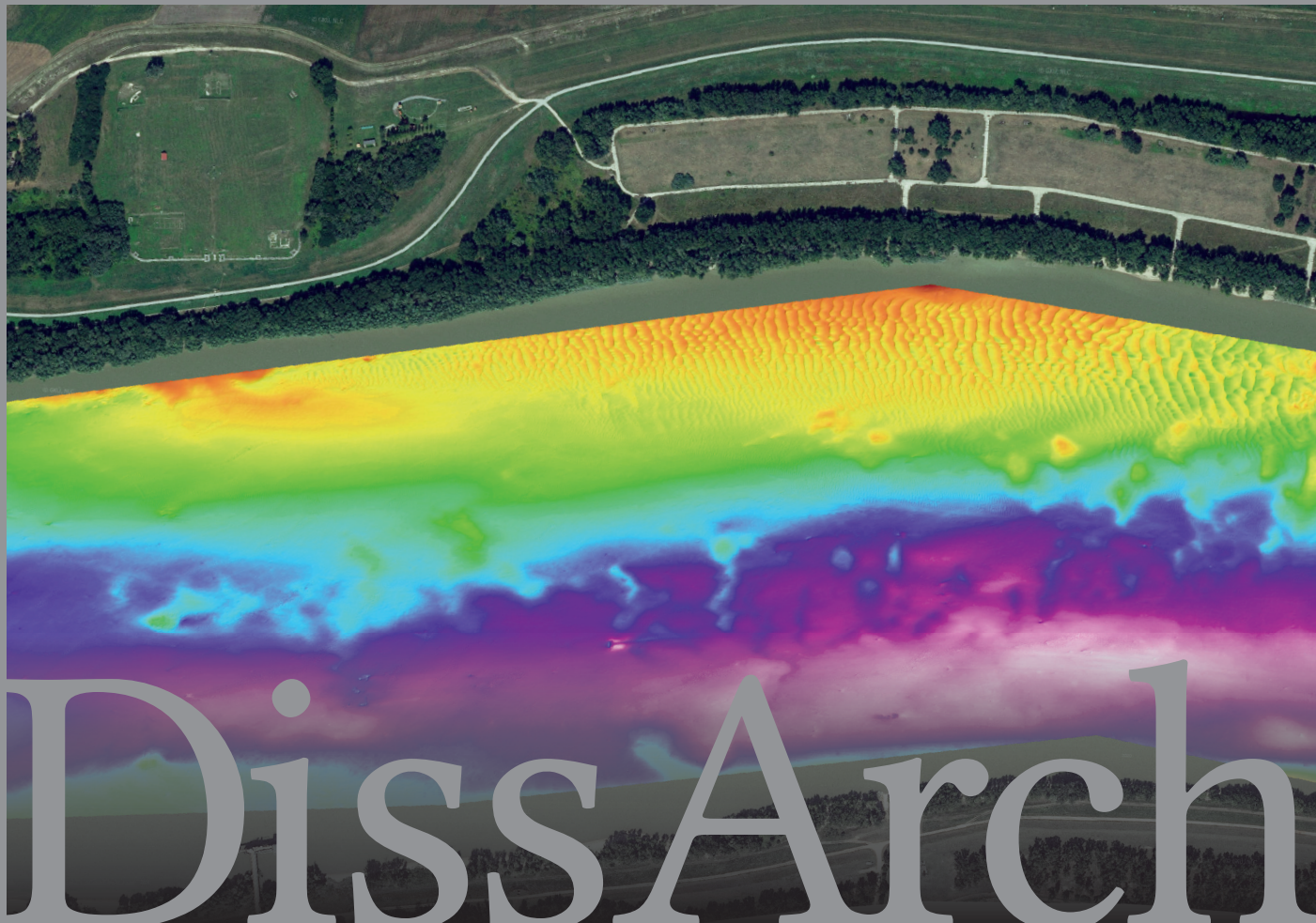


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ex Instituto Archaeologico

Universitatis de Rolando Eötvös nominatae



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ex Instituto Archaeologico
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Medieval life along the Roman limes at the Danube, Ruse Region

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Abstract: This article presents data on forts investigated archaeologically in the Ruse region, with a particular focus on the medieval period. None of the forts in the region has been fully excavated, but campaigns conducted in recent years by archaeologists from the Ruse Regional History Museum have considerably expanded the body of available information.

