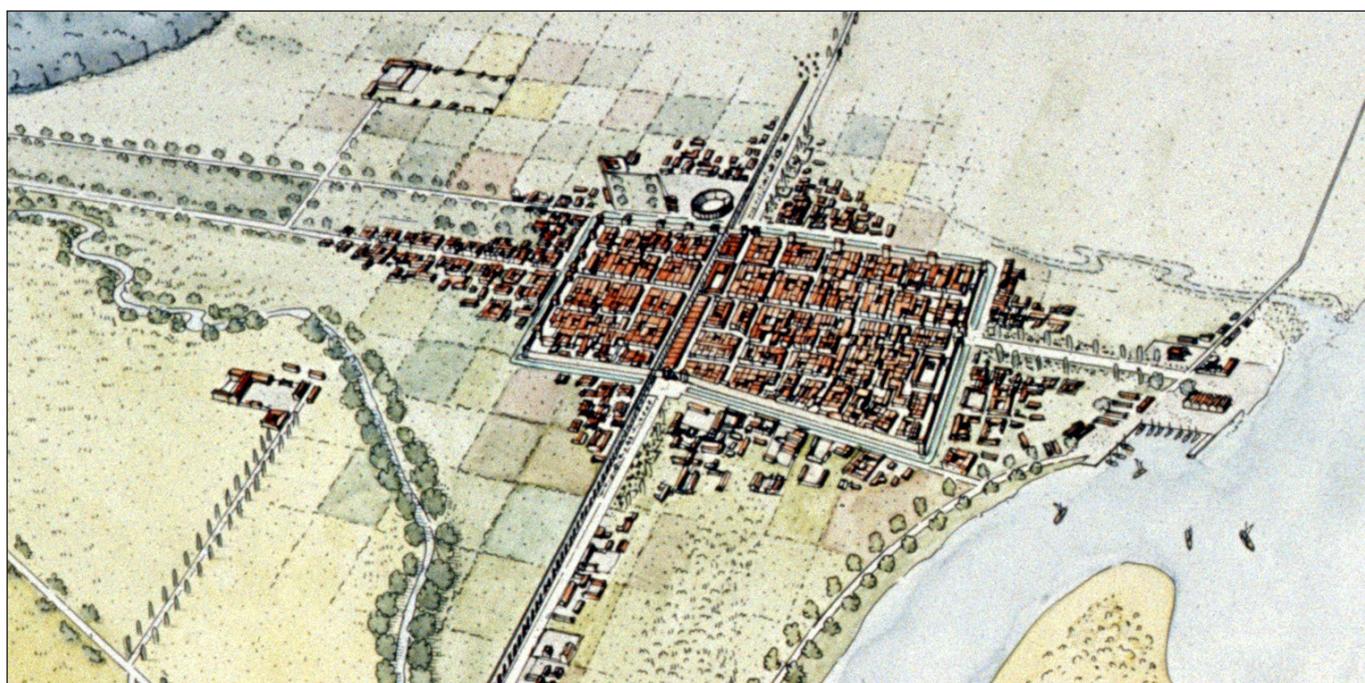


Fig. 1. Reconstruction of the Civil Town of Aquincum (drawing by Markus Schaub)

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duct and sewage systems were finished. The constructions were already built in stone at that time, and complex structures were completed in the town centre: the forum, the sanctuary of Fortuna Augusta, the Great Baths, the row of *tabernae* lining the north-south main road, and the first period of most of the dwelling houses date from this era. The Civil Town was given the rank of a *municipium* in the early 120s AD, which greatly accelerated its development. Later, however, in the last decades of the century, the town suffered a setback, especially in economic terms, due to the Marcomannic Wars (169–180 AD). After decades of warfare, in the heyday of Aquincum (from the turn of the 2nd–3rd centuries until the mid-3rd century AD) the town was given *colonia* status, and many of the buildings and streets were rebuilt. The population grew and the town started to expand beyond its walls. Buildings on display in the archaeological park today also reflect this period. From the 250s–260s AD onwards, the frequent raids by Barbarians and the unfolding economic crisis took its toll on the town, and new constructions and rebuilding activities were stalled. The gradual deterioration led to depopulation by the end of the 3rd century AD, and most of the town's former inhabitants must have moved to the safer and economically more stable Military Town (Fig. 1).

