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Excavations in the legionary fortress of Brigetio in 2019

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Abstract

*In 2019 the excavations in Brigetio focused on the area of the northern gate of the legionary fortress, as the geophysical surveys conducted in the previous year allowed the identification of both the *porta praetoria* and the *via praetoria* leading through it. These fieldworks, beside providing new information on the topography of the legionary fortress regarding the *porta praetoria* and the *via praetoria*, were also significant from a methodological point of view as they allowed the verification of the results of geophysical surveys conducted in the area earlier, thus contributing greatly to the planning and fine-tuning of future measurements.*

Excavations have been carried out regularly since 2015 in the territory of the legionary fortress of Brigetio, including investigations in the area of the *principia* as well as the eastern part of the *praetentura*.¹ In 2015 we located the courtyard of the *principia* and details of buildings situated south of it, as well as a section of the road separating the *principia* and the barracks of *cohortes I*. In 2017 and 2018 we excavated a large-sized apsidal building near the *porta principalis dextra* in the southeastern corner of the *praetentura*. The construction of this *aula* type building can be dated around the 370s and presumably it was the venue where Valentinian I received the envoys of the Quadi on 17th November 375, as a result of which he eventually suffered a stroke and died. Several rooms belonging to earlier construction phases have been unearthed below the building.²

In 2019 the excavations focused on the area of the northern gate of the legionary fortress, as the geophysical surveys conducted in the previous year allowed the identification of both the *porta praetoria* and the *via praetoria* leading through it (Fig. 1).

Thus, beyond its traditional scientific goals the excavation was of great significance also from a methodological point of view, as it provided us with the possibility to verify the results of the GPR-survey, which may prove useful in the preparation and fine-tuning of further surveys.

1 For a summary of the excavations in the legionary fortress of Brigetio see BARTUS et al. 2016; BARTUS et al. 2018b.

2 BARTUS et al. 2018a.



Fig. 1. The *praetentura* of the legionary fortress of Brigetio with the excavated surfaces (Photo: D. Bartus).

The first excavated location has been the northern main gate of the legionary fortress, the *porta praetoria*. In this area there already was a small-scale excavation in 1941 led by Aladár Radnóti during which a section of the gate towers were unearthed, however the excavation's documentation has gone completely lost.³

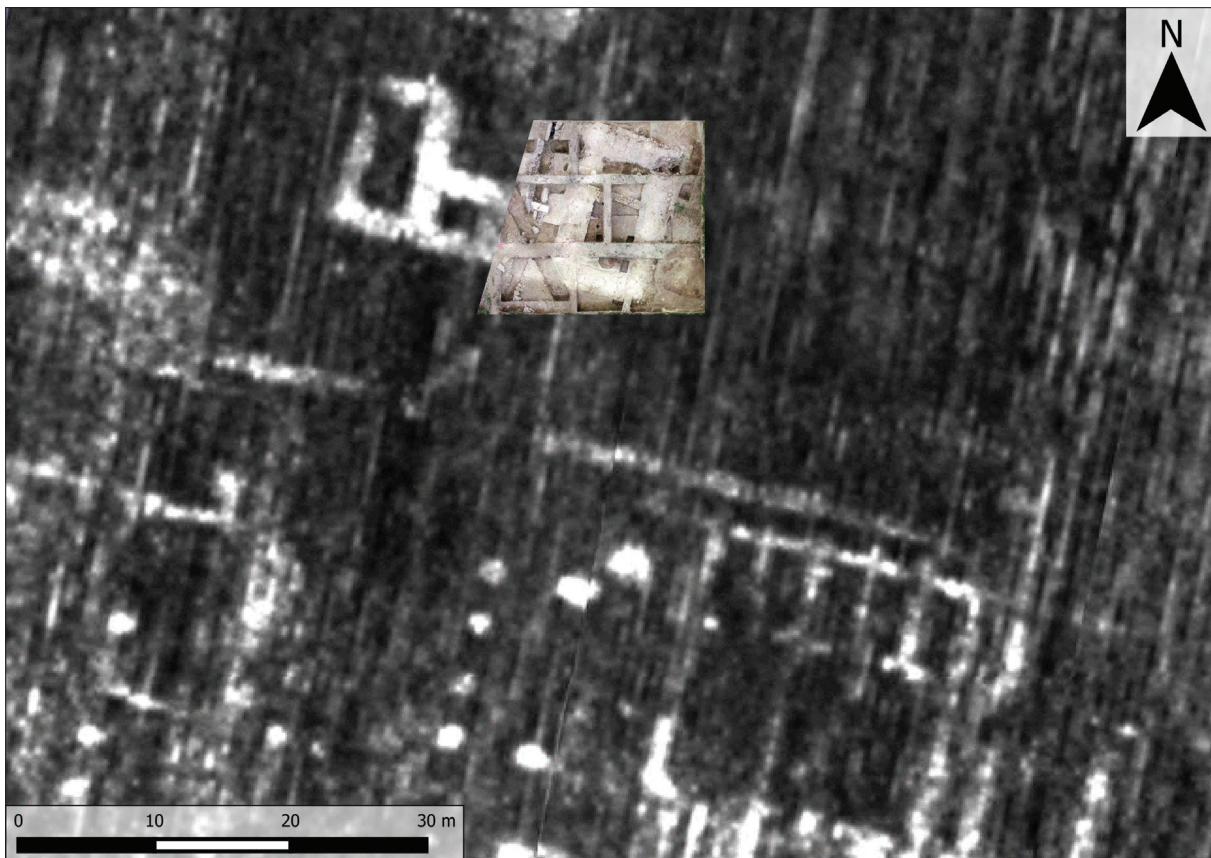


Fig. 2. Hybrid image of the *porta praetoria*: the GPR survey before the excavation, and aerial photo of the unearthed eastern tower (L. Rupnik – B. Simon – D. Bartus).

