



JOURNAL OF ANCIENT HISTORY AND ARCHAEOLOGY

Institute of Archeology and Art History of
Romanian Academy Cluj-Napoca
Technical University Of Cluj-Napoca



JAHA
JOURNAL OF ANCIENT HISTORY
AND ARCHAEOLOGY

Journal of Ancient History and Archaeology

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.14795/j.v8i4>

ISSN 2360 266x

ISSN-L 2360 266x



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JOURNALS

No. 8.4 /2021

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Design & layout:
Petru Ureche

Studies

ANCIENT HISTORY

‘I HAD A DREAM...’ - THE DEDICATION OF AN *EQUES* OF THE *ALA I DARDANORUM* IN THE SURROUNDINGS OF *TROESMIS* AND THE PROBLEM OF RURAL SETTLEMENTS IN NORTHERN MOESIA INFERIOR

Cristina-Georgeta
ALEXANDRESCU

„Vasile Pârvan” Institute of Archaeology, Bucharest
cgetalexandrescu@gmail.com

Abstract: Within the framework of multidisciplinary investigations, under the ongoing Troesmis-project, the basic topographic features of the Roman, Late Roman and Byzantine settlement of Troesmis (Turcoaia, Tulcea County, RO) were clarified. The decisive result was the localisation of the approximately 16 ha legionary camp and the approximately 30-35 ha civilian settlement around it. It was possible not only to postulate the boundaries of the ancient settlement, but also to register for the first time numerous new sites in the surroundings. The central settlement of Troesmis is embedded in a dense network of roads and rural settlement sites of different types. Additionally, for older accidental finds of stone monuments (inscriptions, sculpture etc.) it was possible to recover, at least at hypothetical level, the initial context of display and to correlate the archaeological data with the epigraphical evidence. This paper presents the case of the votive altar ISM V 218, dedicated, following a dream, to the divine power of Liber Pater by M. Antistius Caecina, eques of *ala I Dardanorum Antoniniana*. Its provenance also provides the opportunity for short comments on the Roman rural estates and settlements in the Northern Moesia Inferior.

Keywords: *Liber Pater*, *ala I Dardanorum*, *Antistii*, *Troesmis*, *Roman rural settlements*.

DOI: 10.14795/j.v8i4.689

ISSN 2360 – 266X

ISSN–L 2360 – 266X

1. INTRODUCTION

Little is known about the provenance and initial display of the majority of inscriptions from Northern Moesia Inferior. Therefore, the rare examples of monuments that have not been reused as building material in later periods are of great importance. In the case of *Troesmis* (Turcoaia, Tulcea County), the fortress of *legio V Macedonica* and later *municipium*, the common situation is that the epigraphic evidence was uncovered within the two Late Roman/Byzantine fortifications still dominating the landscape (Fig. 1). Besides the recently elucidated case of the stela of Eutyclus, *verna* of the *eques Romanus Terentius Iunior*¹, there are also a few other examples in the

¹ ALEXANDRESCU 2021.



Fig. 1. The Northern Moesia Inferior in Roman times (after ALEXANDRESCU/GUGL 2014, fig. 1).

surroundings of Troesmis, which seem to have been found in or near their initial place of display².

Under the ongoing Troesmis-project carried out by an international team since 2010, non-invasive prospections enabled the localization of the legionary fortress (of about 16 ha) and its adjacent infrastructure (water supply, marching camps etc.), settlements and necropolis areas³. Both survey and geomagnetic prospections were also carried out in the surroundings of the ancient centre⁴. While processing the

data and corroborating the results with the documentation on the finds of inscriptions and other stone monuments, it was clear that a certain votive altar⁵ was reportedly found⁶ nearby a rural settlement nucleus (called “Turcoaia 1”) localized during the survey and prospections works on the southwest slope of the Priopcea Hill (Fig. 2). The site lies north of the main Măcin-Cerna road, which was one of the main communication axes in Antiquity as well.