THE CHARACTER OF THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH

A wide variety of archaeological excavations and surveys were conducted in the last twenty years in the area of the Civil Town. In the archaeological park, usually authenticating excavations linked to monument restoration and museum development yielded new information concerning the function and chronology of the buildings (e.g., building no. XXIX and the northeast region, the Painters's House and the southeast region, *Symphorus mithraeum*). New results were also obtained through geophysical surveys (e.g., in the western part and the foreground of the town) and the complete revision of records and find materials obtained by previous excavations (e.g., *Macellum*, northeast zone).² On the north fringes of the Civil Town, beyond the archaeological park, primarily preventive excavations preceding development projects contributed to our

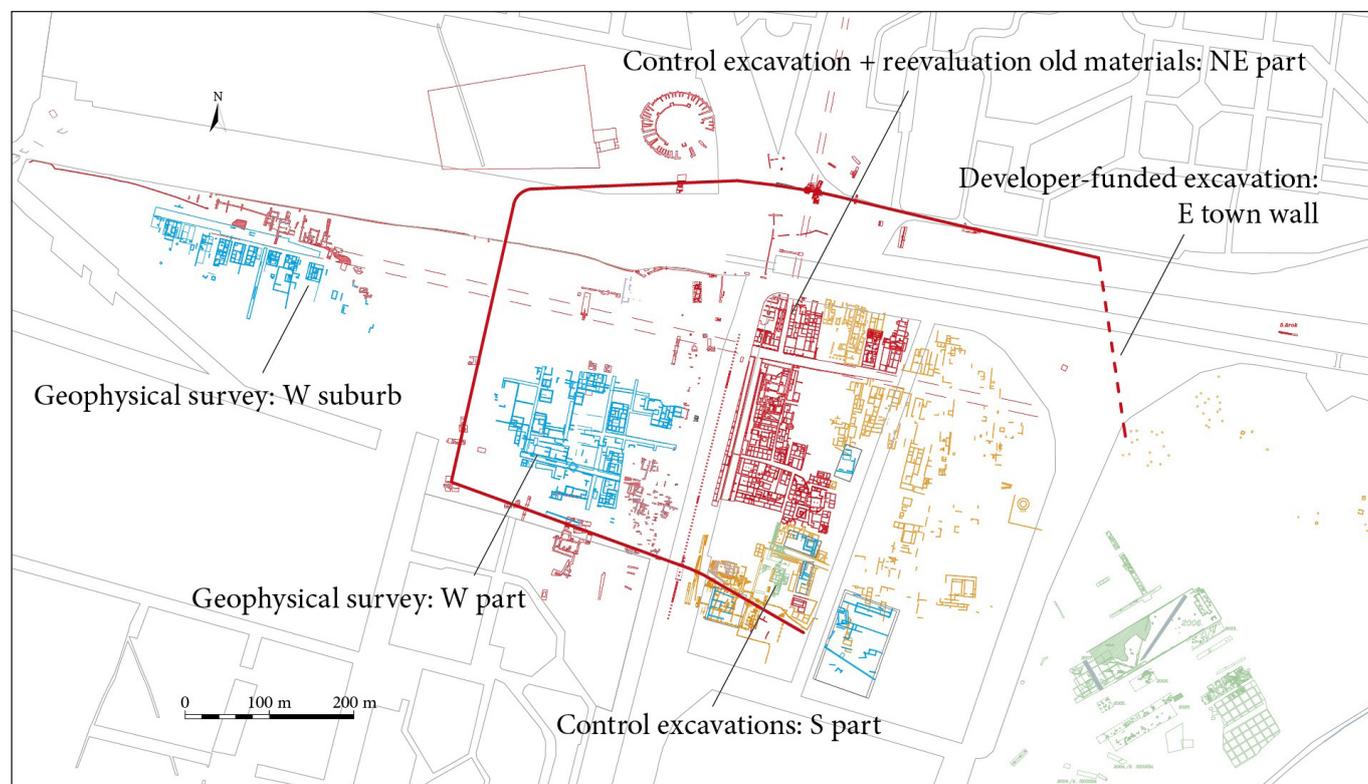


Fig. 2. Areas where research was conducted in the past 20 years in the Civil Town and its vicinity (drawing by Krisztián Kolozsvári and Orsolya Láng)

² Reports on the archaeological interventions by the Budapest History Museum's Aquincum Museum, conducted between 1994 and 2018, are available in the journal *Aquincumi Füzetek* 1 (1995) – 25 (2022).

knowledge about the settlement (the projects included the renovation of the suburban railway line and the railroad between Budapest and Esztergom; test excavations for the project titled “the Aquincum bridge and the linked street network”; development of public utilities along the Szentendrei Road). These research projects made it possible to gather information on the structure and chronology of the town and the function of its buildings, and, at places, this has fundamentally transformed our understanding of the settlement (Fig. 2).