Keywords: Ruse Region, limes, forts, Middle Ages, archaeological research

The Danube formed the natural frontier separating the Roman Empire from its neighbours. Of the *Limes Romanus*, 471 km lie within the territory of the modern Bulgarian state, and a large number of forts were positioned along it, connected by the so-called Danube Road (*Via Istrum*).¹ However, only four of these forts hosted garrisons, mainly auxiliary cohorts and legionary units. Within the present-day Ruse District, the remains of several forts have been identified. From west to east, these are: Yatrus (near the village of Krivina), Scaidava (at the village of Batin), Trimammium (at the village of Mechka), Mediolana (at the village of Pirgovo), Sexaginta Prista (in the town of Ruse), Tegra/Tigra (at the town of Marten), and Appiaria (at the village of Ryahovo)² (Fig. 1). Most have been excavated to some extent.

This paper summarises the available data on the excavated forts, focusing on the medieval period and the transformations observed there. None of the forts in the region has been fully excavated; however, campaigns carried out in recent years by Varbin Varbanov, Nikola Rusev, and Deyan Dragoev of the Ruse Regional History Museum have significantly improved our understanding of their history and character.³

The Roman fortress of Yatrus

The Roman fortress of Yatrus lies 40 km west of Ruse, to the west of the village of Krivina. It was erected atop a small elevation on the right bank at the confluence of the Yantra River. The northern and western parts of the fortress have been destroyed by the Yantra and Danube, leaving only 2.5 ha of the site intact.

1 VARBANOV *et al.* 2014, 3.

2 VARBANOV *et al.* 2014, 6–7.

3 I am grateful to my colleagues from Ruse Museum for the information and materials. The present text includes the results of recent studies carried out in and around the selected sites (except for the Yatrus fort, where no new survey has been conducted since 2000).

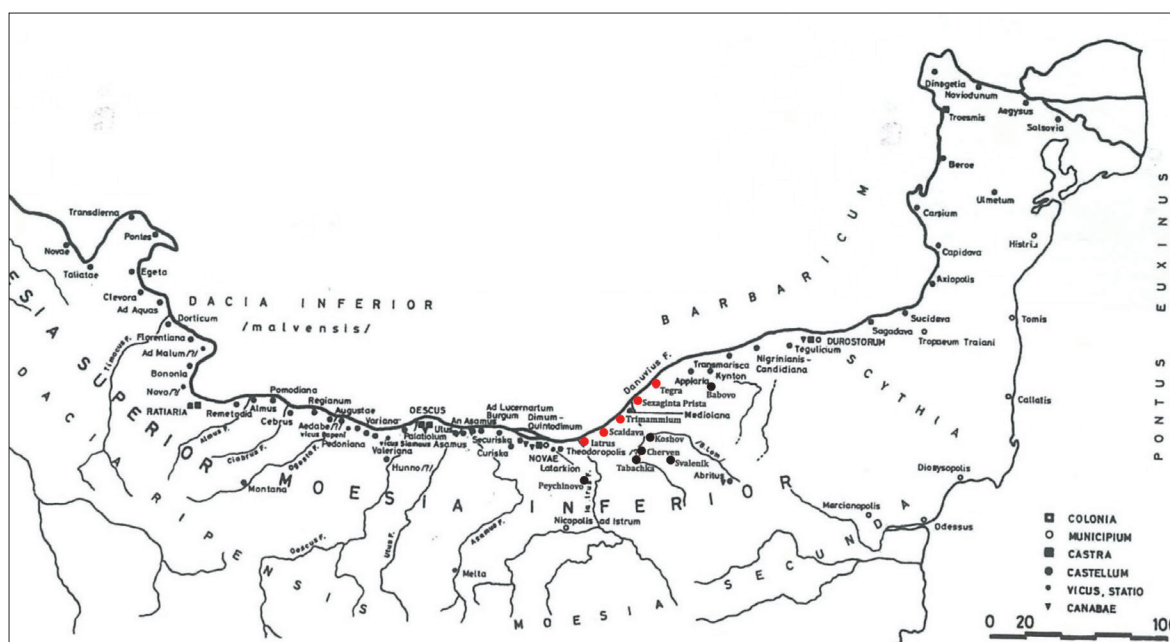


Fig. 1. Roman forts in Ruse region (after [VARBANOV et al. 2019](#)).

