

THE SOUTHWESTERN LIMES OF ROMAN DACIA AND BEYOND - NEW SURVEYS AND EXCAVATIONS

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Abstract: This paper presents the results of a research project on the southwestern frontier of Roman Dacia, which was an external frontier of the Roman Empire in this area. The research aimed to investigate and locate on the ground all Roman military sites with modern devices (GPS) and establish the elements of the ancient landscape that had an influence on the choice of particular locations for the Roman forts. Also, the Roman military sites have been placed on geo-referenced maps. Another goal was to locate and investigate the great earth ramparts from nowadays southwestern Romania (so-called “Roman walls”) and try to see whether there is a relation between them and the forts on one side and the many sites (cemeteries and settlements) of the Sarmatian Iazyges. This people, that lived to the west from Roman Dacia, penetrated the marshy plains east of the river Tisza much earlier than the researchers previously supposed, that is right after the Marcomannic wars (after 180 AD) and not only at the end of the 3rd century AD.

Keywords: Southwestern frontier of Roman Dacia, Roman military sites, Sarmatian Iazyges, ancient landscape.

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This article is largely based on the results of a research project I conducted together with a team of the Cluj-Napoca University within the years 2009-2011 as well as some recent results of rescue excavations in southwestern Romania. The project was founded by the Romanian National Council for Scientific Research (CNCS). The goal of the project was a survey on the southwestern frontier of Roman Dacia, with methods and techniques that have never been used for this frontier sector before. We aimed to visit all known Roman sites of military kind in this area, to identify new ones and to locate them properly on geo-referenced detailed maps and on satellite photos (Google Earth). Another goal was to try to determine the ancient landscape on this frontier based on the observation on the terrain. While we conducted this project, some infrastructure works in nowadays Southwest-Romania like new highways etc. have been started. This required rescue excavations on archaeological sites that were located on the run of these highways in the Romanian southwestern plain (which is part of the Great Hungarian Plain) (fig. 1).

Some of the sites found during these excavations have the specific characteristics of the Iazyges, the Sarmatian population that lived in the Great Hungarian Plain between the Roman provinces of Pannonia (Inferior) and Dacia (Superior and Porolissensis) (fig. 2)

