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ex Instituto Archaeologico Universitatis de Rolando Eötvös nominatae



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Excavations in Brigetio in 2020

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Abstract

In 2020, excavations were carried out simultaneously at several locations both in the territory of the legionary fortress and the military town of Brigetio. As a result, new information was gained regarding the structure of the legionary fortress and a number of late Roman period graves were also identified. The most significant result of the campaign was the excavation of an almost intact cellar in the western zone of the canabae.

During summer 2020 the Department of Classical and Roman Archaeology of the ELTE Eötvös Loránd University in cooperation with the Komáromi Klapka György Museum conducted excavations at several sites in the territory of Brigetio, partially in the framework of a preventive excavation related to public utility construction as well as a planned excavation.

The campaigns concerned the territory of the military town, the legionary fortress as well as the late Roman period cemeteries situated around the fortress (Fig. 1).¹

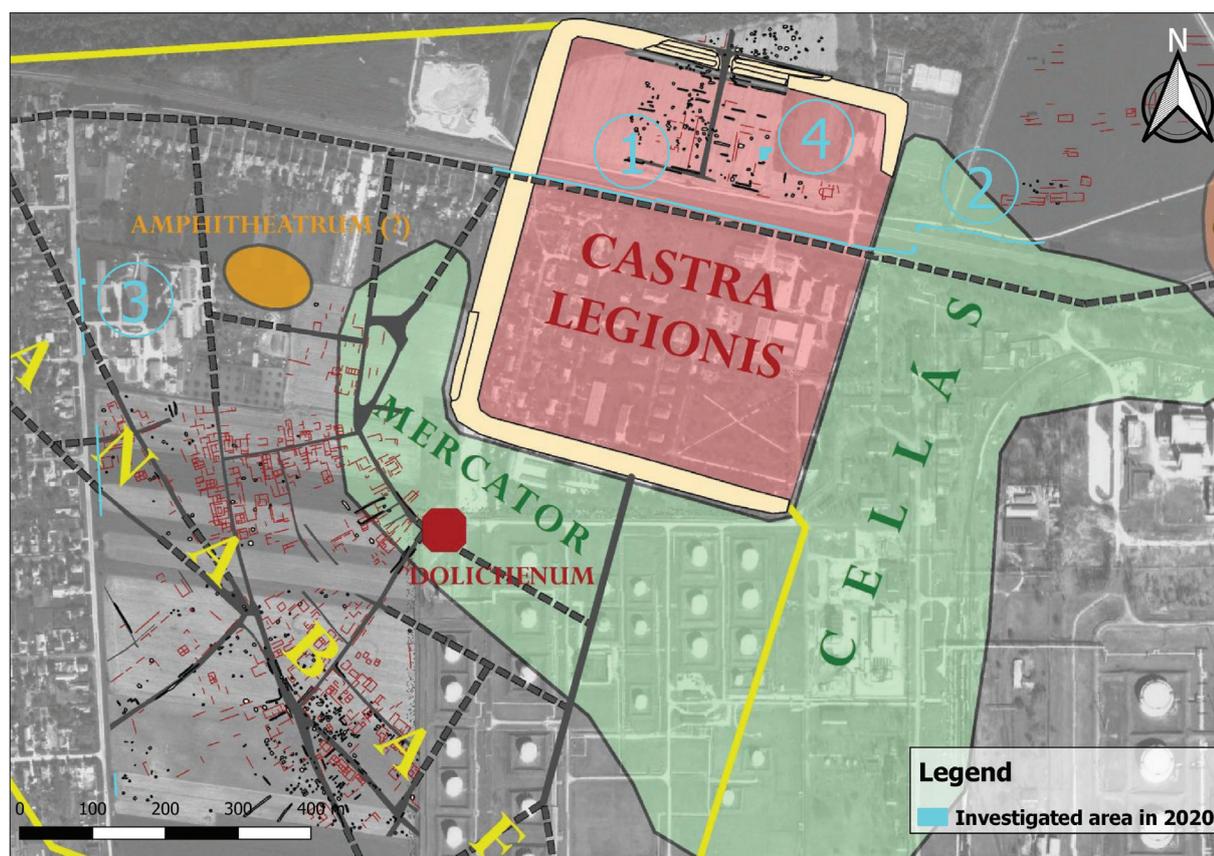


Fig. 1. Investigated area in 2020: Site no. 1 – legionary fortress, Site no. 2 – *canabae* east, Site no. 3 – *canabae* west, Site no. 4 – legionary fortress (planned excavation) (Map by L. Rupnik).

