

HERENNIUS GERMANUS – *VETERANUS OF LEGIO IIII FLAVIA* AND THE ARCHEOLOGICAL COMPLEXES OF RATIARIA AND ITS TERRITORY

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Abstract

The archaeological studies of the frontier zones of the Roman Empire are of particular importance due to the abundant excavated data that can be directly linked to historical sources and epigraphic evidence known for centuries.

In the Lower Danube region of the Roman Limes, an area that has not been as extensively explored as the areas in Central and Western Europe, there are now a lot of new rescue and regular excavations. The new field data, which were obtained from details unearthed near the village of Sinagovtsi, Vidin region, only 15 km away from the ancient centre of Ratiaria, are important as they might help clarify the way of life in Antiquity if linked to and interpreted together with the already known epigraphic, historical and numismatic data.

Keywords: Frontie studies, Roman limes, veterans, excavations, Ratiaria.

The military system of the Roman Limes along Lower Danube, namely the provinces of Moesia Superior and Moesia Inferior,¹ began to take shape as early as the end of the Republican period of Rome (1st century BC), most notably with the campaigns of Marcus Licinius Crassus (29 BC), and throughout the 1st century AD. It is definitely the longest lasting frontier zone of the Roman Empire in Europe, since the defensive zone and all the related structures (civil and military) collapsed definitively at the beginning of the 7th century during the reign of the Roman Emperor Phocas (602–610).²

One of the most interesting areas along the Lower Danube, with particularly distinctive regional features, is the area of Ratiaria and its territory (**Fig. 1**). A military centre

¹ Tacheva 2004, 49–75; Ivanov 1999, 19; Gerov 1949, 4.

² Poulter 1983; Ivanov 1999, 121–146.



Fig. 1. Ratiaria and its territory on the map of Lower Danube frontier system (Ivanov 1999, Map 1, on the back cover page)

was already established here in the early development of the Limes, which later turned into a colony and by the end of Antiquity rose to the rank of a provincial capital.³

Today this is the area of the Lower Danube Limes, where there is a great amount of historical data.⁴ However, fieldwork and archaeological excavations here have been lagging well behind. For almost 25 years no excavations have been carried out at Ratiaria. Similar was the situation in Bononia (Vidin) and Castra Martis (Kula, last excavated in 1972).

Over the last three years, the almost year-round excavations (regular and rescue alike) in the Vidin region have brought to light a number of settlements, villas, workshop complexes and necropolises from the Lower Danube Limes zone in the region of Ratiaria, the province of Moesia Superior.

Two Roman villas have been localised in this, probably least explored, part of the Roman frontier along the Danube—at Gramada and at Sinagovtsi.

These were estates of wealthy families of citizens during the Principate period. It is particularly interesting that in the course of excavations we also happened to come across the necropolises of these large suburban complexes. The key point of the excavations was the uncovering of a workshop complex and the settlement it served from the time when the Roman limes was established along the Lower Danube—the reign of Octavian Augustus (27 BC–14 AD).

There is a necropolis from the same period at this settlement—the largest one along the Lower Danube from the 1st century, consisting of 140 graves with biritual burial complexes and over 700 finds.

³ Velkov 1966, 155–175.

⁴ Velkov 1966, 155–175.

Until recently, there were not many archaeological sites known from the regions of Ratiaria and Bononia. These latest data are therefore of utmost importance and some of them will now be presented for the first time.

We obtained in particular a lot of new field data from the rescue archaeological excavations near the village of Sinagovtsi, where an area of 75 dca was explored as the route of the international road E 79 (Thessaloniki–Kosice) passed across it.

The 2020 and 2021 archaeological excavations were conducted on a flat area (75 dca) of the flood terrace of the Vidbol River (right tributary of the Danube), 300 m east of the village of Sinagovtsi, which is located 10 km away from Vidin (Bononia) and 15 km away from the village of Archar (Ratiaria) – **Fig. 2**.

The topography of the archaeological site is very interesting and particularly important. It is located in the lowest part of the densely populated valley of the Vidbol River, right at its confluence with the Danube. This site is midway between the two largest sites in the westernmost part of the Lower Danube Limes zone, Bononia and Ratiaria, and it is in this part of the road along the Danube where the river turns again due east. This is the largest bend of the Danube, the area where the barbarian territory runs deep into the Moesian lands.