The site, investigated for many years by a joint Bulgarian–German team, was excavated between 1958 and 2000. The identified layer sequence spans from the second quarter of the 3rd century AD to the final destruction of the fortress at the end of the 6th century AD. Structures from Antiquity and early medieval dwellings overlying them have also been uncovered (Fig. 2). Between 1972 and 1978, a total of 75 medieval semi-subterranean and surface houses, farm buildings, and pits were excavated.⁴ The dwellings had square, rectangular, or irregular ground plans. They were identified as semi-subterranean structures with floors ranging from 0.70 to 1.50 m below the modern surface. Except for a single two-room structure, all had only one room. Cooking and heating installations included domed internal ovens and braziers. Postholes for the load-bearing beams were identified both inside and outside the sunken houses. The two-room building comprised two separate spaces connected by a doorway (Fig. 3). Its walls and floor were plastered with clay. In front of the entrance, a sloping passage, probably covered and serving as a vestibule, was detected. The building was heated by a stove in the southern room, whose mouth opened through the dividing wall from the northern room.⁵

Another type of residence had plank-clad walls; completely charred planks, measuring 10 × 12 cm, were recovered during excavation.

A third type of building had stone foundations; only one such structure, excavated in 1968, yielded a rich pottery assemblage.⁶ Its almost square floor lay at a depth of 0.7 m. It contained a fireplace and a movable hearth, with 23 almost intact pottery vessels arranged around it at the south-eastern end. The vessels had been stacked closely on shelves mounted to the wall.⁷

Some researchers place the medieval settlement between the early 7th century and the second third of the 10th century AD. The last two horizons of the site have been dated to the 11th–12th and 12th–14th centuries, respectively: the former has been associated with a brief Pecheneg occu-

4 [WENDEL 1986](#), 207.

5 [DIMOVA 1975](#), 52–53.

6 [DIMOVA 1975](#), 54.

7 [DIMOVA 1975](#), 55.

pation—attested by pits, ditches, hearths and fragments of cauldrons with internal handles—while the latter is marked by pottery fragments dated to the Second Bulgarian Kingdom (13th–14th century).⁸ Others, however, doubt the existence of a 7th-century settlement.⁹ Based on observations at Site XLIV, Lyudmil Vagalinski proposed revisions to the chronology of the late antique features, assigning some to the 8th–9th centuries—that is, after the fort’s destruction.¹⁰ A further hypothesis suggests that the medieval settlement was established only in the 11th century.¹¹



Fig. 2. Plan of medieval residential structures in fort of Yatrus (after [HERRMANN 1986](#)).

The Late Roman fort of Scaidava

The Late Roman fort of Scaidava lies about 35 km south-west of Ruse, on Kale Bair Hill, 3 km north-east of the village of Batin. It has an elongated triangular ground plan covering ca. 2.5–3 ha. Two transverse ditches and a rampart are clearly visible; the latter probably represents the remains of the fortification walls.

Rescue excavations were carried before road construction at the south-eastern foot of the hill in 1974, revealing occupations spanning from the Late Hellenistic to the Late Ottoman periods.¹² Further work in 1979 in the western part of the village, in the locality known as Gredata, uncovered two late antique (4th–5th-century AD) towers overlying a Middle Bronze Age and an Early Hellenistic cemetery. Layers above the ruined towers contained part of a medieval necropolis, dated to the First Bulgarian Kingdom. Part of another 10th–11th-century AD cemetery was excavated east of Kale Bair in 1985–1986.¹³ Varbin Varbanov resumed investigations on the hill in 2013–2014,

⁸ [WENDEL 1986](#), 210.

⁹ [DIMOVA 1979](#), 95–99; [MICHAILOV 1979](#), 211–212; [SLAVCHEV 2006](#), 13–19.

¹⁰ [VAGALINSKI 2003](#), 82.

¹¹ [DIACONU 1988](#), 202.

¹² [VARBANOV 2014a](#).