1. Preventive excavation

Site no. 1: Legionary fortress

The excavation was carried out in the central part of the legionary fortress, immediately north of Main Road no. 1. From the viewpoint of Roman period topography the excavation trenches were located within the *praetentura*, situated north of the *via principalis* crossing the fortress in an east-west direction (Figs 2–3). The only further archaeological observation in the close vicinity of the recent excavation was carried out in 1989 during the construction of the sewage system. At that time Sándor Petényi and Julianna Kisné Cseh identified building sections as well as massive walls.²

Within the trial trench of 80–100 cm width cultural layers could be observed from a depth of 1 m, while the subsoil could be detected in a depth of 200–230 cm. The upper 1 m of the soil as well as the upper layers were disturbed by cable and public utility trenches (for example, sewer

1 The research on the present paper was supported by the National Research, Development and Innovation Office (NKFI K 119520, NKFI K 134522), and the Bolyai+ Postdoctoral Scholarship (ELTE Eötvös Loránd University).

2 Archaeological database – Kuny Domokos Museum: 2013.6./1.

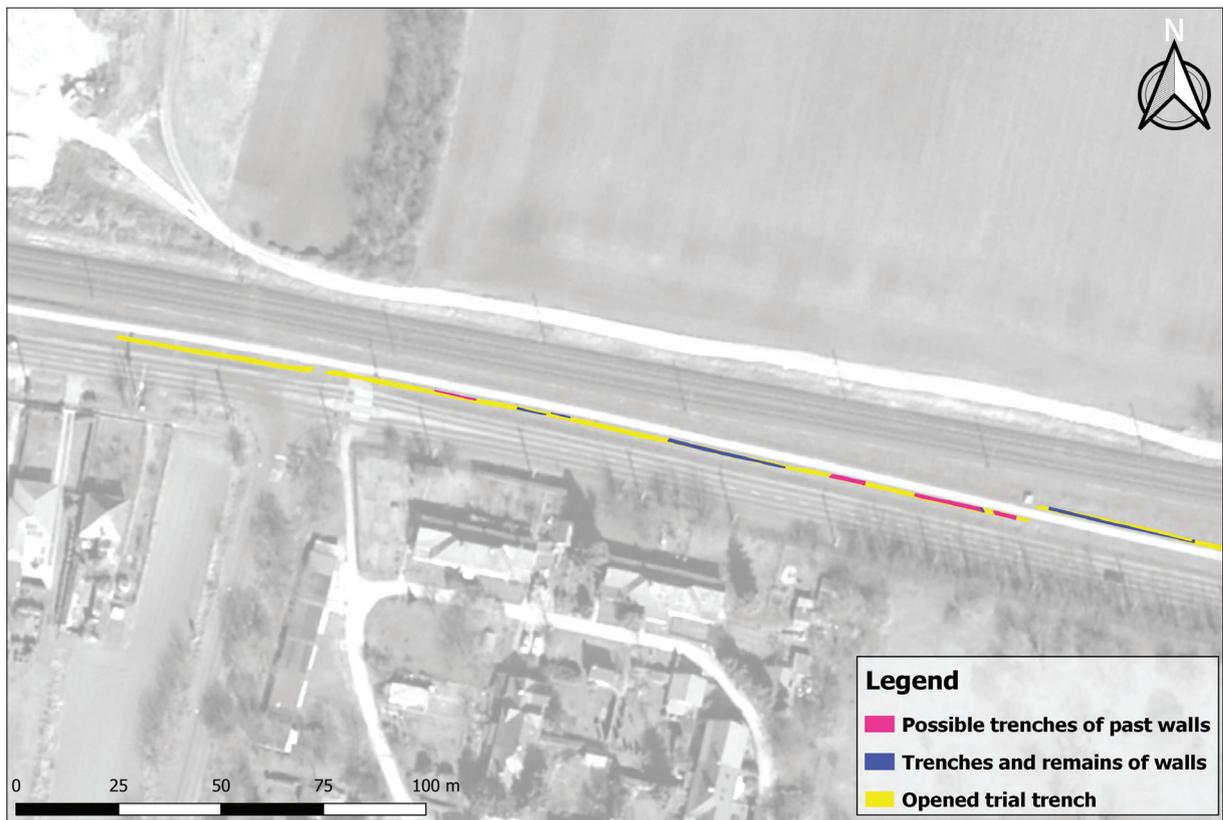


Fig. 2. The western part of Site no. 1.