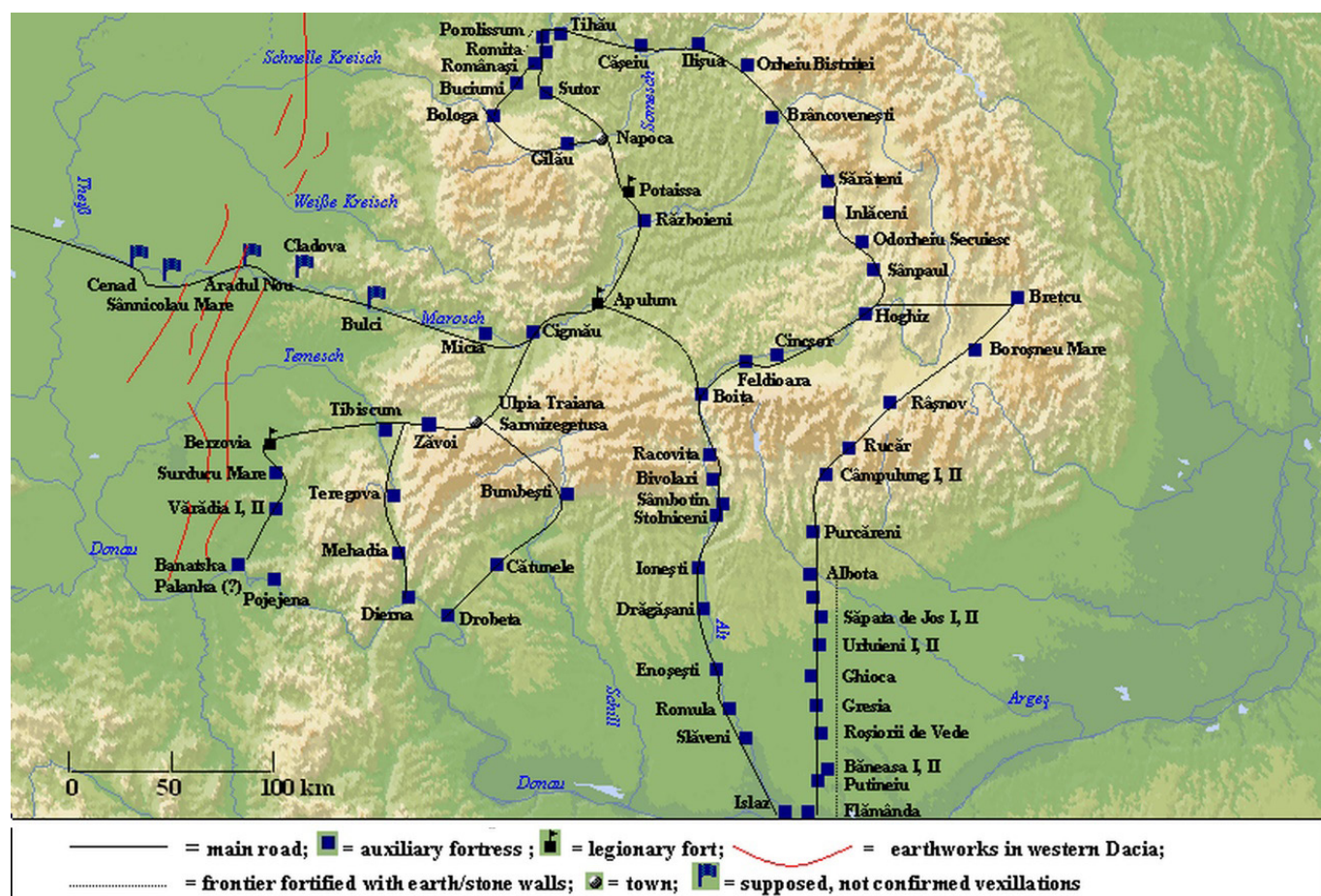


Fig. 1. The most important roads and fortresses from Roman Dacia. (NEMETH/FODOREAN/MATEI/BLAGA 2011, 106, Abb. 3)