¹³ [STANCHEV 1985](#); [STANCHEV 1989](#).

exploring an area of 70 m² and exposing structures from several periods: the Thracian era (1st century BC–1st century AD), the Roman period (2nd–3rd centuries AD), Late Antiquity (4th–6th centuries AD), the Early Middle Ages (10th–11th century AD) and the Second Bulgarian Kingdom (13th century AD).¹⁴ Although no structures from the First Bulgarian Kingdom were identified, pottery and coin finds, together with the nearby 11th-century AD cemetery, indicate an unenclosed settlement in the area.¹⁵

In total, fourteen pits and parts of three residential buildings can be associated with the Second Bulgarian Kingdom (Fig. 4)—about 80% of the features discovered and roughly half of the finds from the second season.¹⁶ In House 1, a roughly circular oven opening to the south was preserved (Fig. 5). Its floor measured ca. 1 m in diameter; the 10 cm thick plastered walls of its dome survived to a height of up to 30 cm. Two Late Roman coins, two *scyphates*, a vertebra, and potsherds were found in its fill. Several of the excavated pits may relate to this house. The second house measured over 4 m (W–E) by more than 2.5 m (N–S). Two hearths and an oven appear to be associated with it. The oblong floor (0.5 × 0.7 m) of the oven was lined with crushed gravel, and it had a domed clay superstructure. A round hearth, ca. 0.7–0.8 m in diameter, lay directly beneath the domed oven and another similar feature, 0.6–0.7 m in diameter, was recorded about a metre to the west on the same level. Between and south-east of the two hearths, a patch of yellow rammed-earth floor was identified.¹⁷ A massive burnt beam clearly defined the western limit of House 3, the fill of which contained five coins (one a *scyphate*) and numerous potsherds dating to the Second Bulgarian Kingdom. The structure was only partially excavated.¹⁸ Occupation at the settlement probably ceased during the Tatar incursions in the first half of the 13th century.



Fig. 3. Medieval dwelling with two rooms in fort of Yatrus (after DIMOVA 1975).

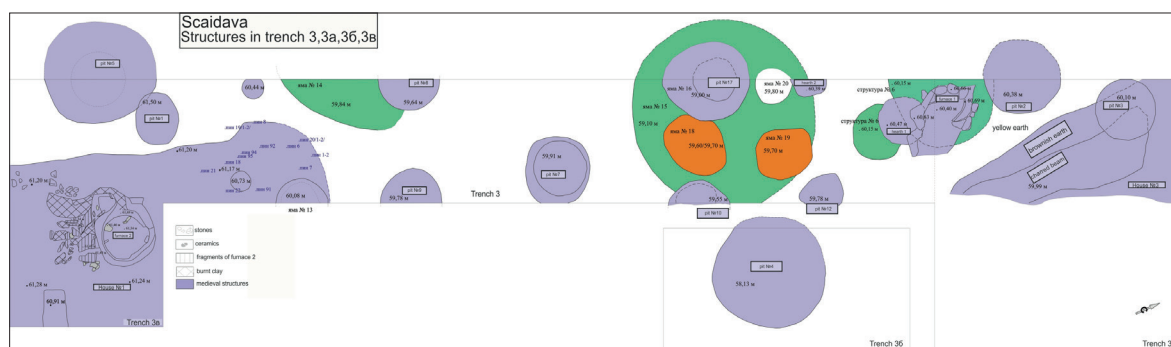


Fig. 4. Medieval structures in fort of Scaidava from 2014 (by V. Varbanov).

14 VARBANOV 2014b, 320; VARBANOV 2015, 410.

15 VARBANOV 2014b, 320–321; VARBANOV 2015, 410–412.

16 VARBANOV 2015, 410–412.

17 VARBANOV 2015, 412.

18 VARBANOV 2015, 412.

The Late Roman fort of Trimammium

The late Roman fort of Trimammium stands on the bank of the Danube, about 22 km south-west of Ruse and roughly 3 km west–north-west of the village of Mechka. It covers ca. 9.7 ha (24 acres). A section of the south-eastern fortification wall from the 4th century AD, bearing traces of reconstructions at the end of the 6th century AD and again in the Middle Ages (11th–12th centuries AD), has been explored.¹⁹



Fig. 5. Situation in dwelling No. 1, fort of Scaidava (photo by V. Varbanov).