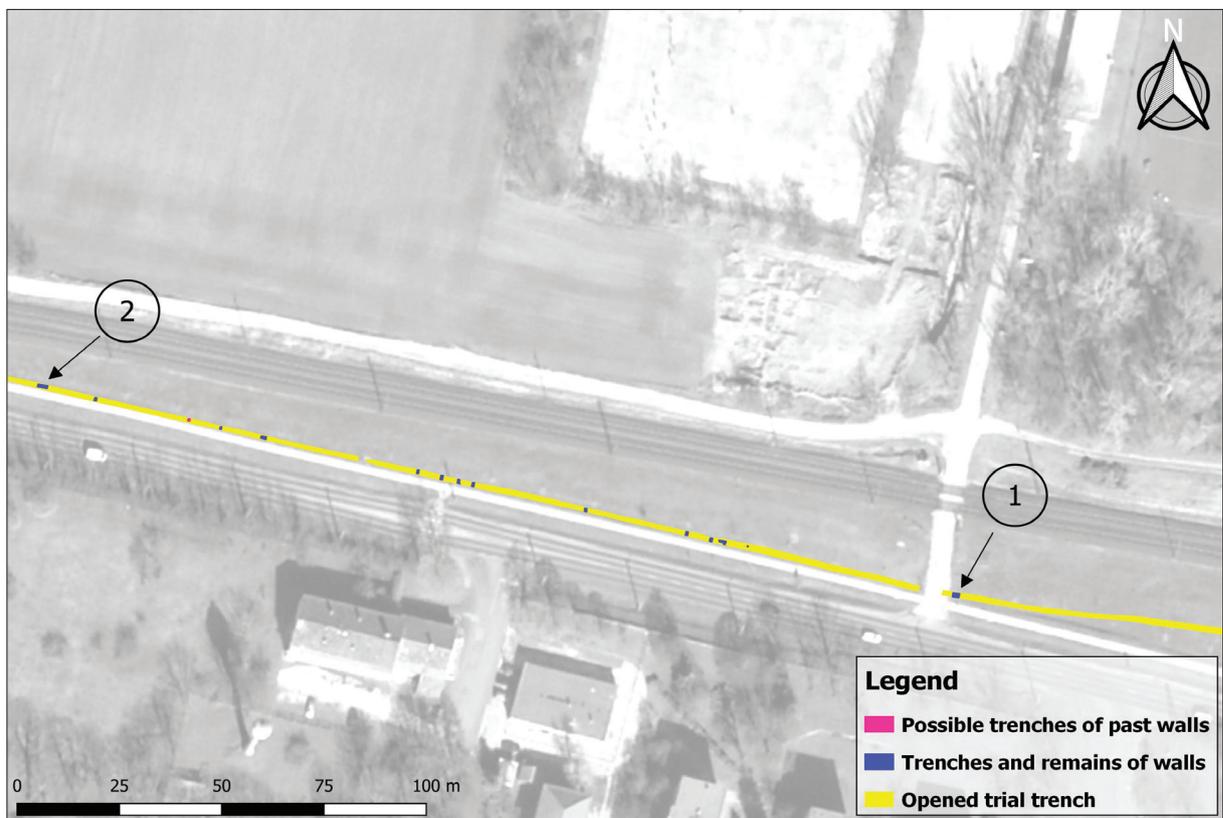


Fig. 3. The eastern part of Site no. 1 with the eastern wall of the legionary fortress (1) and the Late Roman wall (2).

construction in 1989) which could be detected in one half (occasionally in both halves) of the excavated area. As a result, at many places the cross-sections were incomprehensible as they only presented an image of the filling of these modern trenches. During the excavation 439 stratigraphic unit numbers were assigned, all of which units – except for the above-mentioned cable trench – can be dated to the Roman period. Pits, refilled foundation trenches, walls, floors, roads, debris and levelled layers were both identified in the track. At the excavation we could identify some important core elements of the legionary fortress, which thus contributed to the verification of the schematic plan drawn up earlier. One of the most important results was the localization of the eastern, demolished wall of the legionary fortress. The 170 cm wide refilled foundation trench was situated east of Stadion Road. We were able to localize two of the main roads of the fortress: layers belonging to the *via sagularis*, the main road framing the fortress from the inside, were recovered west of Stadion Road, along the eastern fortress wall, while layers belonging to the *via praetoria* – the main road crossing the fortress in a north-south direction – were also identified. Unfortunately, remains of both roads were preserved in a very poor condition: slightly stony, gravelly layers followed one another; no traces of a road surface covered with massive, carved flagstones similar to that found earlier in the northern part of the fortress could be observed in the section excavated in 2020.

The GPR surveys clearly show that the *via praetoria* was flanked on both sides by a row of pillars. Two of these pillars were excavated during the 2019 excavation campaign in the northern part of the fortress;³ also, in the course of the 2020 preventive excavation the remains of a similar pillar were discovered.

Immediately west of the *via praetoria* we discovered a 250 cm thick stone wall running north-east, which did not fit into the previously known topography of the fortress. We presume that this wall can be dated to the Late Roman period, which suggests that in the 4th century AD the western part of the fortress was abandoned while the eastern part was enclosed by a wall (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4. The Late Roman wall.

3 BARTUS et al. 2020.

In 1989, almost at the same location, Sándor Petényi excavated a similarly massive wall between the bike trail and Main Road no. 1, which thus could be the southern continuation of the wall discovered in 2020.⁴ We discovered several pits and refilled foundation trenches on both sides of the *via praetoria*. In the western part of the fortress several 30–40 m long and 50 cm wide refilled foundation trenches running parallelly in east-west direction could be observed. It seems that these archaeological features may have belonged to the row of *tabernae* located along the *via principalis* to the north.