VICUS

As the starting point of the town’s development, a village enjoying the *vicus* status was established in the last quarter of the 1st century AD on a site in the northern zone of the later Aquincum Civil Town. Earlier research (primarily by Tibor Nagy) already hypothesized this antecedent settlement, but its precise location and internal structure was only revealed by preventive excavations in the past few years (by surveys linked to the recon-



Fig. 3. The hypothesized extents of the Aquincum vicus (drawing by Krisztián Kolozsvári and Orsolya Láng)

struction of the Budapest–Esztergom railway) and control excavations preceding the conservation of the ruins in the archaeological park in 2015 (control excavation and processing of field documentation and finds linked to buildings in the “Northern Zone”: building no. I western, central, and eastern wings and buildings nos. XXVI and XXIX; NAGY 1971, 59–81; LÁNG 2015, 531–546). The surveys outlined a settlement along the west-east main road (Street D, *decumanus*), bordered from the east by the steeply sloping area of building no. XXIX (features associated with the *vicus* were absent under this strip house). From the west, the earliest settlement’s borders were delineated by the potters’ district, excavated by Lajos Nagy in the early 20th century under the so-called Military Supply Depository and the earliest cemetery along the Aranyhegyi Stream (LASSÁNYI 2006, 73–78). To the north and south, V-shaped ditches marked the *vicus*’s fringes: one running along the northern town wall in the north, while another running west-east under the later *macellum* and *Victorinus* house, marking the southern border. The planned internal structure of the settlement is also indicated by the north-south oriented, parallel pit houses and a small street perpendicular to the main east-west road. Recent research suggests that the *vicus* had two main periods: the first in the last quarter and end of the 1st century AD, and a later one up to the mid-2nd century AD the latest. We have more information on the village’s structure and features in the later period (Fig. 3).

THE INDUSTRIAL-COMMERCIAL QUARTER AND TANNERY

In the past few years, several control excavations were conducted in the north-eastern quarter of the town, bordered by the east-west main road from the south (Street D, *decumanus*), the north-south main road from the west (Street C – *cardo*), and the present-day fence of the archaeological park from the east and north. In addition, materials from earlier excavations were also re-processed. Control excavations focused on building no. XXIX, which also underwent monument restoration. The excavation revealed that this strip house had been transformed at least nine times, and a metal working workshop operated in its street-side tract until the Marcomannic Wars. Later on, that was replaced by a tannery that remained in business up to the mid-3rd century AD (LÁNG 2016a, 47–59 with earlier literature; 2016b, 352–376). The back tract of the house contained residential rooms equipped with floor heating and decorated with murals; these rooms had been transformed several times, too. The urban leather-working and glue-making workshop is one of its kind in Pannonia; leather soaking tubs, firebox, a press slab, and a platform, perhaps for cutting up the hides, were found there, along with a considerable amount of animal bones (horn cores, long bones and cattle, goat, and sheep phalanges; Fig. 4). The workshop (and shop) was located next to the busiest main road of the town that led to the harbour (Street D), which facilitated the transportation of raw materials and made the shop easily accessible for customers. The workshop was presumably a busy one, and it was thoughtfully located in the main northwest-southeast wind tunnel along the road leading out of town, so that the leather tannery, which must have emitted a strong smell, did not disturb the daily life of the town (LÁNG 2009a, 271–286). The full excavation of the building is still ongoing; the northernmost living quarters will be excavated and, hopefully, conserved in the near future. It is expected that the excavations will bring to light the east-west street that marks the end of the building and also of the related quarter of the town (Figs 5–6).



Fig. 4. Horn cores from the tannery that operated in building no. XXIX (photo by Orsolya Láng)



Fig. 6. Leather soaking tubs from the tannery that operated in building no. XXIX (photo by Orsolya Láng)

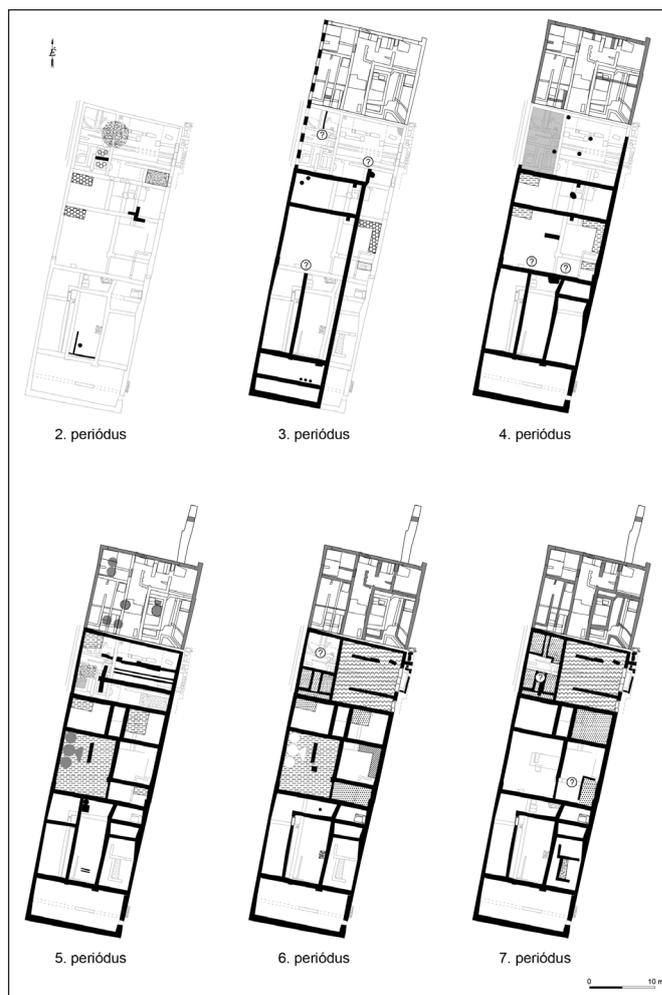


Fig. 5. Construction periods and excavation phases of building no. XXIX (drawing by Tibor Kovács and Krisztián Koložsvári)