Two trenches, A and B, were opened within the fort. Trench A encompassed various medieval structures (Fig. 6) in two distinct horizons dated to the 10th–11th and the 13th centuries AD, respectively. Within the remains of a large antique building (Building A), the foundations of a square medieval structure (Building D) were found, together with a round pit, 1.60 m in diameter and 1.50–2.17 m deep, in the south-western corner (the green patch in Square I 1 in Fig. 6). The pit contained potsherds from the 10th–11th centuries AD. Building D was erected atop the levelled remains of Building A, its walls comprising reused material from the earlier structure. Finds from the medieval building included a lead cross and a bronze button; besides, a bracelet fragment was discovered nearby.²⁰ From the layer overlying this building in Square I 2, 262 potsherds were recovered: eight from the 3rd–4th centuries AD, 67 from the Late Antiquity, 90 from the 10th–11th centuries AD, and 94 from the 12th–13th centuries AD. This layer also produced three medieval clipped copper coins from the early 13th century AD. A brick floor and a hearth from a medieval house were uncovered in Squares II 1 and I 1. Several pits and a storage vessel—dug into an earlier medieval level and fired *in situ*—belong to the horizon of the Second Bulgarian Kingdom; the associated pottery dates them to the 13th–14th centuries AD. Beneath the medieval hearth in Squares II 1 and I 1, a stone fireplace cutting the loess subsoil contained finds of the 10th–11th centuries AD.²¹