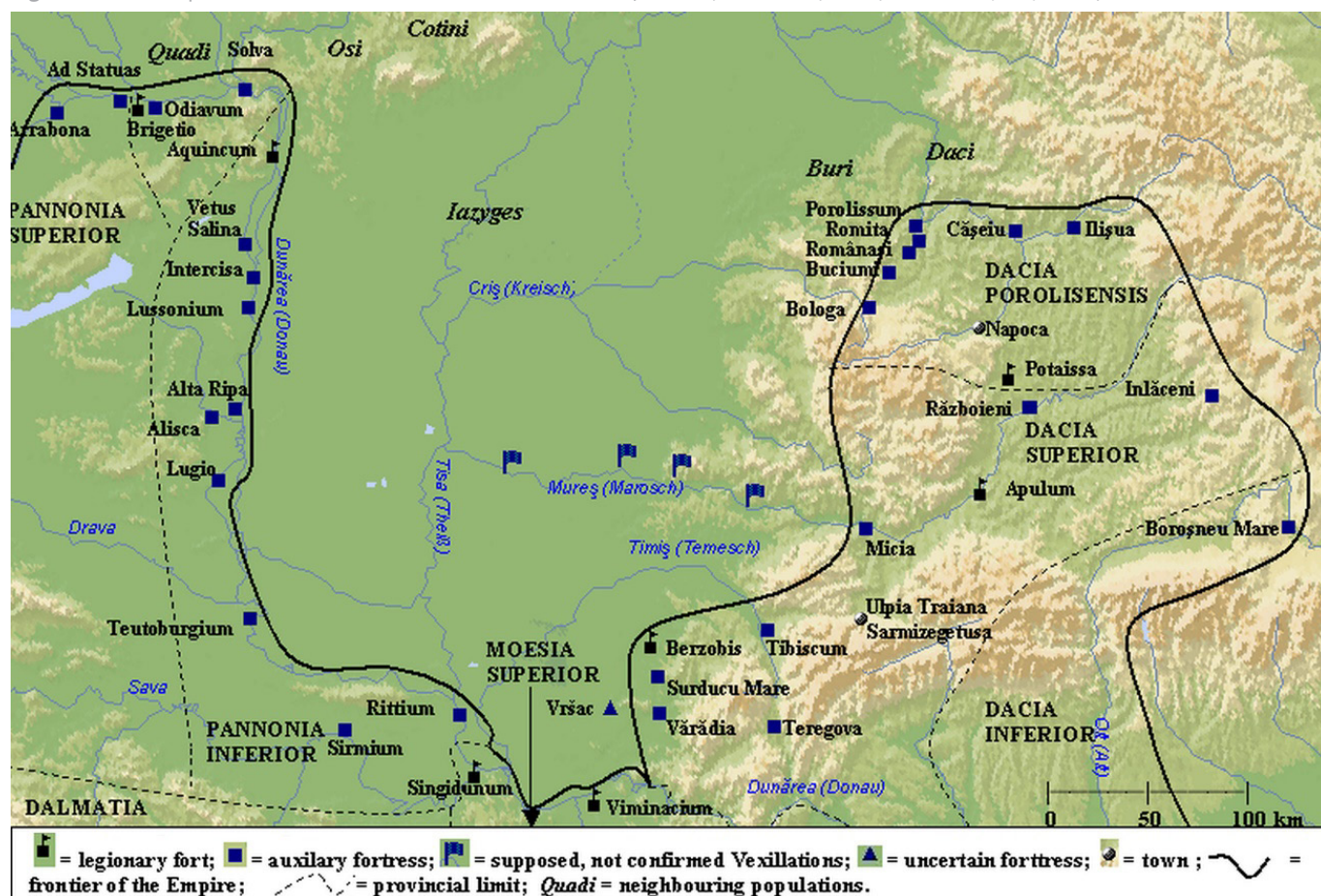


Fig. 2. General map of the Carpathian Basin in Roman time. (NEMETH/FODOREAN/MATEI/BLAGA 2011, 16, Abb. 2)

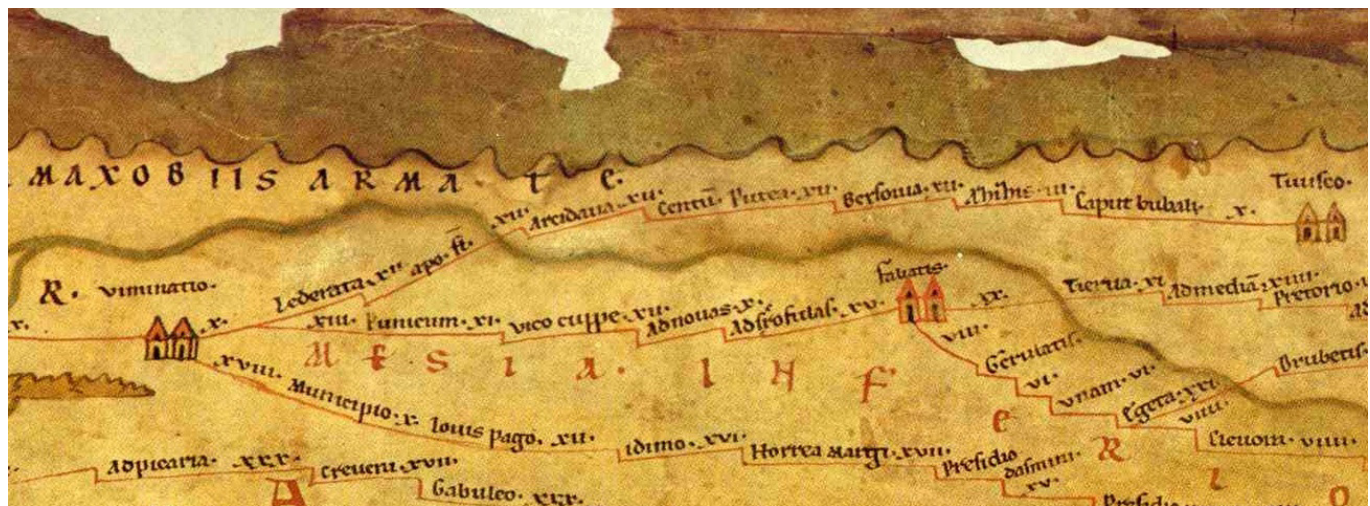


Fig. 3. Tabula Peutingeriana. (NEMETH/FODOREAN/MATEI/BLAGA 2011, 105, Abb. 1)

The image of the southwestern part of Roman Dacia is preserved also on the *Tabula Peutingeriana* (fig. 3).

We can see the two main roads from this part of the province and several place names. What we do not know is, what kind of localities these were, i.e. whether they are names of *stationes* of the *cursus publicus*, names of rural settlements or of the fortresses themselves. The traditional

the remains of the Roman fort of *Lederata* (fig. 6)

The Roman road followed a line that was still on the higher plain of southwestern Dacia, far from the swamps that dominated the western, lower part of this plain (fig. 4). Historical maps show us the distribution of swampy areas in the lower western plain, like in the case of this map from