THE EASTERN TOWN WALL

Research has long focused on the eastern border of the settlement. While there were several archaeological excavations conducted at the northern, southern, and western defence lines of the town (ZSIDI 1990, 147–152, 154), the eastern town wall and the associated structures were first investigated only in 2013 when a new bridge was constructed during the restoration of the Budapest–Esztergom railway line (LÁNG & LASSÁNYI 2014, 23–31). The dismantled town wall and the accompanying moat were identified in the construction pits of the two bridge-heads, along with a building and a street immediately on the inner side of the wall, as well as the defence embankments, a rubbish pit, and a construction built of posts. Based on the relative positions of the features and the accompanying finds it was possible to conclude that the town wall, erected during the reign of Emperor Hadrian, was quarried and its ditch filled in – in a similar manner to the defensive works known on the other sides of the town – no later than in the first half of the 3rd century AD. However, this area was intensively used in later times, too: in the Middle Ages, the moat was filled up and used as a road (Fig. 7).



Fig. 7. Paved road used in the Middle Ages, on top of the one-time Roman fossa (photo by Orsolya Láng)

THE MACELLUM

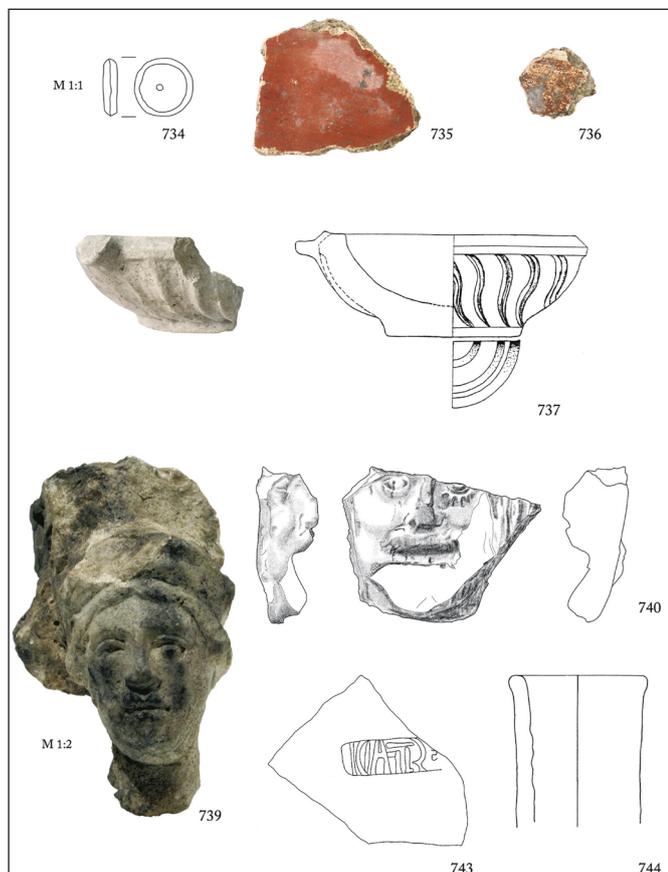


Fig. 8. Finds from the macellum in Aquincum (photo by Péter Komjáthy)

The market building of the Civil Town is one of the early public buildings (between 1882 and 1889) and then re-excavated several times. Having an unusual ground plan (a *tholos* in the middle, surrounded by shops), its unearthed structure has been in the focus of research since (LÁNG 2003, 165–204). In the past few years, all documentations of earlier excavations were revised, which made it possible to outline the construction history of the building (LÁNG et al. 2014). Research revealed that the building, which had primarily North African and Near Eastern, as well as Italian analogies, was constructed around 250 AD. It was built



Fig. 9. Reconstruction of the macellum in Aquincum (drawing by Zsolt Fodor)

as a donation by governor Publius Cosinius Felix for a member of the Cosinius family of North African origin. It was rebuilt at the end of the 3rd century AD, and became abandoned shortly afterwards, along with the rest of the town. The plot may also have accommodated an earlier, small industrial and commercial complex (Figs 8–9).