19 TORBATOV 2012, 438–445.

20 VARBANOV *et al.* 2019, 40–41; VELIKOVA 2012, 419, Fig. 4.

21 VELIKOVA 2012, 405.

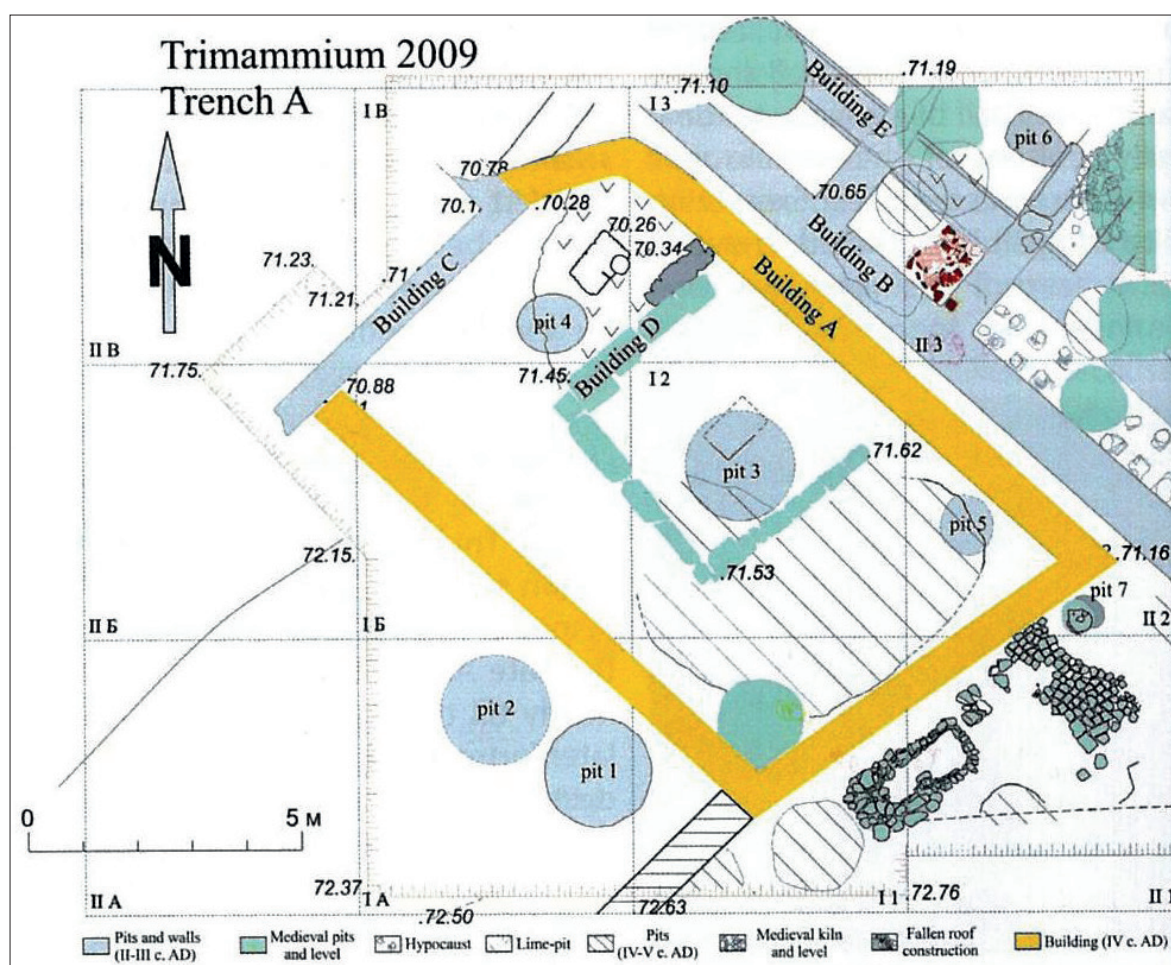


Fig. 6. Plan of the medieval structures in Trench A, Trimammium (by V. Varbanov).

In Trench B, the apse of a medieval church, its walls built of crushed stone set in mud mortar, was uncovered. A Latin imitation *scyphate* found immediately east of the apse dates the construction and use of this church to the early or second half of the 13th century AD.²²

Evidence for the cemetery of the late Roman fort of Trimammium is scarce; only a single limestone gravestone, published by V. Velkov, has been securely associated with it.²³ The Latin inscription commemorates Aurelius Mucianus, a soldier of *Legio I Italiaca* who died at the age of 20 while training as a land surveyor (*ensor*). In 1983, D. Stanchev of the Ruse Museum opened trial trenches to explore the antique cemetery on the outskirts of Stalpishte, 3 km west of the village and 1 km north-east of the fort. His brief report notes that deep ploughing had destroyed the entire necropolis, leaving human bones and fragments of stone sarcophagi scattered across the surface.²⁴

In 2019, Nikola Rusev excavated south of the late Roman fort.²⁵ The location was promising, as the ground falls away markedly to the north and north-east of the fort. Five of the 22 graves uncovered were medieval; the remainder belong to the Roman Imperial Period and Late Antiquity. The medieval grave pits were relatively shallow, cutting into the loess subsoil. Their shapes were hard to determine, although one was certainly trapezoidal. Each burial contained a single individual—man,

22 VELIKOVA 2012, 405–406.

23 VELKOV 1968, 3–10.

24 STANCHEV 1984, 90.

25 RUSEV – YORDANOVA 2020, 1049.

woman or child—lying supine with the arms beside the body or folded over the chest.²⁶ No grave goods were found in any of the five burials, although in one case, a green stain in the pelvic area indicated contact with a copper or bronze object that was no longer there. A copper Bulgarian Type C coin (an imitation of a Byzantine *trachy*) dated to the first quarter of the 13th century AD was found next to one of the grave pits.

In 2022, exploration of the necropolis was extended south, south-west and south-east by four new trenches.²⁷ Seven of the twelve excavated graves were medieval. Trench 1, close to the 2019 excavation area, contained no medieval burials but produced stray finds, including a copper Type B coin (dated AD 1204–1207). Trench 2, to the south-west of the fort, contained four medieval graves, only one of which yielded finds: a copper-plated bracelet and a bronze ring with a purple-red stone inlay. Trench 3, also in the south-west, produced an unfurnished medieval grave, two stray rings,²⁸ and a copper *scyphate*—a Bulgarian Type C imitation coin dating after AD 1207.²⁹ Trench 4, set out 80 m south-east of the fortress, revealed the foundations of a 4th-century AD building, partially destroyed by treasure hunters, and a medieval child burial within its destruction layer.

The Roman fortress of Sexaginta Prista

The late antique fort of Sexaginta Prista is situated on a natural eminence on the riverbank within modern Ruse. It is mentioned by Claudius Ptolemy in his *Geography* as lying between Trimammium (at today's Mechka village) and Durostorum (Silistra); besides, it appears between Trimammium and Tigra/Tegra (Marten) on the *Tabula Peutingeriana*. The site was identified by the Austrian explorer Felix Kanitz.³⁰ Archaeological research has been conducted on the site intermittently over the last 47 years—initially in 1976–1978, and subsequently in 2005–2010, 2012, and 2015–2022. The identified stratigraphic sequence comprises layers of varying thickness associated with the Late Hellenistic Period (2nd century BC–1st century AD), the Roman Period (2nd–3rd centuries AD), Late Antiquity (4th–6th centuries AD), the Early Middle Ages (10th–11th centuries AD), the High Middle Ages (14th century AD), the Ottoman Period (18th–19th centuries AD), and the modern era (20th century).³¹

