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Short report on the excavations in the legionary fortress of Brigetio (2017–2018)

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Abstract

After the aerial archaeological surveys of the preceding years, a new excavation project has been started in 2017 in the northern part of the legionary fortress of Brigetio. The main result of the seasons of 2017 and 2018 were the unearthing of a large Late Roman apsidal building, which can be most probably connected to the death of Valentinian I.

The legionary fortress of Brigetio is the least researched with modern methods of the three main topographical parts of Brigetio (civil town – *canabae* – *castra legionis*, Fig. 1). Apart from some small scale excavations in the middle of the 20th century, modern archaeological research has only been started in 2015, when we found the courtyard of the *principia* with well-identifiable stratigraphy and building periods at the site Szőny-Kiskertek.¹ The most important and unique find of this excavation was the bronze tablet containing the law of Philip-pus Arabs, which was found near the *principia*.²

Although the *retentura* of the legionary fortress is almost entirely covered by modern build-ings, the *praetentura* is under agricultural use and can be researched by remote sensing meth-ods. The northern wall and gate, the *via praetoria*, several other roads and buildings can be identifiable on aerial photos made in the last decades. Obviously the most interesting of all the cropmarks is the well recognisable trace of a large, apsidal building near the *porta principalis dextra* (Fig. 2–3).

In summer 2017 and 2018, a planned excavation was carried out to clarify the chronology and function of the apsidal building and to set out whether it was part of the legionary fortress or belonged to a period after the abandonment of the Roman settlement.³

1 BARTUS et al. 2016.

2 BORHY et al. 2015a; BORHY et al. 2015b.

3 The excavation was conducted by the Department of Classical and Roman Archaeology, Faculty of Human-ities, Eötvös Loránd University and the Klapka György Museum of Komárom under the overall direction of Dávid Bartus (Eötvös Loránd University), László Borhy (Eötvös Loránd University) and Emese Számadó

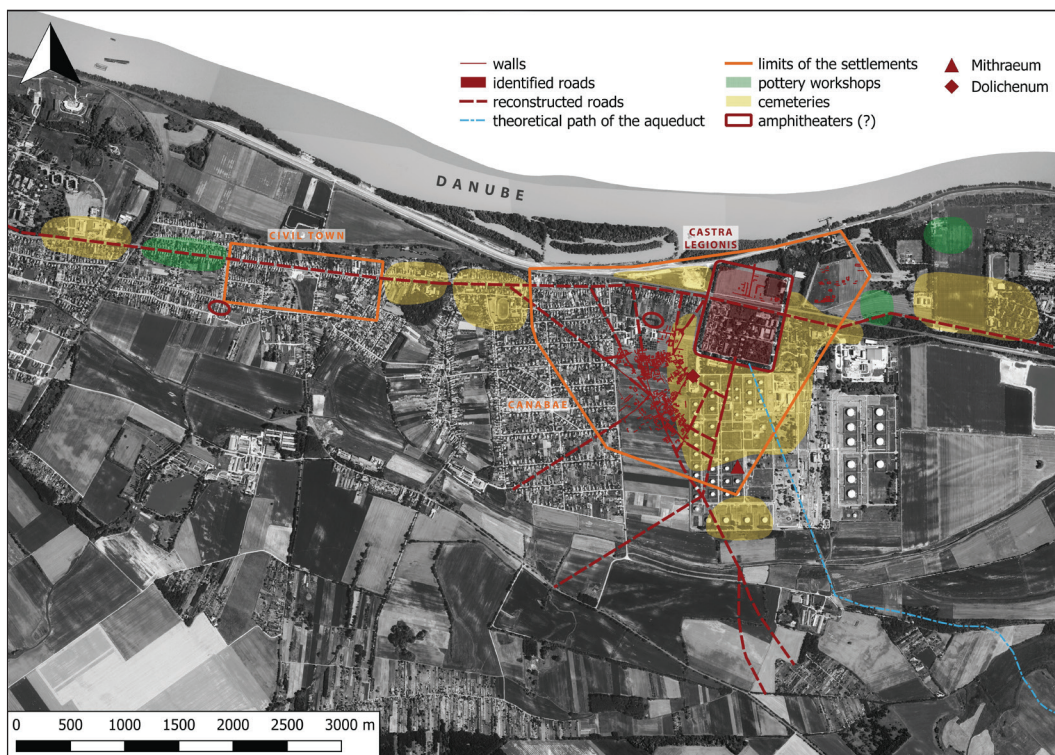


Fig. 1. Map of Brigetio (by L. Rupnik).