THE SOUTH-EASTERN ZONE OF THE CIVIL TOWN

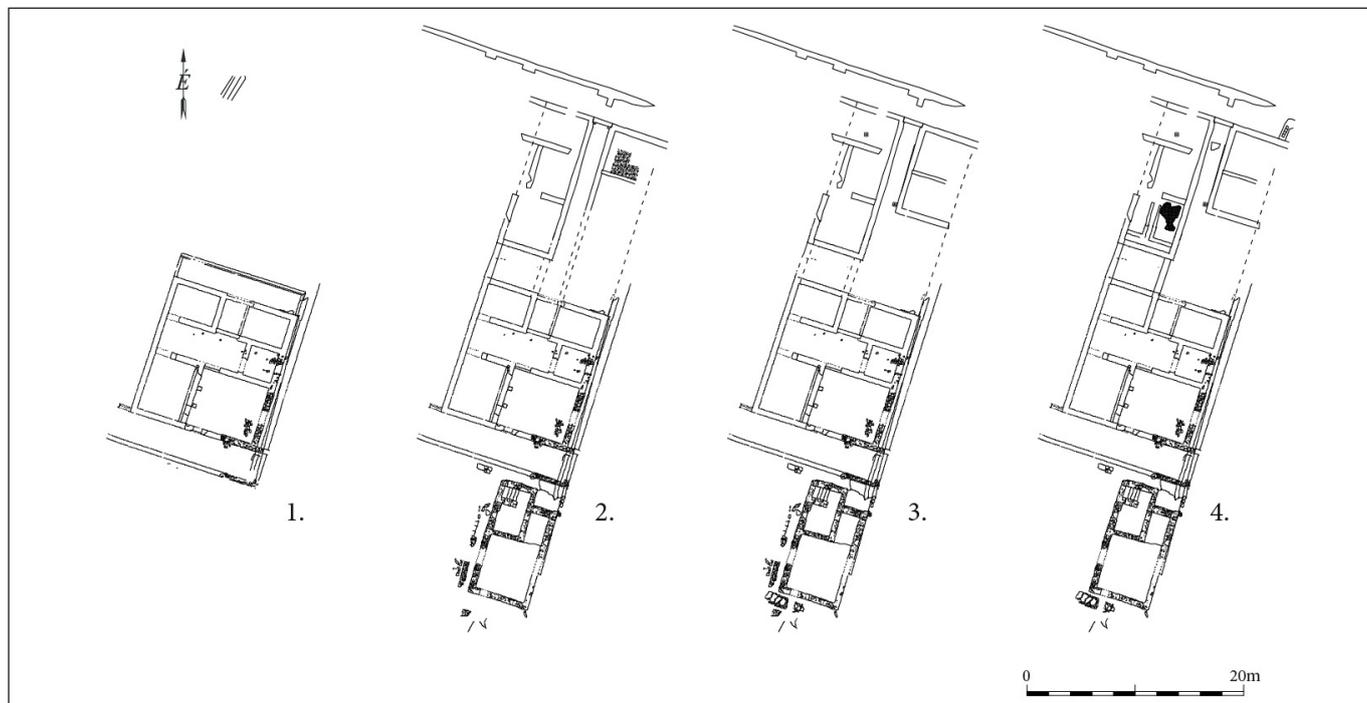


Fig. 10. Reconstructed construction periods of the House of the Painter (drawing by Tibor Kovács and Krisztián Kolozsvári)

The past ten years brought a wealth of new information with regard to the south-eastern part of the settlement, thus uncharted areas have considerably decreased there. For example, a control excavation was conducted in the so-called House of the Painter and its vicinity as part of a development project aimed at making the Aquincum Museum more visitor-friendly. The works included the reconstruction of a Roman building and landscaping of its surroundings. As a result, some details of the strip houses on the southern side of the east-west main road could be authenticated, and the ground plan of the House of the Painter was also clarified (LÁNG 2012, 21–22 with earlier literature; Fig. 10). The investigations revealed that the earliest settlement phase in the area, which must have been limited to home industry, started with the levelling and filling up of the area in the 2nd century AD, followed by the construction of a strip house. The House of the Painter, as it is known today, was also part of a split-level strip house that was transformed multiple times (in four construction phases) and, originally, functioned as *deversorium*. The excavations also made it clear that in this area, just like in other parts of the town, the design of the street network (LÁNG 2016c, 14–17) and the defensive