During the excavation, a large amount of diverse find material came to light mainly from the upper layers, among which the fragment of a pillar base made of porous white limestone is worth mentioning. As for the ceramic material, beside the usual local and imported pottery a late Roman glazed vessel can be highlighted, bearing the traces of antique repair by the means of an iron band. Metals objects were mainly recovered from the uppermost, disturbed layers and consisted mostly of smaller items: brooches, keys, locks, casket fittings, belt buckles, etc.⁵ The most significant metal find of the 2020 campaign was a bronze chariot mount, depicting a young male bacchic figure draped in a nebris, protruding from a calyx (Fig. 5).

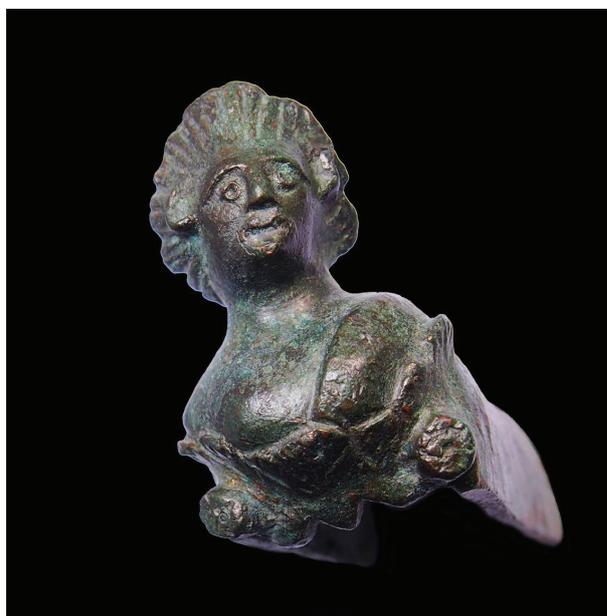


Fig. 5. Bronze chariot mount from Site no. 1.

A great number of coins were also recovered, most of which originate from the time of the Constantinian and Valentinian dynasty. Beside these, 3rd century antoniniani, 2nd century pieces as well as coins from the Flavian era were also found. Among the coins, a medalion of Gordian III minted in Byzantium is worth mentioning, which, with its agnostic reverse, fits well with similar coins found conspicuously frequently in Brigetio. The majority of these originate from Perynthus and are most probably related to the eastern campaigns of the emperor, as already pointed out earlier by L. Barkóczi and A. Kerényi.⁶ Lately, similar examples decorated with the portraits of Caracalla and Geta came to light in 2012 at the Szőny-Vásártér site located in the civilian town of Brigetio.⁷

Among the find material, a great number of sawed-off antlers hint of local bone working. As for the finished bone objects, triangular or rectangular weaving cards are worth mentioning

4 “The wall recovered on the previous day is 50 cm high. It is 120 cm thick on the northern side, on the southern side its thickness is 218 cm. Above the wall on the southern side a 20-30 cm thick gravelly layer can be observed, covered by a 40 cm thick layer of light brown homogeneous soil. The top of the wall was found in a relative depth of 170 cm from the level of the highway. On the northern lateral wall a 25 cm thick black mud layer is topped by a 30 cm thick gravelly brown mixed soil layer, spreading 20 cm above the line of the wall.” Archaeological database – Kuny Domokos Museum: 2013.6./1.

5 The majority of the metal finds were recovered by Attila Kiss and Tamás Gregus, metal detector specialists, to whom we would like to express our gratitude.

6 BARKÓCZI – KERÉNYI 1958.

7 JUHÁSZ 2018, 12.

as well as the fragment of a bone whistle which most probably belonged to a more complex musical instrument, similar to which are known from Brigetio and Aquincum.⁸

Site no. 2: *Canabae* (east)

The site is located beside a present-day agricultural dirt road, on the territory of the *canabae*, directly east of the legionary fortress and west of the Gerhát pottery workshop (Fig. 6). In the framework of the construction works the preventive excavation was carried out in a trench of 50–100 cm width and – depending on the relative depth in which the archaeological features were observed – max. 180 cm depth.