An excavation area of almost 1000 m² was cleared after the removal of the topsoil, and as it turned out on the first day of the fieldwork, the remaining walls of the apsidal building were situated only about 30–40 centimetres below the soil surface, i. e. the level of current agricultural works. That resulted rather in broken ploughshares than destroyed walls, indicating that the walls were really massively built, as it was confirmed by the excavation, with a width of 1 metre and a foundation depth of 2 metres in places. Unlike most parts of Brigetio, the whole area of the apsidal building, together with the walls of earlier periods, have survived the quarrying activities of the 19th and 20th centuries for as yet unknown reasons, which provides ideal circumstances for the research of the stratigraphy, chronology and building periods of the legionary fortress of Brigetio.

According to the results of the first two excavation seasons, the area of the apsidal building is approximately 600 m², consisting of an apse on the western side, two large halls, and a number of smaller rooms (Fig. 4). The floor level of the building was very close to the level of the current agricultural works, therefore most of the floors and the architectural decora-

(Klapka György Museum). Vice-director of the fieldworks was Szilvia Johácz (Eötvös Loránd University). Participants were Anita Benes, Linda Dobosi, Barbara Hajdu, László Rupnik, Nikoletta Sey, Bence Simon, Eszter Süvegh and Melinda Szabó (archaeologists, Eötvös Loránd University), Gabriella Delbó (archaeologist, Klapka György Museum) and László Almády, Réka Ádám, Ferenc Barna, Regina Csordás, Piroska Derzsi, Boldizsár Ekker, Ákos Ekrik, Bianka Fenyvesi, András Füstös, Tamás Gál, Rebeka Gergác, Dóra Havasi, Fruzsina Hege, Ádám Horváth, Bianka Horváth, Adrián Horváth-Lukics, Dániel Hümpfner, Regina Kapitány, Zsanett Kartali, Zsófia Zsuzsanna Kelemen, Dalma Kerekes, Boglárka Teodóra Kertész, Zoltán Kiss, Dalma Kollerits, Flóra Klinga, Dóra Tekla Králik, László Krén, Ágota Madai, Attila Marsi, Alexandra Mező, Ákos Müller, Anna Nagy, Rita Olasz, Zsolt Tamás Papp, Bence Párkányi, Daniella Pokker, Dániel Polyák, Alexandra Szabó, Márton Szabó, Róbert Szederkényi, Iringó Tatár, Adél Ternovácz, Benedek Tóth, Dorottya Török, Kira Ujj, Dávid Váczi, Gergő Vincze. The excavation was supported by the National Research, Development and Innovation Office (NKFI 119520) and MTA-ELTE Research Group for Interdisciplinary Archaeology.

tions of the building are missing now, together with the finds which could have been connected with the building. Although we know almost exclusively the walls of the building, it can be dated by a very fortunate find. A brick stamp of Terentius dux have been found in the last days of our excavation in August 2018, in a pit under one of the walls of the apsidal building, which gives a *terminus a quo* for the building. Additional brick stamps of Terentius dux and Frigeridus dux was found in the building in 2017, which indicate that it was built most likely by Frigeridus dux in the first years of the 370s under the reign of Valentinian I.



Fig. 2. Traces of the apsidal building on aerial photo (Photo: D. Bartus).



Fig. 3. Cropmarks indicating the apsidal building on aerial photos at different growing periods (Photos: L. Rupnik).



Fig. 4. Orthophoto of the excavation season of 2017 (Photo and map: D. Bartus – L. Rupnik).

Valentinian I was died in 17 November 375 somewhere in the legionary fortress of Brigetio, when he gave an audience to the Quadi and suffered a stroke, as told by Ammianus Marcellinus, but the exact location of that was unknown until now. Although we have no direct evidence, the aula-like plan, the measures, and the datation of the building indicate that it was the most suitable place in the legionary fortress for an imperial audience, and Valentinian I was most likely died here.

As it has been mentioned before, several earlier periods were unearthed under the apsidal building with walls, floors and even wall-paintings in very good condition. The absolute chronology and the function of these buildings are still unclear in some points, but general observations can be made of these periods, which belong obviously to the legionary fortress.