Recent excavations have added substantially to the medieval sequence; one of these is the discovery in front of the Military Club in 2015 of a sealed layer dating to the late 10th–early 11th century AD. In Trench I, a layer rich in 11th-century AD material yielded belt buckles, an encolpion fragment, a heart-shaped belt fitting, a knife tip and five anonymous *folles* of Classes A3 (AD 976–1030/35) and B (AD 1028–1034).³²

In 2017, part of a sunken medieval building, approximately 12 m² in area, aligned with the cardinal points, was discovered beneath 19th-century layers inside the south-eastern fortification wall, near the excavated gateway and approximately 20 m from a partially explored U-shaped tower. Together with several pits and a cooking oven, it was excavated over three seasons (Fig. 7). Its survival was fortuitous: the difference between the modern surface and the highest preserved point of the dwelling was only 0.70 m, and elsewhere the modern deposit had truncated earlier remains at greater depth. The medieval building had nonetheless been partly destroyed by an east–west water-pipe trench that cut through

26 RUSEV – YORDANOVA 2020, 1052.

27 RUSEV in press.

28 Two flat rings; one bears on its bezel the image of a bird with outstretched wings, the other, a pentagram.

29 RUSEV in press.

30 DREMSIZOVA-NELCHINOVA – IVANOV 1983, 58.

31 VARBANOV 2013, 29; VARBANOV et al. 2023.

32 VELIKOVA 2017, 234.

it. The structure is clearly delineated by a layer of yellow clay from a Late Roman building that once abutted the fortification wall. The southern and central parts of the building were excavated, yielding burnt beams. The heating installation was located near the north-eastern corner, though a pit had partially disturbed it. It was probably a stone stove built of medium and small rubble on the rammed-earth floor. Its mouth was not found, which suggests it may have opened to the west. Four pits were sunk from the floor in the northern part of the building. The feature is dated to the early decades of the 11th century AD based on nearby anonymous *folles*: a Class C *folles* (AD 1034–1041) to the north, in a layer perhaps belonging to the same context,³³ and three further specimens—a Class A2 (AD 976–1025) and two Class B (AD 1028–1034)—from a 19th-century deposit in adjacent south-western squares, i.e. clearly in secondary position together with ancient, medieval, and modern finds.



Fig. 7. Plan of medieval structures from Sexaginta Prista (by V. Varbanov).

Work on the southern part of the medieval building continued in 2019, when a contemporary pit was also found to the west. The pit fill comprised grey-black loose soil with abundant animal remains (mainly fish bones and scales), alternating with ashy grey layers rich in charcoal and bone. The quantity of animal bone was greatest in the uppermost levels, decreasing downwards, while the lower layers contained much medieval pottery. North-east of the building, an external cooking oven was uncovered, with its mouth facing west and part of its dome preserved; its plastered walls were 4–8 cm thick. The floor thickness varied, thinning at the eastern end, thickening to ca. 4.5 cm in the middle and reaching 12 cm at the mouth. The medieval features explored define a horizon between the late 10th and early 11th centuries AD, a period marked by the establishment of Byzantine rule in several major centres along the Lower Danube and by raids from late nomadic groups.³⁴

Unfortified ancient and medieval settlement and cemeteries, ‘Kaleto’ area near the town of Marten, Ruse District

The ancient fort of Tegra/Tigra in the ‘Kaleto’ area near Marten is mentioned in several sources: the *Tabula Peutingeriana*, the *Antonine Itinerary*, the *Ravenna Cosmography* and Procopius’ *De Aedificiis*, where it appears among the forts rebuilt by Justinian I in the 6th century AD.³⁵ Bricks with stamps of the *Legio I Italiaca* have been found on the site, but the written references cease after the 5th century AD. The fort occupies the top of a steep hill on a wedge-shaped plateau of c. 500 × 200 m, with a rampart—now destroyed—on the eastern side. Traces of the fort walls are still visible. A marble bust of Athena, a relief of Apollo, and a bronze statuette of Venus are known from the site.