Two other topics, significant yet little approached by previous research, are of interest to the present discussion:

² For a few examples, see ALEXANDRESCU 2019. – The systematic holistic documentation of the Roman stone monuments from the northern part of the province is the object of the present project (PN-III-P4-ID-PCE-2020-1031).

³ For the detailed reports of the project, see ALEXANDRESCU/GUGL/KAINRATH 2016.

⁴ The results are summarised in ALEXANDRESCU/GUGL/KAINRATH/GRABHERR (forthcoming) and will be included in the second volume of the Troesmis monographic series.

⁵ ISM V 218; COATU 1930 (on the situation of the monument after its finding). – The monument is now hosted by Complexul Muzeal Național Moldova Iași, Muzeul de Istorie a Moldovei, inv. no 1264.

⁶ “at the foot of the Priopcea Hill, near the road Cerna - Măcin” – NICORESCU 1915; COATU 1930.

⁷ ALEXANDRESCU/GUGL/KAINRATH/GRABHERR (forthcoming).

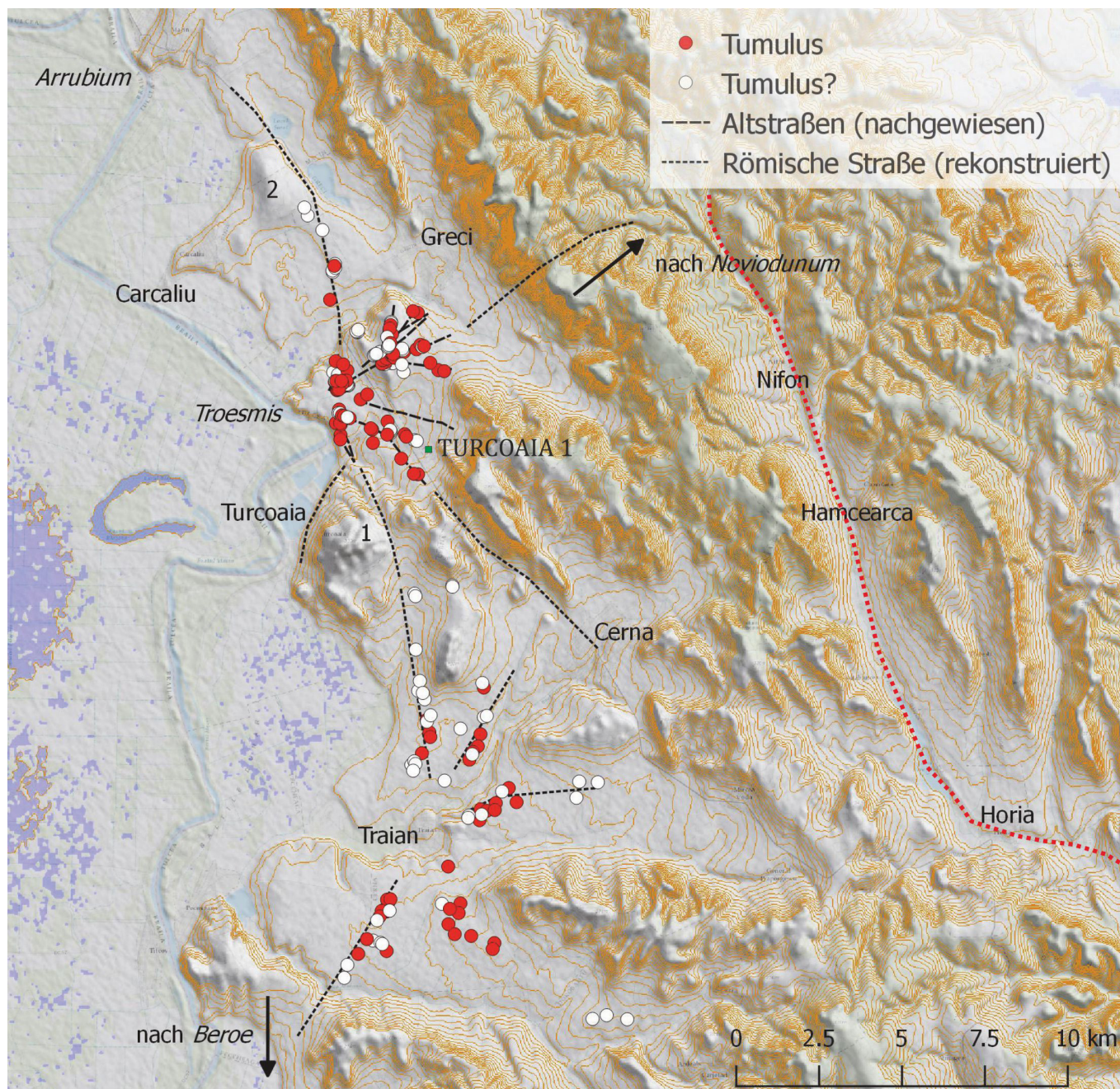


Fig. 2. The hinterland of Troesmis, with the spot of Turcoaia 1 site (after ALEXANDRESCU/GUGL/KAINRATH (eds.) 2016, Fig. 178).

the evidence on the 2nd-3rd century settlements in the Troesmis area and the problem of rural settlements in the northern part of the province⁸. Although it is not possible to completely clarify the matter or even systematically approach it, due to the state of research, this paper provides and highlights the possible correlation between the available archaeological and epigraphical evidence.

2. THE VOTIVE ALTAR ISM V 218

The tall altar (Fig. 3) is carved in a Turonian sandstone block⁹, slightly irregular in shape, and measures 150-159 cm in height, with a width of 47 cm (top) - 36 cm (shaft) - 42