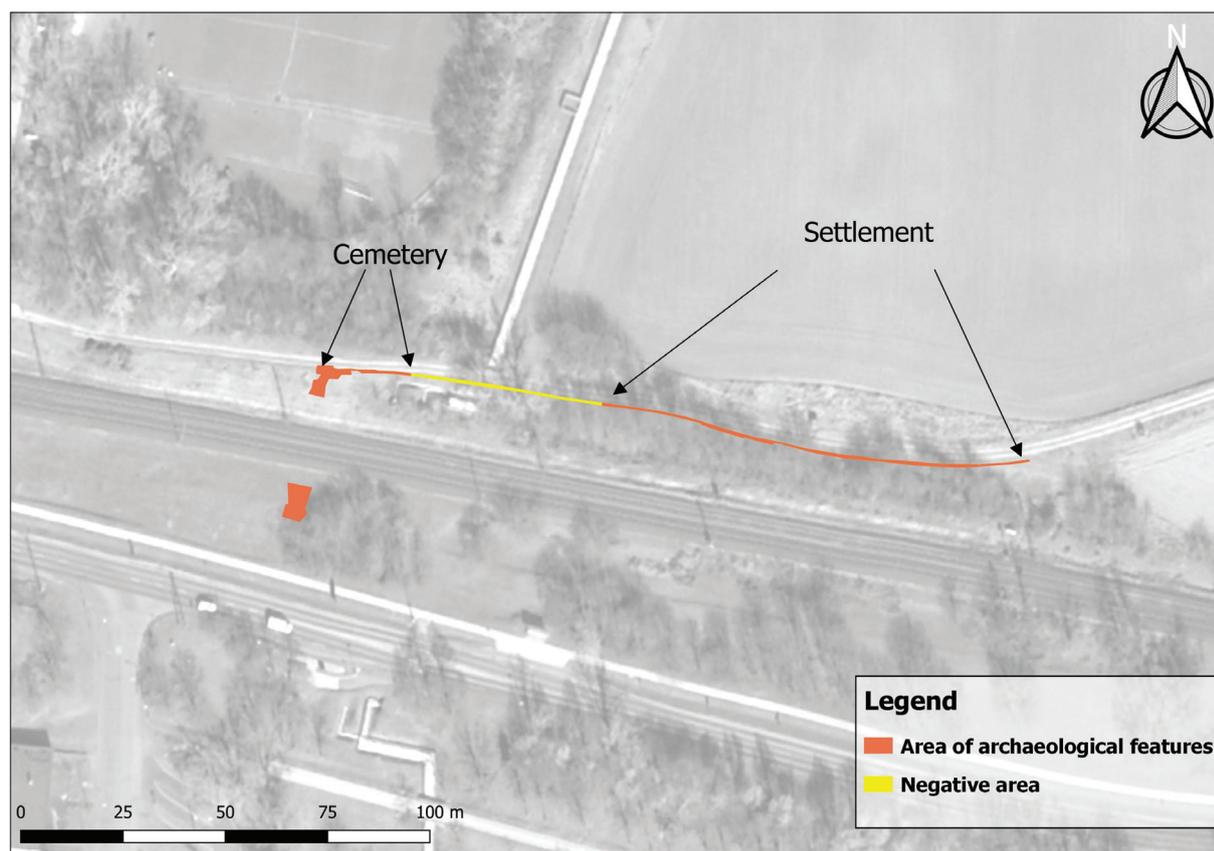


Fig. 6. Map of Site no. 2.

The area has been disturbed cca. 40–50 cm deep; we could observe modern stony, gravelly and debris layers while archeological features first emerged in a depth of 60 cm. Archaeological features concentrated in the eastern and western part of the trial trench, the central part appeared empty.

In the eastern part of the trench a north-south running wall foundation could be observed cca. 120 cm deep, from which bricks bearing stamps of the *legio I Adiutrix* were recovered. West of this feature a cremation grave without any grave goods was unearthed in a cca. 140–150 cm depth. West of the cremation grave remains of ruined buildings could be observed in a depth of cca. 100–150 cm. Further to the west, in the central part of the eastern trench section a two-period chamber with a terrazzo floor was discovered in a depth of 60–100 cm. The eastern

⁸ BÍRÓ 1994, Cat. 623–627; BÍRÓ et al. 2012, Cat. 324–326.

side of the chamber was bordered by a north-south running loam wall one Roman foot thick, decorated with a wall painting. A north-south running refilled foundation trench bordered the chamber from the west. Several single or multiple layer beaten clay floors could be observed west of the above-mentioned chamber in a depth of 80–100 cm, bordered by north-south running refilled foundation trenches. Further west a 70–80 cm wide refilled foundation trench was discovered cca. 100–120 cm deep, below which a wall foundation could also be observed. Some 60 cm west of the refilled foundation trench a 150 cm wide north-south running canal with built walls and smoothed bottom was found in a depth of 150 cm. Both the eastern and the western wall of the canal was 40 cm thick. No further built features were found west of the canal; altogether five oval pits and a southwest-northeast running trench were documented in this section of the trial trench.

The excavated archaeological material including domestic and imported pottery, a few stamped bricks and bronze objects as well as the only bronze coin recovered here could be unanimously dated to the Roman period.