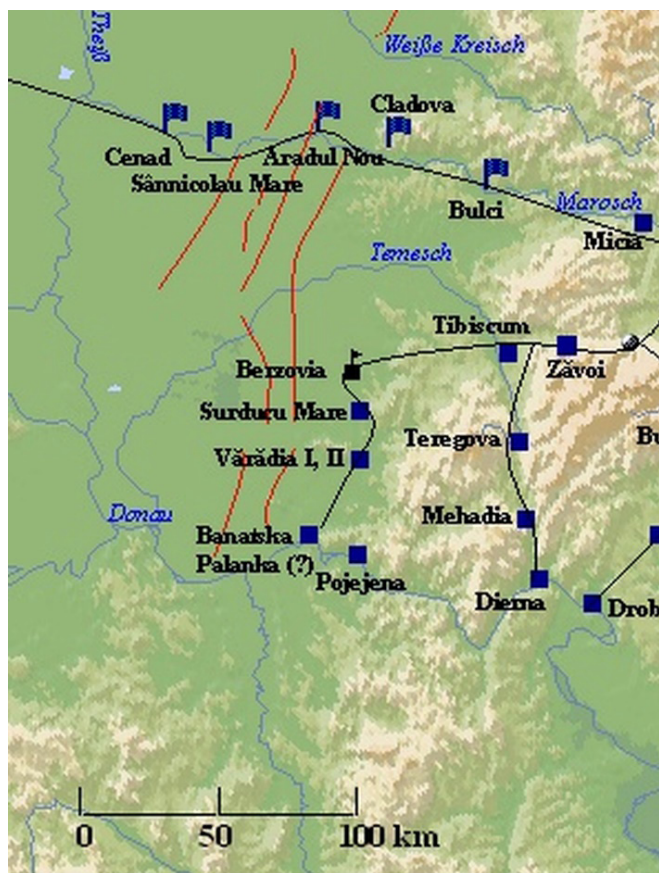


Fig. 4. The southwestern part of Roman Dacia (NEMETH/FODOREAN/MATEI/BLAGA 2011, 107, Abb. 4)

research identifies these names with the fortresses located on these roads (fig. 4)

The western road started on the Danube on a very favorable place. Emperor Trajan and his strategists chose this particular place to cross the Danube and from the satellite photo is obvious why they did so (fig. 5). Here are also visible



Fig. 5. Satellite view of the Danube at the Lederata/Ram place. (© Google Earth)



Fig. 6. The traces of the Roman fort at Lederata/Ram, Serbia (© Google Earth)