cm (bottom) and a depth of 36-41 cm. It is complete and in good state of conservation. The block is differently carved, according to the use of the parts: the lower part of 40 cm is only roughly worked, as it was supposed to fix the altar into the ground; the rear side is also only roughly carved, most probably with the point chisel and the sculptor's pick. The fact that the altar, with profiled moulding and plinth, features mouldings only on the front and lateral sides hints at its display in front of a wall. The front top part of the altar is decorated with two schematized acroterai with a small leaf starting from the bottom of each acroterion. In this decoration, as well as in the mouldings and about one centimetre of the shaft, there are visible the fine shaping and smoothing with the flat and tooth chisel and eventually with the scraper (Fig. 6). The sides and the front of the altar bear traces of the tooth chisel, visibly finer on the front, where

⁸ BAUMANN 1977; BAUMANN 1983; BAUMANN 1995; BĂRBULESCU 2001; BĂLTĂC 2011; MIHAILESCU BÎRLIBA 2018.

⁹ Stone provenance was determined by dr. Albert Baltres.



Fig. 3. ISM V 218, front side (© the author).



Fig. 4. ISM V 218, right side (© the author).

the inscription had to be carved (Fig. 4 and 5).

The dedication (Fig. 5) is carved just below the moulding, being displayed on eleven lines covering the entire width of the shaft, without any frame or delimitation of the inscription, and reads as follows:

NVMINI
 LIBERIS
 PATRIS
 M·ANTIS
 5 TIVS·CAE
 CINA·EQ·
 ALAE·I·DA
 RDANO·ANTO
 NINIANAE
 10 EX VISO·
 POSVIT

Numini/Liberi{s}/Patris/M(arcus) Antis/tius Cae/cina eq(ues)/alae I Da/rdan(orum) Anto/ninianae/ex viso /posuit.

The letter height varies - lines 1-10: 5-5.20 cm; line 11: 3.8-4 cm. There is a ligature in line 8, *NT*, while the following letter *O* is smaller, 2.5 cm. A triangular interpunct is used in the lines 4, 5-8 and 10. The letters carved with serifs are of good quality, but only the last line is almost centred.



Fig. 5. ISM V 218, detail of the inscription (© the author).



Fig. 6. ISM V 218, detail of the left side (© the author).