The earliest period was presented in the form of a black ash layer, which can be found in nearly the whole area of the excavated surface. It can be connected with the foundation of the fortress at the turn of the first and second centuries AD, and the massive ash layer indicates that presumably the first legionary fortress had – at least partly – timber structures. The datation of the destruction of these buildings is uncertain by now, but the Marcomannic wars can be a plausible option, which is in accordance with the massively burnt courtyard of the *principia*, excavated in 2015 at the site Szöny-Kiskertek.⁴

4 BARTUS et al. 2016, 70–71.

The next period is the main stone period of the legionary fortress, a large building with an area of at least 700 m², consisting more than 30 rooms. The function of the building is not clearly identified yet, but it seems that the building was divided into symmetrically planned units of five rooms, one of them being a courtyard. Some of the rooms have terrazzo-floors in almost perfect condition (Fig. 5), but without hypocaust system. In one of them, wall-paintings with geometrical and floral decorations was found in situ (Fig. 6). A very important find came to light from this period: the rim of a *mortarium* with the cursive Latin inscription VLPSAB (Fig. 7), which refers to the owner of the pot, most likely a soldier named Ulpus Sabinus. A fragment of a bone stylus was also found near the inscribed potsherd. What makes these two finds really interesting is an altar of Silvanus from Aquincum, dedicated by a certain Marcus Ulpus Sabinus, who acted as a *commentariens* (kind of a scribe) of the *legio I adiutrix* in Brigetio.⁵ We do not know whether the two objects belonged to the same person or not, but it is a plausible hypothesis that we found the room of Marcus Ulpus Sabinus, the *commentariens* of the legion.



Fig. 5. Terrazzo floor and entrance in one of the rooms (Photo: D. Bartus).



Fig. 6. Wall-painting in situ with geometric and floral decoration (Photo: D. Bartus).

5 On the inscriptions mentioning Ulpus Sabinus in Pannonia, see Póczy 1959.

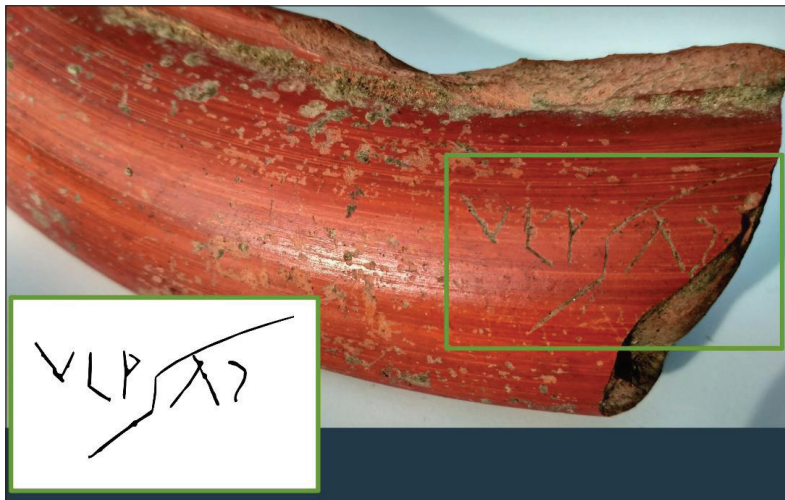


Fig. 7. Fragment of a *mortarium* with the inscription VLPSAB (Photo: D. Bartus).

The next two periods can be dated to the first half of the 4th century AD, when Romans started to abandon the military town and moved into the well-defendable legionary fortress, using the former *canabae* as a cemetery. A crossbow brooch from a grave from the territory of the military town, datable to the first decades of the 4th century AD marks the beginning of this process, which probably involved the demolition of some earlier military buildings for constructing residential quarters inside the legionary fortress. However, these buildings were short-lived, since, as it has been mentioned before, in the first years of the 370s, the large apsidal building was built in the same place. But this one did not last long either. Maybe as early as shortly after the death of Valentinian I, or at the beginning of the 5th century at the latest, some rooms of the apsidal building were abandoned, demolished, and a rudimentary hypocaust system was installed in one of the large halls of the building, which indicates that the original representative function of the large apsidal building was probably changed to purely residential.



Fig. 8. Aerial photo of the sewer (Photo: D. Bartus).

Apart from the buildings some other features were unearthed during the excavations. Two wells were found, both are preceding the apsidal building, and two lime-pits, which can be connected to the construction of the apsidal building. A very important data concerning the topography of the legionary fortress is the discovery of a long north-south sewer which goes along the *via sagularis* of the eastern wall (Fig. 8).

The excavations will continue at the site focusing mainly on the periods preceding the apsidal building. In the following years, a large archaeological park will be established in the whole territory of the *praetentura* of the legionary fortress, and the apsidal building and its preceding periods will be one of the main highlights.

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