Huge embankments of alluvial deposits have formed along the River Vidbol in the northern part of the site. They had buried the cultural layers under 1.00–3.00 m thick alluvial deposits. For this reason, the whole multi-layered archaeological situation is perfectly preserved and intact, which is a very rare chance for the archaeological sites in Vidin region.

Near Sinagovtsi an entire necropolis from the 1st century BC–1st century AD was localised and fully excavated. This absolutely rare to find complex contains 140 graves with inhumation and cremation, which makes the early Roman necropolis at Sinagovtsi the largest so far in Bulgaria from that period.



Fig. 2. Archaeological complexes near Sinagovtsi between Bononia, Ratiaria and Castra Martis (Google Earth with my addition of the names of the sites)

Most of the graves feature a cremation ritual, while inhumation is found in only 10%. Body inhumation was practiced almost exclusively in children's burial complexes, as deceased children were apparently not cremated.

Most grave goods are difficult to identify. These are quite ordinary pits, some of which are very shallow cut into the ancient ground (**Fig. 3**).

The burial ritual itself is also interesting and rather poorly known. It gives an insight into the burial practices of the local Thracian population at the time when the Roman limes along the Lower Danube was established and developed.

These small burial pits contain only a handful of burnt bones (most pits are in the range of 25–30 cm in diameter), yet numerous grave gifts of various kinds—pottery, glass vessels, beads, other jewellery, armaments, coins and many other types of household items—are placed alongside them.

The individuals were not cremated at the site of the burial ceremony. There's definitely another area with the pyres where the bodies of the deceased were burned.

After laying a few burnt bones in the small burial pits, grave gifts were placed directly beneath the surface of the ancient terrain. There is no field evidence that grave goods were used in the pyre of the deceased.

The rich and highly diverse grave goods at almost all graves are worth mentioning. The inventory of grave 38 is of paramount importance in view of the purpose of this article—new field data that can be interpreted alongside the epigraphic data on warriors and veterans in the early period of the Lower Danube Limes.



Fig. 3. Grave Nr. 40 from the 1st century AD necropolis, little pits dug into the ground of the ancient terrain (photo: author)

It was used to bury the bones of a person, who was definitely involved in the military affairs on the Lower Danube in the 1st century AD. The whole inventory of the grave consists of three large iron spearheads and one curved combat knife (**Figs. 4–7**). These are weapons that were used by the legionaries and the auxiliary troops along the Limes.

There are such finds on either side of the Danube, both in Romania and Bulgaria.⁵ Several similar spearheads were found very close to Sinagovtzi (at the village of Vidbol, now part of the town of Dunavtzi, 2 km away from the site) and in the military centre of Ratiaria itself.⁶

Grave No. 38 in the necropolis of Sinagovtzi is different from the others, which contain jewellery—fibulae (silver and bronze), rings, earrings (silver and bronze), mirrors, hundreds of multi-coloured beads.

Could this be a direct archaeological evidence that a member of the local society was part of the Roman legionary and auxiliary units and possessed iron weapons typical of the Limes area?

The materials of this rare and so important necropolis date it to the period 1st century BC–1st century AD as a general chronology, yet most of the graves (based mainly on the fibulae) date to Flavian times—the second half of the 1st century AD.



Fig. 4. Grave Nr. 38—with fibulae and armor, iron spearheads and one curved combat knife (photo: author)

⁵ Torbov 2003, 51–68; Torbov 2005, 358–367; Torbov 2018; Rustoiu 2016, 199–221.

⁶ Materials are collected in the dissertation of V. Zhivkov, *The Culture between Lower Danube and Stara Planina: from mid-2nd century BC to early 2nd century AD* (Based on Archaeological Material from Northern Bulgaria), Sofia 2022, Pl.LX.



Fig. 5. Iron spearheads and curved knife *in situ* (photo: author)



Fig. 6. Iron spearhead after restoration, 1st century AD (photo: author)



Fig. 7. Curved knife after restoration, 1st century AD (photo: author)

The earliest fibulae from the necropolis are of the Jeserine type and the spoon-shaped type (two silver finds), which date from the time of the Principate of Octavian Augustus (30 BC–AD 14).⁷ These findings give the earliest chronology of necropolis near Sinagovtsi.