The dating of the monument after 212 and up to 217 A.D. is based on the mentioned surname of the *ala I Dardanorum, Antoniniana*. The unit was part of the army of Moesia Inferior since the end of the first century A.D., as attested by the military diplomas as *ala I Vespasiana Dardanorum*¹⁰. One of the latest testimonies of the unit in the third century (2.08.241 A.D.) is a dedication to *Jupiter Optimus Maximus* and *Deus Sabadios* put in Rome by 14 *equites singulares Augusti* recruited from the *ala prima Dardanorum provinciae Moesiae inferioris*¹¹. The garrison of this *ala* is considered to have been in *Arrubium* (Măcin, Tulcea County)¹², about 13 km to the north from Troesmis. As the *legio V Macedonica* left Troesmis around 168 A.D., partially for the campaigns in the East and finally dislocated to Dacia, the *ala I Dardanorum* was one of the military units on this sector of the *limes*, supporting the detachments of *legio I Italica*. The mobility of the persons and detachments along the *limes* sector and within the province was quite high, being also supported by the functional road network¹³.

3. M. ANTISTIUS CAECINA AND THE ANTISTIA FAMILY IN THE TROESMIS AREA

The Antistia family, originating in Ancyra, in Asia Minor, was of great interest to the epigraphic studies, as its members are attested in Moesia Inferior over a hundred years¹⁴. P. Nicorescu¹⁵ pointed out the importance of the altar ISM V 218 when attesting the Antistii in the Troesmis area. Among the five members of this family attested there, two were active in the army (recruited most likely on the occasion of the Parthian wars of Trajan) and settled in the surroundings of the ancient centre, as veterans. Four inscriptions - the monumental base with the discharge list for the year 134 A.D. (ISM V 136), two epitaphs (ISM V 174 and 175) and one small honorary inscription (ISM V 148) - were reused as building material in the late fortifications

¹⁰ MATEI-POPESCU 2010, 169-172 (with literature).

¹¹ CIL VI 31164.

¹² ISM V 251 (building inscription carved in a marble slab). - See also MATEI-POPESCU 2010, 170 (with literature).

¹³ The unit is attested at Histria during the barbarian attacks around 170 A.D. - MATEI-POPESCU 2010, 171.

¹⁴ ACRUDOAE 2009; MIHAILESCU BÎRLIBA/ DUMITRACHE 2012, 42-43; MIHAILESCU BÎRLIBA 2018, 172-173.

¹⁵ NICORESCU 1915, 41.

from Troesmis. As the epitaphs also mention other members of the family of the veterans (wives and especially C. Antistius Zoticus, mentioned as heres of his father, but also on his own epitaph, ISM V 175), it is obvious that the entire family settled in the more or less immediate surroundings of Troesmis. Significant is that the two Antistii setting up the honorary inscription ISM V 148 for M. Ulpus Marcianus, former *singularis* and veteran of the *ala I Dardanorum*, and *duumvir quinquennalis* of the *municipium Troesmis*, also fulfil administrative duties in the same urban centre: M. Antistius Rufus as *pontifex* and M. Antistius Domitius, as *aedil* and *quaestor*. The detailed investigation of the prosopography and family relations between the epigraphically attested Antistii were published on several occasions by L. Mihailescu-Bîrliba and his co-authors¹⁶. The epitaph of Antistia Firmina¹⁷, most probably from the same family, was found in the southern part of the province, in Odessos (Varna). Her husband, Malius Secundus, was a *beneficiarius consularis*.

4. LIBER PATER AND THE ARMY

M. Antistius Caecina dedicated the impressive altar to Liber Pater following a dream (*ex viso*). It has been observed that among the dedications made to Liber Pater, several are the result of a direct demand of the god expressed in a dream¹⁸. Therefore, they were considered a quite private matter and used as argument for the private character of the cult¹⁹, respectively for the customized and inner communication with the divinities²⁰. In the present discussion, in the absence of any further information on the special attribution of M. Antistius Caecina, the altar ISM V 218 can be considered a personal dedication, made with no (declared) connection to an official function or the profession of the dedicant. P. Nicorescu expressed the two possibilities, namely that the altar was put near or within a country estate of the Antistii near Troesmis or that the dream/vision happened in the area²¹. Both situations might have happened and the need for the benevolence of Liber Pater in such a region is self-evident. According to the investigation of N. Zugravu, the expression *ex viso* would indicate a dream during the sleep and not an apparition with premonitory value, respectively an express order of the god²².