Fig. 11. Detail of the strip house (*deversorium*?) in the immediate vicinity of the southern town wall of the Civil Town (photo by Orsolya Láng)

structures was set up in the early 2nd century AD, but the actual construction only started later, therefore only a few re-building projects were realized until the town was abandoned at the end of the 3rd century AD. Similar phenomena were observed during the control survey preceding the reconstruction of the *Symphorus mithraeum*: there, the earliest period (2nd century AD) was represented by a timber-framed building, perhaps a shrine. The first construction period of the shrine was dated to the 2nd century AD, and in the early 3rd century AD it was re-built with a slightly different orientation. The rich archaeological find material brought to light during earlier excavations of the *mithraeum* is linked to this re-building period, too (e.g., artefacts used in the shrine and cult figurines; LÁNG 2022). It was abandoned in the late 3rd century AD at the earliest. Investigations of the southern defence line of the settlement, linked to the museum development project, also yielded new information. A section of the defence wall was found fallen, which provided an opportunity to study its structure. It was clarified that the accompanying *fossa* (ditch) was filled up in the mid-3rd century AD at the latest (but probably earlier), and new walls were erected on its top (LÁNG 2011b, 18–35). A ground-penetrating radar survey was conducted in the course of the museum’s development project on the same spot, in the gate zone right outside the southern town wall. The survey and a full-scale excavation suggested, that – instead of a complex identified earlier as *deversorium* – several north-south oriented strip houses, partly built on top of the dismantled defence wall³ and extending beyond the gate, occupied the area (Fig. 11).

AQUINCUM WEST – THE WESTERN PART OF THE TOWN

Research in the past 130 years paid less attention to the western side of the Civil Town, even though the defence walls of the town have been better preserved here. The early excavations, conducted at scattered locations, were

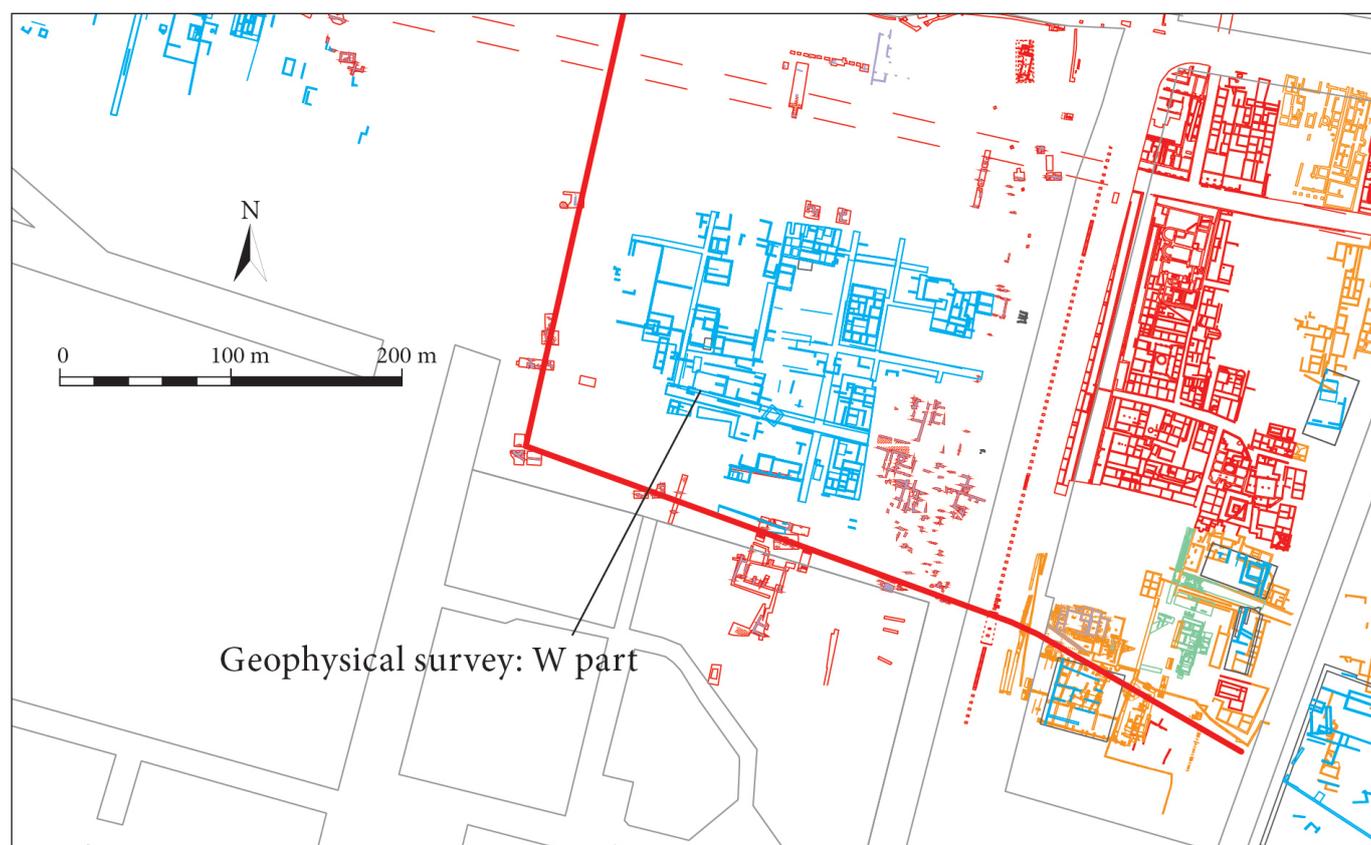


Fig. 12. Built-in areas in the south-western part of the Civil Town, based on a geophysical survey (drawing by Stefan Groh and Krisztián Kolozsvári)