3 BARKÓCZI 1951, 14.

Our excavation has confirmed the results of the geophysical measurements (*Fig. 2*): the gate of the *porta praetoria* consisted of two rectangular gate towers with considerably massive stone foundations, however only a few stone blocks of the rising walls have remained in place (*Fig. 3*). Thus, we only have limited knowledge of the inner structure of the towers; we could identify the traces of a later reconstruction in the western tower while in the eastern tower we discovered a massive chalky layer which could be related to a reconstruction or possibly the demolition of the tower.



Fig. 3. The *porta praetoria* during the excavation (Photo: D. Bartus).

The dismantling of the towers could have been carried out already in Roman times, it is conceivable that the gate has no longer been used during the late Roman period. The size (8×12 m) and the layout of the towers can be considered common in Roman military architecture. They belong among the type of towers protruding inward, of which numerous examples are known from other legionary fortresses.⁴

The *via praetoria* passed through the gateway between the two towers (*Fig. 4*). It was covered with large stone slabs on which the ruts of cartwheels were clearly observable (*Fig. 5*). Inside the gateway no traces of a possible double-portalled gate could be documented, therefore the assumption of previous research regarding a single-portalled gate can be further maintained.

The stones comprising the fortress walls have been – similarly to other areas within Brigetio – plundered in modern times, therefore the walls once connecting to the *porta praetoria* could only be identified in the form of trenches. The turf rampart running along the inner side of the wall was clearly observable on the eastern side of the gate.⁵

4 BISHOP 2012, Fig. 29, 32, 35, 47, etc. On the gates of Roman legionary fortresses in general, see BECHERT 1971. On the *porta praetoria* in general, see AUMÜLLER 2002, 231–304.

5 BARKÓCZI 1951, 15.



Fig. 4. Stone slabs covering the *via praetoria* (Photo: D. Bartus).



Fig. 5. Ruts of cartwheels in the gateway (Photo: D. Bartus).

Dating is considerably difficult due to the fact that the gate towers have most probably been dismantled already in the Roman period. Also, the excavation of 1941 as well as drainage construction works in the 1950s have significantly disturbed the environment of the gate. As a result, we could not gain accurate information during the excavation regarding to the construction or periodisation of the gate; hopefully the evaluation of the find material will contribute to a more precise picture.



Fig. 6. Ortophoto of the southern excavation surface with pillar bases flanking the *via praetoria* (B. Simon).

The second excavated location was situated slightly to the south of the *porta praetoria*, along the *via praetoria*. Only a few stone slabs covering the main road of the legionary fortress remained in their original place, however we have excavated four pillar bases belonging to the row of pillars flanking the *via praetoria* (Fig. 6), which were also clearly visible on the GPR images. East of the main road we have unearthed a late Roman lime kiln (Fig. 7), which had been



Fig. 7. The Late Roman lime kiln (Photo: D. Bartus).



Fig. 8. Stone balls from the eastern tower *in situ* (Photo: D. Bartus).

filled with debris and litter after being abandoned. From the upper levels of its filling more than a hundred roman coins came to light. A few metres to the west of the lime kiln two Migration Period graves represented the period following the abandonment of the legionary fortress.

More than a dozen stone balls came to light from the eastern gate tower which can be identified as ammunition for a stone projector (Fig. 8), therefore, from the find material's point of view, they are related to the primary function of the fortress.⁶ The *caliga* nails found in their original position beside the gate can also be linked to the military (Fig. 9). Perhaps the bronze statuette representing a *murmillio* gladiator in fine detail, found in the trench flanking the *via praetoria* has also been among the personal belongings of a soldier.⁷

The 2019 excavations, beside providing new information on the topography of the legionary fortress regarding the *porta praetoria* and the *via praetoria*, were also significant from a methodological point of view as they allowed the verification of the results of geophysical surveys conducted in the area earlier, thus contributing greatly to the planning and fine-tuning of future measurements.⁸



Fig. 9. Iron nails from a *caliga* (Photo: D. Bartus).

6 On the terminology of antique catapults and other siege engines see CAMPBELL 2011, 689–692.

7 BARTUS 2019.

8 The research on the present paper was supported by the National Research, Development and Innovation Office (NKFI K 119520, NKFI K 134522), Excellence Programme for Higher Education Institutions (FIKP), and the Bolyai+ Postdoctoral Scholarship (ELTE Eötvös Loránd University).

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