Liber Pater and his companion Libera were originally a pair of Italic gods responsible for human, animal and plant fertility, and also for the harvest and wine trade²³. In the time of the Roman Republic Liber Pater was seen as corresponding to the Greek god of wine Dionysus/Bacchus, with whom he is considered to have later merged completely. Libera, in turn, was equated with Kore/Persephone, and rarely with Ceres. During the Principate time, the cult of Dionysus/Bacchus belonged to the so-called mystery cults.

Liber Pater is richly attested in Dalmatia and in the Danubian provinces, and was considered to be most popular among the soldiers²⁴. There are several dedications to Liber Pater²⁵ alone or to Liber and Libera found in Moesia Inferior, especially along the Danube, but their number is by far insignificant as compared to other deities²⁶. In some dedications, Liber is associated with Jupiter, Hercules, Ceres²⁷. The question remains, on how the votive reliefs without dedication are to be interpreted/called²⁸. But there is no way as to conventionally use the name Liber/Dionysus. The still open question on the cult of Liber Pater and its character, respectively its exact connection with the cult of Dionysus, has a particular aspect in the area of Troesmis and along the Danubian border of the province. It is not clear if, how and when the Liber Pater-Dionysus/Bacchus symbiosis took place and what were the attributions of those divinities. The possible syncretism with local, Thracian or Illyrian deities, needs to be taken into consideration, for example with Sabazios²⁹ or Silvanus.

The great popularity of Liber Pater in Dacia has been highlighted by special dedicated studies. It is interesting the dedication from Apulum (Alba Iulia, Alba County) of an *optio praetorii* of *legio V Macedonica* to Liber and Libera, also ascribed to a dream (*visu monitus*)³⁰. However the possible connection with these deities as result of the former garrison of the legion cannot be put forward, given the popularity of Liber Pater in Dacia, especially in the military environment.

In this discussion, it is possible to highlight only some facts. The altar reused in the Western fortification from Troesmis (ISM V 162) bears a dedication to Jupiter Optimus Maximus and Liber Pater, but no detail on the dedicant. Further on its right side, it shows a grape, which can be understood as a Bacchic element, but can be also just the symbol of one of the traditional attributes of Italic Liber Pater, as a protector of vine, viticulture and wine trade³¹.

South of Troesmis, in the area of the camp from Beroe (Făgărașu Nou, Tulcea county), there was reported the accidental find of two marble votive plates, bearing a complex yet common depiction of Bacchus/Dionysus³². One of them has in the lower register a winemaking and wine transport scene and bears a dedication (ISM V 133), without mentioning however the name of the addressed divinity³³. As there is no information on the finding context or on the possible reuse of the votive plates within the fortification, the

¹⁶ MIHAILESCU BÎRLIBA/ DUMITRACHE 2012, 42-43; MIHAILESCU BÎRLIBA 2018, 172-173; MIHAILESCU BÎRLIBA 2020, .

¹⁷ IGBulg I², 218.

¹⁸ MAYER-OLIVÉ 2017, 526; MATIJEVIĆ 2021. - On the different kinds of oniric experiences and their epigraphic expression see ZUGRAVU 2004-2005 (with literature).

¹⁹ MAYER-OLIVÉ 2017.

²⁰ ZUGRAVU 2004-2005, 113-114.

²¹ NICORESCU 1915, 42.

²² ZUGRAVU 2004-2005, 101-102.

²³ SIMON 1990, 126-134.

²⁴ BRUHL 1953, 215-223; MAYER-OLIVÉ 2009; MAYER-OLIVÉ 2017; MATIJEVIĆ 2021. For Dacia see POPESCU 2004 (with literature). For Moesia Inferior, see ALEXANDROV 2010 (with literature); SARNOWSKI 2013; TOMAS 2015.