³ Additional wall fragments of buildings and a section of the north-south main road were excavated in the same area in 2019 and 2022, during preliminary archaeological excavations and archaeological observation of construction work in connection with the museum’s so-called “Aquincum Promenade” project. A publication on the 2019 excavation is currently in preparation for Issue 25 of *Aquincumi Füzetek*, by the author of this article.

followed by a systematic excavation programme at the turn of the 1960s and 70s, within the framework of an international archaeology camp (Interstudex). However, as the revitalization of Óbuda district accelerated, the program came to a halt (HAJNÓCZI 1993, 407–419). Consequently, there is relatively little information available on the structure and chronology of this part of the town, and that is why the geophysical survey, conducted jointly with the Austrian Archaeological Institute in 2011, targeting the south-western zone of the Civil Town, proved to be ground-breaking (GROH et al. 2014, 370–373). The geophysical and the complementary metal detecting surveys of the area, as well as a small-scale test excavation have revealed that this side of the settlement had a predominantly orthogonal structure, and the plots were typically occupied by private dwellings (LASSÁNYI & ZSIDI 2017, 273–288; Fig. 12). The character and quantity of finds suggest that this area was less disturbed by excavations, and phenomena known from the eastern part of the town could also be observed here (finds dating to the 2nd–3rd century AD were predominant, while artefacts from the 4th century AD were almost completely absent). Details of a large building ornamented with mosaics and murals, probably a public building (baths?) were brought to light in the north-western part of the *municipium*, in the zone of the east-west main road (Street D), during small-scale excavations linked to the renovation of the Budapest–Esztergom railway and the “Aquincum bridge and its associated street network” project (LÁNG 2009b, 18–29; LÁNG & LASSÁNYI 2015, 19–31). This part of the city, now a highly protected site with prohibition of construction, is considered as an “archaeological reserve,” where small-scale and mainly non-intrusive surveys will be preferred in the future.

THE WESTERN FOREGROUNDS

Earlier investigations have identified strip houses along the east-west main road outside the western wall of the Civil Town. Ovens and grindstones testified there to activities linked to home industry (PÓCZY 1976, 425). The geophysical survey, mentioned in connection with the western part of the town, was extended to cover this area, too, and, as a result, we gained a better understanding of this zone outside the town wall. Measurements