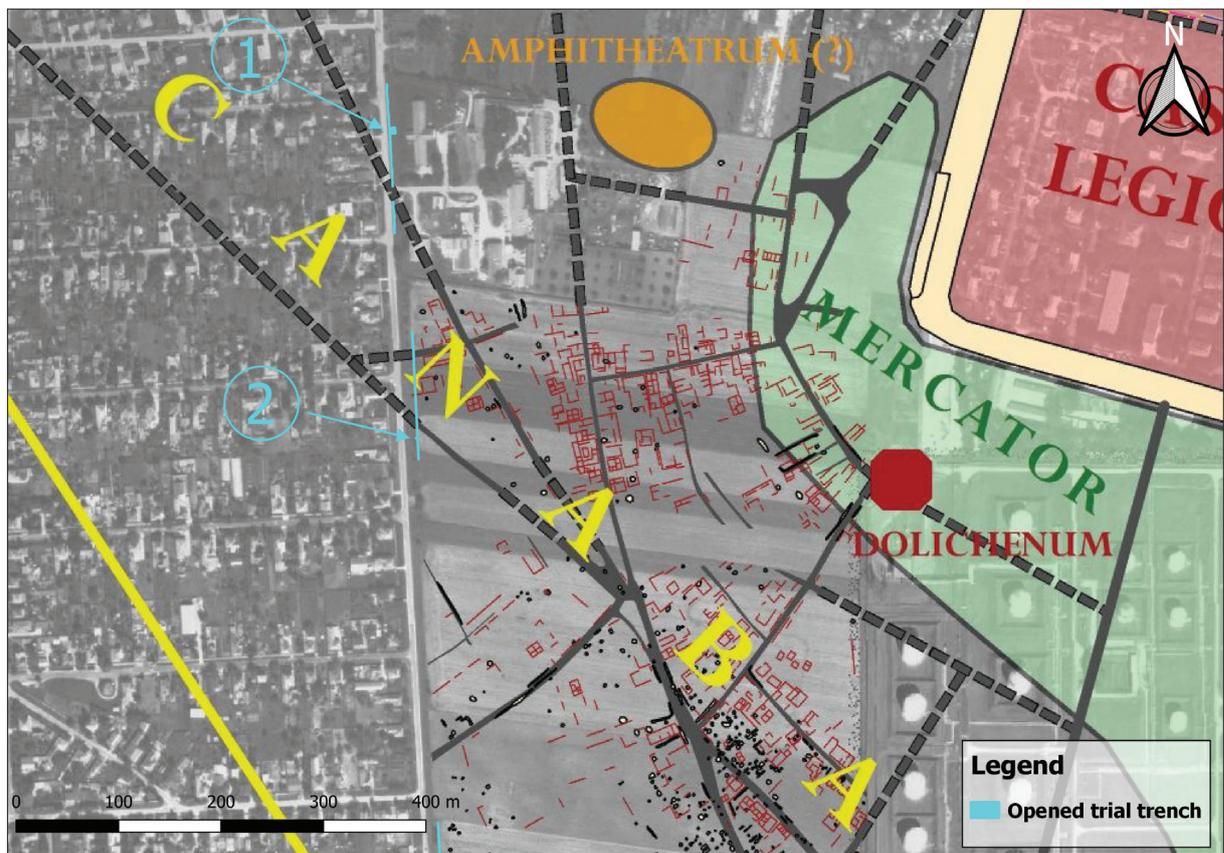


Fig. 7. Map of Site no. 3.

Site no. 3: *Canabae* (west)

The site is located along the eastern side of Szabadság Street, in the part of the one-time *canabae* situated west of the legionary fortress (Fig. 7). In the area, a hard, gravelly, mortary walking surface could be documented at several spots. As the excavation was conducted in a narrow trench, it cannot be determined with certainty if these walking surface fragments actually comprised a road surface. From those Roman period roads which have been identified in

the course of earlier non-destructive archaeological surveys,⁹ some sections of the gravel road arriving from southeast could be observed; the buildings indentified in the northern part of the excavated area were aligned with this road. In the case of the walking surfaces/road surfaces the traces of reparation could be detected: some shallow depressions, smaller pits were filled with debris up to the road level.

The remains of three Roman period canals were discovered in the excavated area, all of which were running northwest-southeast. Two canals were situated on top of each other while the third was located somewhat to the south. Based on the excavated section it seems that the southern wall of the earlier canal was reused as the bottom of the new canal.

In the past few years three Roman period cellars have been unearthed at the Szőny-Vásártér site, in the territory of the civilian town of Brigetio.¹⁰ In addition to these, in 2020 we could excavate a further cellar, this time in the territory of the a *canabae*. Similarly to its counterparts at the Szőny-Vásártér site, this structure has also been preserved in a very good condition (*Fig. 8*).

The floor area of the cellar found in the territory of the *canabae* was cca. 16 m², thus it was similar in size to the third cellar excavated at the Vásártér site.¹¹ The floor plan of the building was approximately square and similarly to the cellars at the



Fig. 8. Aerial photo of the cellar.



Fig. 9. Beam cavities in the cellar.

⁹ BORHY et al. 2017, 126. 1. ábra.

¹⁰ BARTUS – BORHY 2016, 101.

¹¹ BARTUS et al. 2017, 84.