²⁵ ISM IV 30 (Tropaeum Traiani). - Several examples from Novae: see TOMAS 2015.

²⁶ See ALEXANDROV 2010.

²⁷ ISM IV 21 (Tropaeum Traiani).

²⁸ For the finds from Novae and surroundings see TOMAS 2015.

²⁹ See, for instance, the dedication of the equites from the same *ala* in Rome – note 11 above.

³⁰ IDR III.5/1, 243.

³¹ SIMON 1990, 126; MAYER-OLIVÉ 2017.

³² DRAGOMIR 1962.

³³ Only one fragmentarily preserved votive plate from Montana, bearing the depiction of a what seems to have been a Maenad and a Satyr, accompanying Dionysus, mentions Liber Pater as the divinity to whom it is addressed: VELKOV/ALEKSANDROV 1994, cat. no 70.

hypothesis advanced by E. Doruțiu-Boilă, on the existence of a sanctuary of Bacchus/Dionysus in Beroe is too forward.

The evidence on the cult of Dionysus in the region, due to the Greek cities on the Black Sea shores and their traditions is behind any doubt³⁴. In the territory of Histria, in Nistorești (Pantelimon commune, Constanța County) there was found the funerary altar of Lucius Pompeius Valens, from Ancyra, which had a *sacerdotium at Liberum*, among other dignities in Histria, and also an estate³⁵. He ordered the altar and his *sepulcrum* while still being alive (at the age of 76), for him, his wife and his son, and the order was fulfilled by Marcus, the administrator of his estate, in 157 A.D. In the interior of the province and in the centres along the Danube, the inscriptions, as already said, are not numerous³⁶. For the reliefs, some fragmentarily preserved, some simply without (carved) inscriptions, the exact attribution to a divinity or, to be more precise, the name by which Dionysus/Liber Pater was addressed is unknown. Novae is a case considered very special due to the state of the existing evidence. There the epigraphic evidence on the cult of Liber Pater/Dionysus reaches the Late Antiquity and the military component of the cult, especially during the Principate, is evident³⁷. However there are dedications to Liber and Libera or to Liber Pater alone. Furthermore, particularly in the Late Roman period, it is clear that the dedications are directly related to the successful supplies to the troops and the responsible primipili and others involved in the *lustrum primi pili*. Thus, the so-called area of responsibility of Liber Pater was the harvest and the essential provisions for the army. As the depiction (statue or statuette) of Dionysus in the principia of the fortress in Novae seems to follow the common Dionysus iconography³⁸, it is probable that the assimilation of the two deities was not complete, and there were particular situations and responsibilities for which the addressee had to be specifically Liber Pater³⁹.

Turning back to Troesmis and the altar ISM V 218 it can be considered the same need for divine help in troubled times regarding the harvest and the vital supplies. Given the rather scarce evidence of the cult in the region a further explanation for the popularity of the cult in the provinces starting with the reign of Septimius Severus⁴⁰ seems to be not significant in this case.

5. THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL DATA

The archaeological research focused for decades, in the northern part of the province, on fortifications and neglected their surroundings and what was supposed to be their administrative territory. This increased, in terms of interpretation and analysis on settlements development, the discrepancy between the finds of stone monuments (with or without inscriptions), made mostly accidentally, and the archaeologically investigated settlement structures.

³⁴ PIPPIDI 1959; AVRAM 2018 (with literature).

³⁵ ISM I 373.

³⁶ See notes 25 and 27 above.

³⁷ SARNOWSKI 2013; TOMAS 2015 (with literature).

³⁸ SARNOWSKI 2013.

³⁹ SARNOWSKI 2013.

⁴⁰ KRAWCZYK 2021; MAYER-OLIVÉ 2017; MATIJEVIĆ 2021.