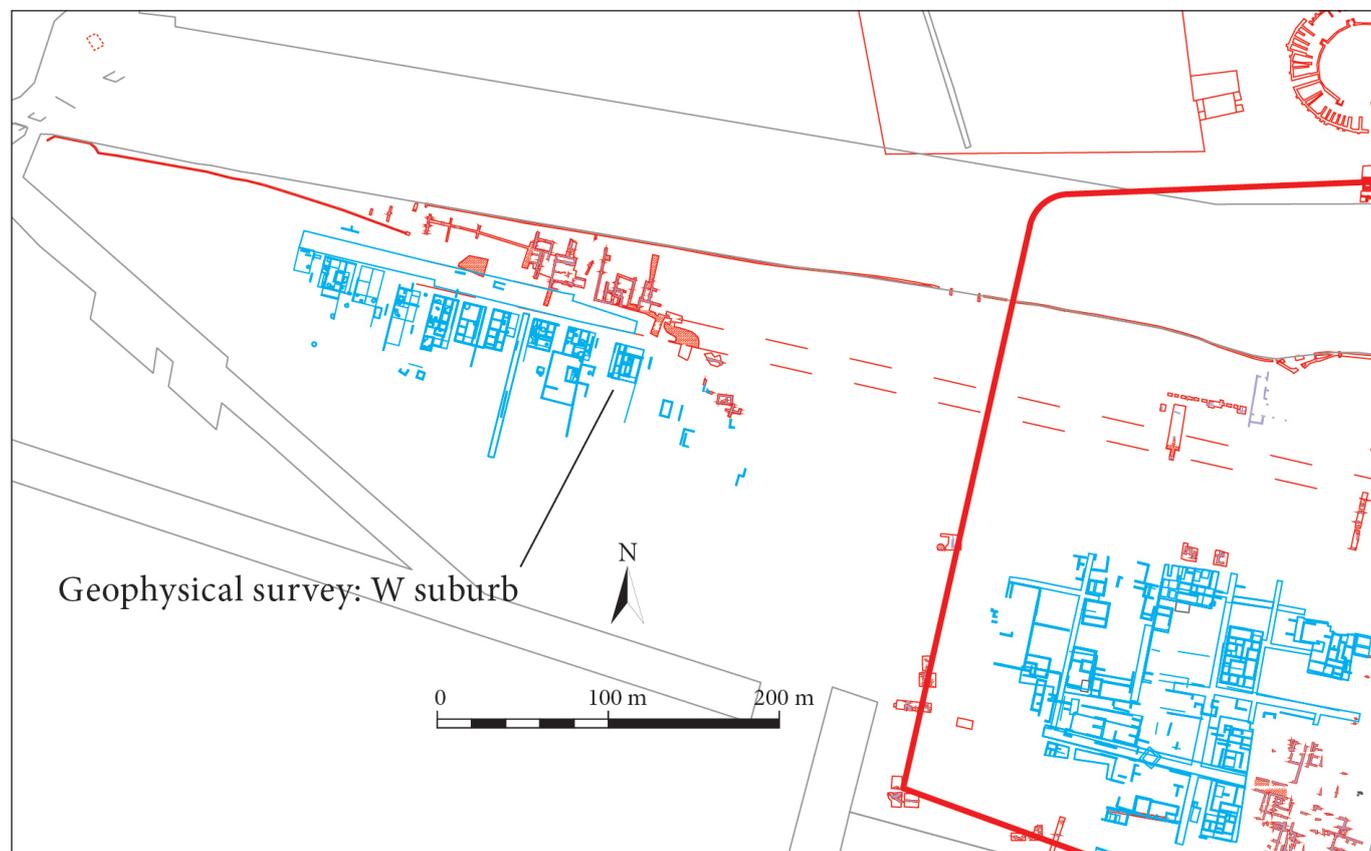


Fig. 13. Built-in areas in the western foreground of the Civil Town, based on a geophysical survey (drawing by Stefan Groh and Krisztián Kolozsvári)

indicated that strip houses here, typically dated to the 2nd–3rd century AD, had backyards, and the structure of the area seems to have followed the layout of the earliest *vicus* that had been located here (GROH et al. 2014, 366–370; *Fig. 13*). In addition to the non-intrusive methods, a control excavation was carried out in the area (LASSÁNYI 2013, 21–28), which yielded finds that suggested the presence of a workshop. Research in the last few years has also clarified that, in accordance with the results of earlier excavations, the buildings were abandoned by the late 3rd century AD, and the area between them was then used by the locals as a graveyard.⁴

ABANDONMENT OF THE CIVIL TOWN

Earlier hypotheses supposed that the town survived into the mid-4th century AD, and it was not excluded that life continued in a small area in the western part of the town until the end of the 4th century AD, by creating a new east town wall that incorporated the pillars of the earlier aqueduct (ZSIDI 2002, 121–122). However, recent investigations in the above-mentioned areas suggested that none of the settlement's parts survived into the 4th century AD. The finds suitable for dating indicate that the last alterations and the latest period of the buildings do not date beyond the 3rd century AD (LÁNG 2018, 143–168). The lack of destruction layers suggests that the inhabitants left the settlement gradually and probably moved to the more secure and economically attractive Military Town. Earlier research suggested that there was a smaller settlement in the zone of the watchtowers on the Danube bank (Gasworks), but that has not yet been identified (PÓCZY 1964, 68–69). Urban features disappear at the end of the 3rd century AD in the area of the town, and cultures of later periods are only sporadically represented, typically along the north-south main road (Street C). The settlement's area remained unoccupied during the Middle Ages, the Modern Age, and the most recent period, and, thus — with the exception of the main transport routes and the eastern edge of the city — the Civil Town of Aquincum — after the ones in Italy — is still the largest Roman ruin town in Europe.

SUMMARY

Some of the research projects carried out in the Civil Town of Aquincum over the last twenty years were related to the reconstruction of the main transport routes running north-south and east-west through the town, while others were linked to non-intrusive surveys and planned excavations in the town and the review of the record obtained by previous excavations. As a result, the earliest period of the settlement (civil *vicus*), its spatial extents, chronology, and structure could be outlined. The research projects discussed above also provided new data on the periodisation, function, and even plan of some buildings in the town (e.g., *macellum*, building no. XXIX — tannery, House of the Painter, *Symphorus mithraeum*). Furthermore, the exact location and structure of the town's defences (eastern and southern walls) were also revealed, along with important topographical information obtained by non-destructive detector surveys in the western part of the town. A systematic analysis of the finds also made it clear that, contrary to previous assumptions, the town most probably did not survive into the 4th century AD.

In conclusion, the archaeological research of the last two decades provided us with essential new insights into the history of the Civil Town of Aquincum, and further research, probably mainly through planned excavations, will hopefully contribute even more to our knowledge of this important part of the capital of the province of Pannonia Inferior.

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⁴ In addition to the sporadic burials in urban environment, research has also been carried out in the “official” cemeteries around the city in the last 20 years (e.g., in the eastern cemetery of the town at the Gas Factory, in the western cemetery next to the Aranyhegyi Stream, and also south of the city at Záhony Street–Auchan. These, however, are not discussed in this paper.

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