Fig. 10. The door of the cellar.

charred wooden boards observed on the terrazzo floor along the northern wall could be interpreted as remnants of this shelf. Along the eastern wall of the cellar the ledge was wider, and there were no beam cavities along this section; here the ledge itself could have been used as a shelf. Along the southern wall the ledge became gradually narrower until it reached the western wall. This phenomenon could be most probably explained with the location of the entrance, which was situated in the corner enclosed by the southern and western walls. In the case of the Szabadság Street cellar, the structure of the entrance differs from that of the other cellars excavated at the Szöny-Vásártér site. As for the Vásártér cellars, a wooden ladder or wooden stairs led down to the cellar¹², while the cellar in Szabadság Street possessed a door (Fig. 10). This is confirmed by the fact that during the removal of the cellar's filling, a lock and its key have been found in front of the doorway located at the southern part of the western wall. However, as the excavation did not concern the area west of the cellar, we do not have information about how exactly one could reach this door, located on the cellar's floor level.

No significant remains of the wooden construction covering the cellar have been preserved, we could merely document some charred wood remains in a few patches on the cellar floor. However, one can guess at the roof structure based on the beam cavities found in the walls of the cellar as well as the impressions of beams preserved in the mortar on top of the wall. The cavity in the western wall of the cellar does not run parallel with the floor but opens diagonally

Vásártér site it possessed plastered walls and a terrazzo floor. However, its shelving was of a different design. The same as in the cellar no. 1 at the Vásártér site, a square cavity could be observed on the western wall of the cellar, which was most probably meant for the beam holding the shelf that ran along almost the whole width of the wall (Fig. 9). The shelf ended at the northern wall, where it rested on a plastered ledge protruding from the wall. This ledge ran all along the northern, eastern and southern walls of the cellar. Its width varied, it was narrower along the northern wall while on its western side similar beam cavities could be observed than the cavity on the western wall. This suggests that at the narrower sections wider shelves made of wood were placed on top of the ledge and the beams. Perhaps the burnt wooden remains found on the ledge as well as the traces of

12 BARTUS – BORHY 2016, 102–103.

upwards. It can be aligned with one of the break-ins (formed to support beams) which were preserved on top of the wall on the eastern side. At this point, a wooden lath inside the diagonal cavity supported one of the beams. On top of the eastern wall, break-ins for beams could be observed in two cases; the above-mentioned supporting structure was aligned opposite the northern break-in while it is unclear how the southern beam was fixed to the eastern wall. Aligned with both break-ins, a vertical cavity for a wooden lath ment to support a beam could be observed in the ledge running along the eastern wall of the cellar. Impressions of covering laths laid at right angles to the beams were preserved at the western end of the northern wall.



Fig. 11. Windows pierced into the southern wall of the cellar.



Fig. 12. Cross-section of the construction debris in the cellar.

Based on all the above-mentioned facts, the roof structure of the Szabadság Street cellar could have been similar to that of cellar no. 2 at the Vásártér site.¹³ The illumination of the cellar was provided through two narrow, loophole-like openings, pierced into the southern wall (*Fig. 11*).

The filling of the cellar mainly consisted of construction debris (*Fig. 12*), the find material is dominated by fresco and stucco fragments. The cellar has been emptied before it collapsed; on the floor a hard, charred block of mortar could be observed which perhaps belonged to the plastering of the roof structure.¹⁴ Above it a debris layer consisting of teguale could be observed which was topped by a collapsed loam wall. This latter, cca. 1 m thick structure has been preserved almost in the full extent of the cellar, the outlines of the single loam bricks to be distinguished quite well. These two debris layers most probably belonged to a building situated right next to the cellar to the south. The loam wall was plastered on both sides. However, this building which collapsed into the cellar did not totally fill it in east-west direction, as the filling of the cellar in the area between the western 'window' and the doorway was somewhat different (*Fig. 13*). This part of the cellar could have been used as a waste pit after the neighbouring loam wall has collapsed. The filling in this part of the cellar contained almost all of the ceramic finds known from the building altogether. The various debris layers atop the collapsed loam wall cannot be assigned to another specific building, however, they contained a great number of red fresco and stucco fragments and also yielded the most significant find of the excavation, a fragment of a wall painting depicting a woman's portrait (*Fig. 14*). The stuccoes and frescoes no doubt belonged to an ornate building however it cannot be stated if this building once stood in the close vicinity of the cellar.



Fig. 13. Pottery fragments near the door of the cellar.

13 BARTUS et al. 2017, 84.

14 See cellar no. 2: BARTUS et al. 2017, 84.



Fig. 14. Fragment of a wall painting depicting a woman's portrait.

Late Roman period graves

During the 2020 excavation campaign 15 graves were excavated in the eastern vicinity of the legionary fortress, on the northern side of Main Road no. 1. These graves belong to the so-called Cellás cemetery flanking the fortress.¹⁵ Already in 1989 Sándor Petényi excavated some graves on the northern side of Main Road no. 1.¹⁶ The part of the cemetery excavated in 2020 is situated east of the legionary fortress and north of the *limes* road, in the north-eastern foreground of the *porta principalis dextra*. 12 graves were found north of the Almásfüzitő-Szöny railway track while another 3 graves were located to the south, in the zone between the railway track and Main Road no. 1.