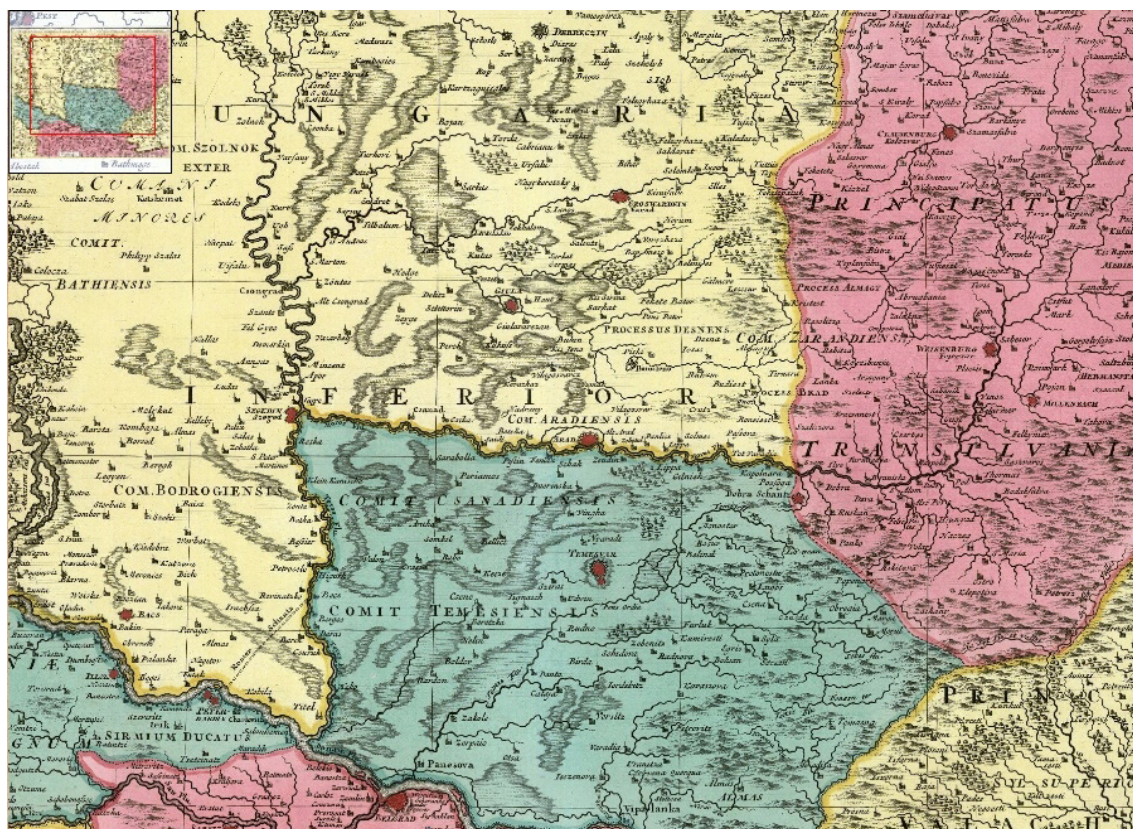


Fig. 7. 17th century map focusing on the area under study.

the end of the 17th century¹ (fig. 7). Only after 1718, the year of the conquest by the Austrians of this area (called “The Banat”), extensive drainage and river regularizing works have been made, which finally eliminated the swamps. The presence of the swamps in Antiquity explains the lack of interest for the Romans to occupy this territory.

Prior and during the survey we gathered and used the historical and archaeological information from the ancient writers (mostly Cassius Dio and Balbus), from ancient maps (*Tabula Peutingeriana*), maps from the end of the 17th century and the Austrian military maps of the 18th century (so-called *Josephinische Landesaufnahme* from 1763-1785). These sources have the quality to partly reflect situations on the field that are dated before the great drainage and regularization works made by the Austrian authorities in the second half of the 18th century. Other information came from the contemporary literature and from local archaeologists.

All sites visited during this survey have been located with a modern GPS, the surrounding landscape has been photographed and - in the case of some parts of the great earth walls from Southwest Romania – geomagnetic measurements too.

The main results of the project have been the precise location of the Roman military sites on maps and satellite photos, the registering of the present day landscape and of the changes in it during the time and an extensive presentation of the earth ramparts from Southwest Romania, including

their exact positioning on geo-referenced maps.

CASE STUDIES

Berzobis (Berzovia, Caraș-Severin County)

The legionary fortress had the dimensions 490 x 410 m and, according to the previous research, had a timber enclosure, while many internal buildings were made of stone². Here was stationed the legion IV Flavia felix, that left it's home camp of *Sigidunum* in Upper Moesia to take part in Trajan's first Dacian war of 101-102 AD. In the period between the first and the second Dacian war, this legion was most probably garrisoned on the location of the future *Colonia Ulpia Traiana Sarmizegetusa*. After the end of the second war, the legion built its fortress in *Berzobis*, where it remained until the beginning of Hadrian's reign, when it was relocated back to Upper Moesia³. Detachments of this legion were stationed in several strategic locations in the Southwest of Roman Dacia.

The legionary fortress lies nowadays under the northwestern part of the modern day village Berzovia, approximately 200 to 500 m south from the river Bârzava. The difference in altitude from the sea level between the plateau where the fortress is located (150 m) and the nearby river valley (140 m) is 10 m. This offered a protection against the flooding of the fortress by the river. Until the 18th century, the Romanian village Jidovin (the old name of Berzovia) was situated to the west from this plateau, on a lower ground and thus exposed to floods. The Austrian authorities have moved the village on exactly the same plateau that had been chosen by the Romans for the legionary fortress, obviously for the

1 Müller, Johann Christoph (1673-1721), Carte Accurate d'Hongrie, ou se fait voir le Theatre de la Guerre, aux Environs les Pays de Belgrade, Temisvar, etc. Accuraate Kaart Hungarie, waar in de Stoel des Oorlogs vertoont word, omtrent de Lande van Belgrado en Temeswaar, ann't Keyserlyke Origineel geteekent / designée a l'Originel de Celle de L'Empereur par L'Ingenieur Muller ; door d'Ingenieur Muller. Retrieved from <http://www.oldmapsonline.org> on 14 December 2014.

2 PROTASE 1967, 49-51. 67; MOGA 1971; MEDELEȚ / PETROVSKY 1974; GUDEA 1997, 29-30.

3 BENEA 1983, 141-159; NEMETH 2005a, 193-194.



Fig. 8. The location of the fort from Berzovia. (NEMETH/FODOREAN/MATEI/BLAGA 2011, 113, Abb. 11)

same reasons. (fig. 8).