On the other hand, the most numerous and latest in terms of chronology are fibulae of the highly raised type,⁸ fibulae of the Augen type,⁹ fibulae of the disc-shaped type and the so-called soldier's fibulae.¹⁰ Thus a narrower chronology of the necropolis is fully justified—from the reign of Augustus (27 BC–AD 14) to the reign of the Flavian dynasty (69–96 AD).

This historical period coincides perfectly with the establishment of Roman power in the Lower Danube area of the Roman Empire.

But the chronological diversity of the complexes at Sinagovtsi is not over at the end of the 1st century. Most of the data from the fieldwork were found in the northern sector of Sinagovtsi, which is right next to the Vidbol River. Here, in the very floodplain terrace of the riverbed, only 2 km away from the confluence with the Danube, cultural layers over 4 meters deep and structures and materials were recorded dating from the early Neolithic to the Middle Ages.

Among the most important archaeological complexes of this area are the excavated structures (pits and dwellings containing grind-stone) from the 1st century BC–1st century AD, and as many as eight kilns for grey pottery from the same period (**Fig. 8**). It can be definitely stated that it was a small ceramics workshop for household pottery.

The stratigraphy of the region is multi-layered, as above the ceramics complex of kilns for grey pottery, the dwellings, workshops and trash pits there is a small yet rich necropolis from the Antonine period—the second half of the 2nd century AD. A whole building, consisting of six rooms and having a spacious courtyard, dates to the period from the very end of the 2nd to the mid-3rd century AD (**Fig. 9**).

The stratigraphy of the layers and structures show the superb overlapping of the archaeological complexes of the Early Roman, Antonine and Severan periods.

The building is part of a villa rustica in the region of Sinagovtsi. This architectural complex is identified on the basis of analogies with similar small, compact complexes—Villa Makresh, Villa Gramada.¹¹ Moreover, four different collective finds of iron agricultural tools were localised in the building and the courtyard.

The farm (or rather the uncovered part of the farm) was identified as a Roman farm, which is logical because of the found Roman military diploma (**Fig. 10**). It dates from a period earlier than the villa – the reign of Hadrian,¹² probably 125 AD. This might be a typical inheritance document of the owners of the villa and the lands around it.

⁷ Rustoiu 1997, 48–49; Gencheva 2004, 15, 138–139.

⁸ Almgren 1923, 237; Gencheva 2004, 24–32, 144–148.

⁹ Almgren 1923, the so-called Augenfibeln, Gruppe III.

¹⁰ Gencheva 2004, 18, 68, 140–141, 186–187.

¹¹ The villa near the village of Makresh was excavated during rescue excavations led by Yordana Atanasova from RMH-Vidin and uncovered after cultivating the terrain (1970): Atanasova 1980, 4, 65–82. On the other hand, the villa near the town of Gramada has been localised quite recently during rescue excavations along the route of a gas pipeline: Alexandrov *et al.* 2020, 896, fig. 5; Dimitrov *et al.* 2020, 89–90, figs. 2, 5, 6, kat. No. 58–66.

¹² Research of the find is made by colleagues Ilian Boyanov and Kalin Stoev. This side is with the name of L. Vmbrio—veteranus of cohors I Montanorum. The chronology goes after the names of the Emperor of the Antonine dynasty on the other side. The find will be published in forthcoming paper.



Fig. 8. Pottery from the settlement (find Nr. 34/2021), 1st century AD (photo: author)



Fig. 9. Areal photo of the building from *villa rustica* near Sinagovzi, 3rd century AD (photo: author)



Fig. 10. Roman military diploma, found in the villa, beginning of the 2nd c. AD
(L. Umbrius, veteranus from the *cohors I Montanorum*) (photo: author)

The logical link along these lines between the chronology of the diploma and the life of the villa can be found in the necropolis from the reign of the Antonine dynasty – the reigns of Antoninus Pius, Marcus Aurelius and Commodus.