The majority of the graves did not have any built structure, only a single brick grave could be identified where four brimmed roof tiles were used to cover up the grave. Most of the graves were oriented west-east (rarely southwest-northeast), with an exception of a few burials oriented north-south. The graves were cut into a brown fill layer, which itself can also be dated to the Roman period based on the archaeological material it contained. Some of the burials were very close to the surface in the humus layer (or immediately below it), while a few graves laid in a considerable depth (sometimes even 1.5 m). Several superpositions could be observed among the graves which suggests that the cemetery has been used for a longer period (Fig. 15).

More than one grave was heavily disturbed. Only two burials included any grave goods: a small-sized grey cup was found in Grave SE106 while in Grave SE142 there was a multiple bronze wire bracelet on the left arm of the skeleton. Grave SE208 is worth mentioning because of the horse skeleton found below (and partially next to) the deceased person.



Fig. 15. Late Roman graves in superposition (Site no. 3).

Archaeological features became rarer in the part of the *canabae* lying west of the legionary fortress, in the southern section of Szabadság Street (Site no. 3). Beside pits and wall remains a 3rd–4th century AD grave also came to light, oriented east-west. The seven iron nails found on both sides of the grave in line with the deceased person's head, pelvis and feet suggest a coffin. The legs were drawn up on the right side, the arms were bent over the pelvis. Grave goods consisted of a glass balsamarium, a larger glass bottle with spherical body and a glass

15 Regarding the Cellás cemetery see BARKÓCZI 1951, 9–10. Short summary on the cemeteries of Brigetio: OLASZ 2020, 8–13.

16 SZÁMADÓ 1992, 159.

cup with vertical sides, situated next to the feet along with a bronze bulla. The location of the grave is curious as it came to light outside the territory of the already known late Roman cemeteries of Brigetio.¹⁷ This fact suggests that within the *canabae* late Roman graves were spread over a larger territory than anticipated.

2. Planned excavation in the legionary fortress

In 2020, the planned excavation at the Szőny, Stadion Road site was carried out parallelly with the preventive excavation related to the public utility construction. The area to be excavated was assigned based on the evaluated results of earlier geophysical surveys; it was located in the northeastern section of the military hospital (*valetudinarium*), in the territory of the *praetentura*, east of the *via praetoria*. Military hospitals usually consisted of a double row of small quadractic or rectangular rooms clustered around a central courtyard. During the geophysical survey the rooms of the hospital could be identified at several spots and the outlines of a smaller apsidal building could be observed next to the hospital's eastern row of rooms in a depth of 1.8–2.2 m. Initially we suspected the apsidal building to be late Roman, because its west-east orientation coincided with that of the apsidal building excavated during the 2017–2018 campaign.¹⁸ The main reason behind the excavation of this new apsidal building was to gain information on its chronology as well as function.

The excavation, the area of which reached 175 m², focused on the northern and southern rows of rooms, where it seemed that there were two smaller apses at the northwestern and southwestern end, thus the building could have had three apses. However, our assumption based on the GPR image could not be verified during the excavation. During the removal of the humus layer the stone doorsill of one of the northern rooms came to light (Fig. 16). Later it turned out that the doorsill actually laid *in situ* as we could also document the wall section to which it has been attached.



Fig. 16. Stone doorsill at Site no. 4.

All of the walls belonging to the room with the doorsill could be identified, although in the case of most of them we could only find refilled foundation trenches. No floor level could be identified, however not far from the doorsill a round *hypocaustum* brick came to light without context. The wall flanking the room from the south continued towards west, however there it could only be documented – beside a truncated wall as well as some foundation remains with stones and tegulae – in the form of a refilled foundation trench. Similar foundations including stones and tegulae were unearthed at several spots in the excavated area, suggesting that all these walls can be dated to the same period.

17 BARKÓCZI 1961, 108; SZÁMADÓ 2010, 151; DELBÓ 2017, 31.

18 BARTUS et al. 2018.

Beside the above-mentioned wall remains we found several northwest and southeast running refilled foundation trenches in the southwestern part of the excavated area which could not be unequivocally assigned to any actual period. The oldest archaeological feature of the excavation was a round furnace, the red, burnt walls and bottom of which were unearthed west of the above-mentioned room, below a refilled foundation (Fig. 17).



Fig. 17. The furnace unearthed at Site no. 4.

Several recent features have disturbed the excavated area. The continuation of the northwest-southeast running modern age trench found during the 2019 excavation campaign at the *porta praetoria* could also be identified here.¹⁹ We also found a parallel as well as a perpendicular trench which made the interpretation of the excavated area considerably more difficult.

Due to the short duration of the excavation campaign several questions related to the periodisation were left unanswered. In order to understand the relation between the *valetudinarium* and the apsidal building a further, larger scale excavation is required. As for the walls and refilled foundation trenches found during the 2020 campaign it cannot be decided with certainty which building they originally belonged to.

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¹⁹ BARTUS et al. 2020.

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