The later have been mainly the object of rescue excavations⁴¹. Provenance and in some case even the identity of the owner (based on the scarce epigraphic evidence) of what was interpreted as rural estates (*villae, praedia*) of the 2nd-3rd century A.D. were postulated⁴². Nevertheless the limited character of the possible investigations provided only general dating criteria (2nd to 4th century A.D.) of what still needs to be carefully called, in my opinion, rural settlement nuclei. Even in this state of the research (Fig. 1) is clear that the northern part of Moesia Inferior differs from the region around the Greek cities on the Black Sea shore and in the southern part⁴³. The difference resides in what concerns the pre-Roman settlements and the reduced number of population, as well as in the development after the setting-up of the Roman administration, especially after the Dacian wars. This was again seriously affected by the attacks of the late second and especially during the third century, until it eventually radically changed in the fourth century. V.H. Baumann could identify the specialized ceramics production and ore mining activity of several rural settlements he investigated in the surroundings of Noviodunum⁴⁴. But the character, structure and specific activity is still not clear for most of the registered rural settlement nuclei. For the time being, the situation in the Troesmis area is limited to the localization of those nuclei and to observations on their topography (sites along the main roads; sites on topographically prominent points such as a ridge; remote, protected sites in the rear valley areas)⁴⁵. More in-depth analyses, as well as any attempt to clarify the dating and differentiate between villages, estates etc. need a larger archaeological information basis.

6. CONCLUSIONS AND PERSPECTIVES

The existence of rural estates in the surroundings of military and urban centres such as Aegyssus, Tomis, Histria and Capidava is attested by their explicit mention in the inscriptions⁴⁶. Some were found in reuse as building materials, very few, even if without documentation on their finding context, came to light in or near their initial place of display, without being reused. The epigraphic sources provide again the basic documentation on the existence of different kinds of rural settlements and on the ancient terminology⁴⁷, the interpretation of which still escapes our knowledge in the attempt of corroborating the scarce available archaeological evidence of rural settlement nuclei,

⁴¹ See especially BAUMANN 1977; BAUMANN 1983; BAUMANN 1995.

⁴² The best example is the settlement in Horia (Tulcea County), also in the surroundings of Troesmis, in which case the Italic character of the excavated structure was highlighted (BAUMANN 2011) as well as the hypothesis that Annaeus Pulcher, *centurio legionis V Macedonica* and *frumentarius*, the dedicant of a marble votive relief found in the area (ISM V 239), was the owner of the 'villa' (BAUMANN 1977, 158). However the fragmentary relief was found in reuse in a grave dated to the 3rd-4th century and its provenance from the earlier structures in the area is possible but not obligatory. Furthermore the settlement in Horia seem to have been a *statio*, as the location is an important crossroad of the N-S and E-W axes.

⁴³ BAUMANN 1977; BĂRBULESCU 2001; BĂLTĂC 2011. – On the discussion about the *vici* and *civitates* see also IBBA 2016; MIHAILESCU BÎRLIBA 2018 (with literature), especially 8-14.

⁴⁴ BAUMANN 1983; BAUMANN 1995.

⁴⁵ ALEXANDRESCU/GUGL/KAINRATH/GRABHERR (forthcoming).

⁴⁶ BAUMANN 1977; BAUMANN 1995.

⁴⁷ See the overview in BĂLTĂC 2011 (with literature).

particularly in the northern part of the province, with the different names of such rural settlements.

It goes without saying that including the systematic multidisciplinary investigation of the surroundings of the main ancient sites in the focus of the future archaeological research will certainly enable the re-evaluation of the available epigraphical and historical data, as well as the understanding of the dynamics of settlement development, economics and trade at provincial and interprovincial level.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This paper was elaborated under the ongoing project “PN-III-P4-ID-PCE-2020-1031: Roman Stone Monuments from Northern Dobruja. Multidisciplinary Recovery of the Loss of Time and Context (DOBRON_STONE)”. The author is grateful to I. Iațcu and the management of Complexul Muzeal Național Moldova Iași, Muzeul de Istorie a Moldovei, for generously enabling the documentation of the altar ISM V 218.

A short field research was possible 2015, as the area was not yet cultivated, while the geomagnetic prospections, carried on in 2017, were partially financed under the project PNII-RU-TE-2014-4-2063.

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