Zăvoi (Caraș-Severin County)

This large military camp (336 × 336 m) had an earth and timber enclosure and dates possibly from the time

of Trajan's Dacian wars. The only hints on the troops that have been stationed here are some tile stamps of the *cohors I Sagittariorum*⁴. They could date from a later period than Trajan's though, as this cohort garrisoned the auxiliary camp

⁴ BOZU 1977.



Fig. 9. The location of the fort from Zăvoi. (NEMETH/FODOREAN/MATEI/BLAGA 2011, 121, Abb. 19)

of *Tibiscum* (Jupa), that's situated only 20 km to the west from Zăvoi.

The relation between the Roman camp and the modern village of Zăvoi is very similar to the one of Berzovia. Today, the Roman camp is located within the village, but up until the 18th century, the village was situated to the



Fig. 10. Vărădia. The view to the west of the camp from the 'Chilii' Hill. (NEMETH/FODOREAN/MATEI/BLAGA 2011, 136, Abb. 35, c)

northeast of the Roman camp, on the other side of the Bistra River. At some point in that century, the village was moved towards south, where it still lies today, thus encompassing also the Roman military camp (fig. 9). The reasons for this move must have been the same as in Berzovia, since the area to the south from the river is on a higher ground compared to the river valley and its immediate north bank, where the old village of Zăvoi was located (the difference in altitude is 5-6 m).

Vărădia (Caraș-Severin County)

The earliest Roman military camp from Vărădia was the one made of earth and timber that was situated on the hill „Chilii” and had the dimensions 214 x 132 m. The supposition is that this camp was used only during Trajan's Dacian wars and that its garrison was a detachment of the legion IV Flavia felix (and maybe other troops as well), since



Fig. 11. Vărădia. The camp from 'Pusta Rovina', view west.

a tile bearing the stamp of this legion has been found at this site⁵.

The hypothesis of a short lifespan of the „Chilii” fortress is being supported also by the fact that the Romans built a second camp approximately 900 m in a straight line to the south from the first one, on a location called „Pusta Rovine”. This auxiliary camp (dimensions: 172 × 154 m) had a first phase with an enclosure and internal buildings of earth and timber, while in the second phase the headquarters building (*principia*) and the enclosure have been rebuilt in stone⁶. The only hint to the military unit that was stationed here is a military bronze tag (*tessera militaris*) belonging to a soldier from the *cohors I Vindelicorum milliaria equitata*⁷.

The probably older camp from the hill “Chilii” had a very good view toward south and east, which was an advantage for watching the Roman road that came from the south, i.e. from the Danube. The view to the west was on the contrary blocked by the higher, forested hills of Vršac (nowadays, Serbia) (fig. 10), which wasn’t a hindrance at that point in time, as the people of the Iazyges, who were living to the west from Dacia, were Trajan’s participating allies in the war against the Dacians.

The newer camp from “Pusta Rovina” had, unlike the one on “Chilii”, an unhindered view to all directions, including the west (fig. 11). It was an advantage for watching over the meanwhile established frontier of Roman Dacia and the possible attacks of the Iazyges, who were at this point in time unhappy with certain post-war decisions of the Romans⁸ and had to be contained by the latter⁹.

The camp’s location lies today approximately 200 m east from the River Caraș. The ground on which this camp is located has an altitude from the sea level of 106 m, whereas the area to the west from the river has a height of 100 m and less, which would mean that, in case of flooding, this area would have rather been affected and not so much the one of the fort itself.

The Lower Mureș Valley and the earth ramparts from southwestern Romania

Important parts of this survey were the Lower Mureș Valley and the earth ramparts from southwestern Romania.

Most of the literature about this sector of the Mureș Valley (fig. 4) assumed that there were stationed probably at least Roman vexillations of the *legio XIII gemina* (garrisoned