33 VELIKOVA – VARBANOV 2023, 318, Obr. 23.

34 VELIKOVA – VARBANOV 2023, 315–319.

35 DREMSIZOVA-NELCHINOVA – IVANOV 1983, 45.

The fort is thought to have been established at the end of the 1st or the beginning of the 2nd century AD and to have been destroyed during Avar and Slav incursions in the 6th century AD. The fortifications nonetheless remained in use in the Middle Ages and were even re-fortified during the Ottoman Period.³⁶

Rescue excavations were conducted in the Kaleto area in 2012 and 2013, in preparation for the construction of a gas treatment facility on the gas line connecting Ruse and Giurgiu.³⁷ The site is situated on a plateau that rises above the surrounding terrain and slopes away to the north and east. The ancient fort of Tegra/Tigra and its medieval successor are located in the immediate vicinity (Fig. 8). Within the 1,100 m² area investigated, the cultural deposit ranged in thickness from approximately 0.5 m to over 2.7 m.



Fig. 8. Aerial photo of the necropolis near Tegra/Tigra fort (photo by D. Dragoev).

Preliminary indications of both an ancient and a medieval unenclosed settlement on the site were partly confirmed: several semi-sunken buildings were identified in the trenches, including seven well-preserved examples with associated hearths, ovens, and refuse pits. Numerous later grave pits had disturbed many of the sunken features, leaving only parts of floors or remains of furnaces intact, so that their ground plans could not be reconstructed. Based on their find material, these structures can be dated to the 10th and early 11th centuries AD.³⁸

In total, 113 graves were unearthed, 83 of them in 2012; with further 265 in 2013, the total number of excavated burials in the site now is 378. The graves span several periods: the Late Iron Age (5th–4th century BC), the Roman Period (1st–3rd centuries AD), Late Antiquity (4th–6th centuries AD), the Early Middle Ages (10th–11th centuries AD) and the Second Bulgarian Kingdom (13th–early 14th centuries AD).³⁹ Regardless of date, the graves were dispersed across the investigated area in close proximity to one another, with some intersecting; however, only the most recent burials showed a concentration in the easternmost and northernmost zones of the excavation area. All were simple pit graves dug into the loess subsoil to depths of 0.40–2.10 m below the modern surface. Some contained wooden coffins fastened with iron nails. Traces of planks were noted in Grave 80, dated to the Second Bulgarian Kingdom, and in nine further graves excavated in 2013.⁴⁰ Furnaces adjacent to a few of the grave pits likely played a role in the funeral, serving as facilities for preparing a ritual meal. The medieval graves are characterised by an almost complete absence of grave goods, apart from clothing accessories (such as buttons). Textile remains were observed in one grave (Fig. 9).

36 DREMSIZOVA-NELCHINOVA – IVANOV 1983, 46.

37 DRAGOEV 2013, 253.

38 DRAGOEV 2014, 322.

39 DRAGOEV 2013, 254.

40 DRAGOEV 2014, 324.

Conclusions

The results of excavations at the selected sites reflect some of the changes that have occurred throughout their history.

Despite debate over the chronology of the medieval settlement overlying the fort at Yatrus, the archaeological record attests to sustained occupation until the end of the 11th century AD, with limited material attributable to the Second Bulgarian Kingdom.

Although key structures remain to be located, the evidence—especially the pottery record and the two early medieval cemeteries at the foot of the hill at Scaidava—indicates a 10th–11th-century AD settlement. Features of the Second Bulgarian Kingdom relate to a 13th-century occupation. Due to the limited area investigated, a detailed chronological framework for the medieval settlement remains difficult to establish; however, the 13th-century occupation was likely terminated by Tatar raids.

Trimammium appears to display a similar sequence, with new cemetery data confirming a 13th-century AD settlement. Recent research at Sexaginta Prista has revealed more structures dating to the late 10th–early 11th centuries AD. Stray finds across the hilltop and a recently discovered 14th-century AD cemetery indicate occupation during the period of the Second Bulgarian Kingdom.

Although no excavations have yet been undertaken within the fort of Tegra/Tigra, evidence from the nearby cemetery indicates medieval occupation in the 10th–11th and 13th–14th centuries AD, likely corresponding to settlements that reused the fort's remains; confirmation will require further research.

The structures unearthed in and around the antique forts reflect characteristic medieval settlement patterns. Occasional features at the foot of the hills or in their vicinity provide valuable insights into the relationship between the settlements on the forts and their surrounding landscapes.



Fig. 9. Traces of fabric on a skull from a medieval burial (photo by D. Dragoev).

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