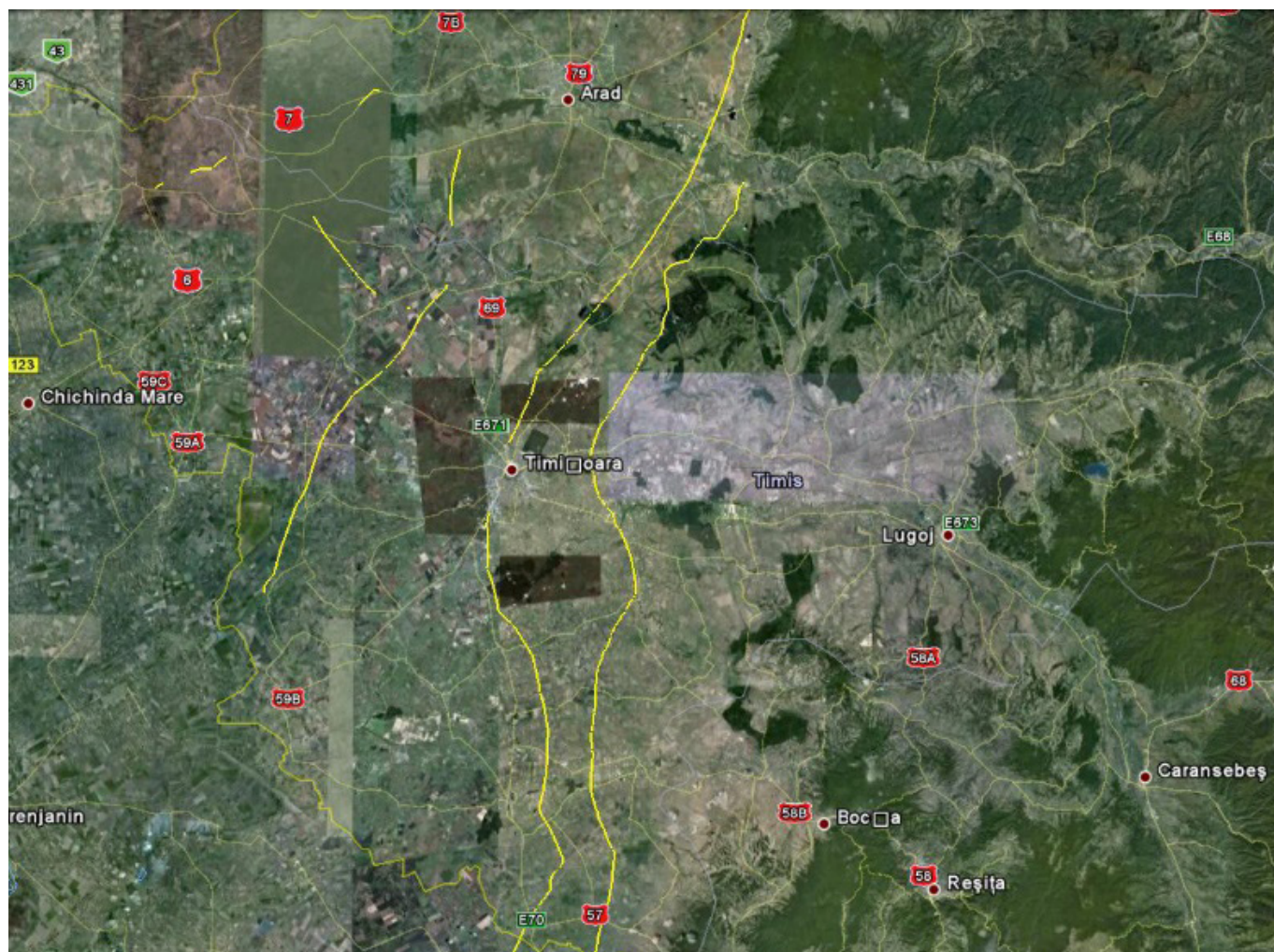


Fig. 12. The earthen-ramparts in southwest Romania, Google satellite view. (NEMETH/FODOREAN/MATEI/BLAGA 2011,

5 BENEĂ 1983, 156; IAROSLAVSCHI/BOZU 2003; NEMETH 2005a, 119, 130-131, 133, 137.

6 GUDEA 1997, 26-28; NEMETH 2005a, 119, 130-131, 137; NEMETH 2005b, 698-691.

7 FLORESCU 1934, 69; IDR III/1, 110 = AE 1935, 109.

8 Cassius Dio, 68.10.3.

9 HA, *Hadrian*, 3.9.



Fig. 13. Giarmata. The eastern ditch.

in Apulum, nowadays Alba-Iulia) and of the *cohors II Flavia Commagenorum* (stationed in Micia, nowadays, Vețel/Deva). These assumptions were based on the fact that in several places on the Lower Marosch, Roman finds were unearthed (stamped tiles, one inscription, etc.)¹⁰. On a closer look at

each and every location on the spot we could establish that all these finds appeared in mediaeval archaeological contexts, as reused construction material. No Roman military site has actually been discovered on the Lower Mureș Valley so far.

There is still no certain and unanimous accepted explanation for the existence of the three long earth ramparts from western Romania, from which one sector lies in the Southwest of the country (fig. 12). No fortification has been found so far on or near these ramparts. Some rescue excavations for the new infrastructure projects (motorways) focused on the middle rampart, but no relevant finds for the dating have been discovered. The ramparts seem to have ditches on both East and West side (like seen in the rescue excavation on the easternmost rampart, sectioned at Giarmata, Timiș County), but it is impossible to say whether they were in use at the same time or not (figs. 13-14).

New infrastructure works for motorways in southwestern Romania unearthed sites that have been attributed to the Sarmatian Iazyges, a population living in the plains between the provinces of Dacia and Pannonia (fig. 2).

The older Romanian specialist's opinions about the penetration of the Iazyges to the east of the Tisza, towards the southwestern Dacian frontier assumed that they came to this area relatively late, towards the end of the 3rd century AD, so after the abandonment of the province of Dacia by Emperor Aurelian¹¹. New discoveries of Sarmatian sites, mostly graveyards, proved that they settled down here already in the last two decades of the 2nd century AD¹². This permission to come here could have been a consequence of the new peace treaties after the Marcomannic Wars, of which we have no information from the written sources. Unfortunately, there were almost only rescue excavations



Fig. 14. Giarmata. The western ditch.

10 E.g. GUDEA 1997, 23-24, Nos. 1-4, which sums up the archaeological arguments for this supposition.

11 DÖRNER 1971.

12 BÂRCĂ/COCIȘ 2013; summing up: BÂRCĂ 2014.

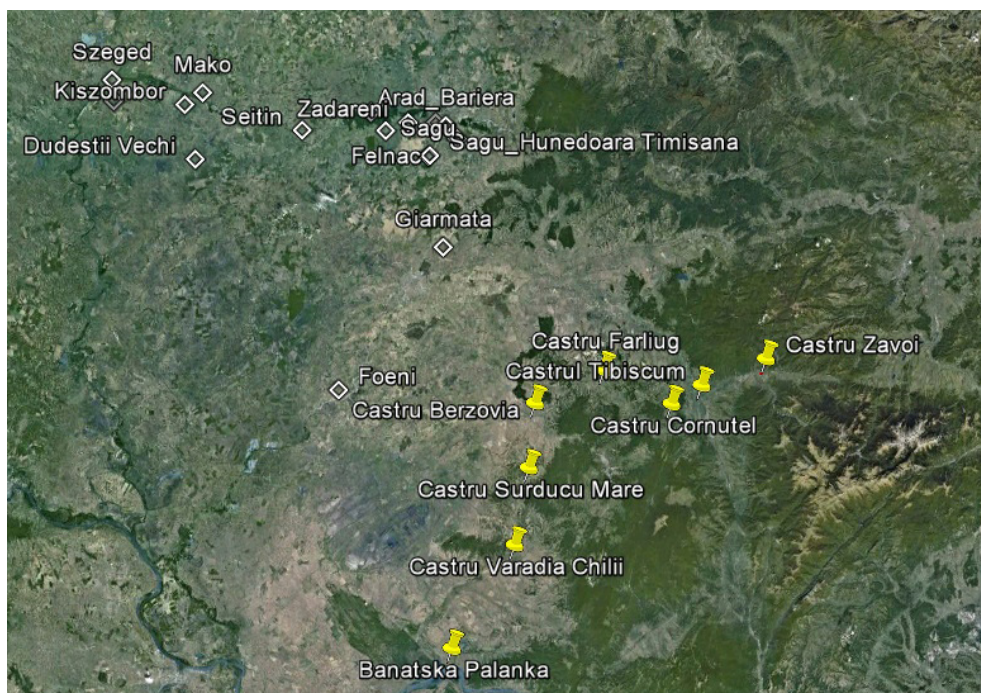


Fig. 15. Sarmatian sites at the SW Roman border of Dacia. ♦ - Sarmatian sites; 📌 - Roman forts in Dacia

in Romania that discovered the Sarmatian presence in the southwestern part of the country until today. The rescue excavations were of course following the run of the motorways. A few other excavations were aiming other sites and incidentally discovered Sarmatian graves from the end of the 2nd c. AD, like in Foeni¹³ (fig. 15).

The Iazyges were in the 2nd/3rd c. AD on turns allies and enemies of the Romans. Of all these roughly 200 years they fought against the Romans only on a few occasions, of which more important were the wars from 117-118 AD, the Marcomannic Wars, and the wars of Maximinus Thrax against them (AD 236-237). One can easily see that most of the time, the Iazyges were at peace with the Romans. In such periods of peace, the Romans granted them some privileges, one of which could have been the permission to penetrate to the east of the river Tisza right after the Marcomannic Wars and not just at the end of the 3rd c. AD.

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