However, to what historical period can we link these huge new archaeological finds halfway between the two major centres of Roman power in the region of Bononia and Ratiaria?

How can we interpret the field data?

After all, the new findings from the latest archaeological excavations are remarkable. These are undoubtedly the largest archaeological complexes of the Roman period in the entire Vidin region to date—two necropolises from the Roman period (with 140 and 11 graves), an early ceramics workshop, a 1st century settlement, a Roman villa rustica from the period of the Severan dynasty and afterwards.

The archaeological contexts found near the village of Sinagovtsi, however, are not novelty. In the 1960s, a large hoard of coins was found in the village when a water pipeline

was being constructed. These are 1990 Roman coins from the middle and second half of the 3rd century, acquired by the Museum in 1966.

There are remains of sarcophagi in the village, hewn stone blocks from old Roman buildings, but more importantly there are epigraphic monuments from the site.

In 1943, Ivan Velkov reported an inscription in Latin, uncovered south of the village of Sinagovtsi. The inscription mentions the veteran of the *legio III Flavia Felix*, Herennius Germanus, who made a dedication to the Goddess Diana.

*Dianae
L. Herennius Ge-
rmanus vet(eranus) leg(ionis)
III P(?)F et Herennia
Secunda l(ibens) m(erito)
posuit*

The inscription is on a stone slab of a medium size: 80 × 50 cm, and was found in the area of Karnula in September 1940.¹³ The data here point to another sanctuary of the Goddess Diana existing in north-western Bulgaria and to the historical figure himself. Apparently this is a veteran from late 1st–early 2nd century AD. This is where the fundamental question arises:

Could Germanus be related to the large archaeological complexes near Sinagovtsi?

A veteran who was granted land in the beautiful valley along the Vidbol River, where we have already found evidence of villa life?

Of course, it is more likely that the dedication was made by a person (veteran) who visited the holy site than by a person who lived in the region. Moreover, the name of another Roman soldier, Lucius Umbrius, appears on the military diploma found at the excavations near Sinagovtsi.

There has been an ongoing debate for years as to exactly which legions or legion vexillationes were stationed in Ratiaria in the 1st century and until the Dacian Wars of Trajan. It could as well be *legio III Flavia Felix*.¹⁴

In any case, the finds near the village of Sinagovtsi are of a military nature. Weapons have been found in the graves of the necropolis, which dates back to the 1st century AD. For example, the finds in grave 38 in the early Roman necropolis of Sinagovtsi are not an isolated phenomenon. Separate items from military objects were found – such as another spearhead (*pilum?*) and other curved knives. Imported materials (metal and glass

¹³ Ritterling 1925, 1548; Gerov 1949, I, no. 32, p. 31, 76. Most likely, there is an error in reading (or writing), as also mentioned by prof. Gerov, since the epithet of Legio IV Flavia is Flavia Felix, that is, it should read “FF” instead of “PF”. Unfortunately, neither I. Velkov, nor B. Gerov publish a photo of the stone slab. Today this monument is in the fund of RMH-Vidin and should be examined and analysed again.

¹⁴ Ivanov 1999, 91–92, with literature and an analysis on the discussed issues. Together with Legio VII Claudia Pia Fidelis, the two legions were part of the military units of Moesia Superior in the Flavian period (i.e. from the 70s of the 1st century) until the Dacian Wars of Trajan (early 2nd century), when major reshuffles of military units were underway in the province. Therefore, for a period of about three decades (70s/90s of the 1st century), there are good reasons to believe that parts of the legion were stationed at different stages in Ratiaria. Such was the initial opinion of Prof. B. Filow (Filow 1906, 5, 35, 46). Others are in the opinion that the legion was dislocated in Viminacium or Singidunum. So far, during the latest excavations of Ratiaria, no elements of construction ceramics with the stamps of Legio IV Flavia have been found.

vessels in the necropolis), although not weapons, also provide direct evidence of contacts between the local people and the legionaries in this part of the Limes.

In any case, the new finds in the necropolises, the villa complex and the settlements near the village of Sinagovtsi can and should be considered along with the evidence that militaries and veterans had already settled in this area between Bononia and Ratsiaria, as is the case of Herennius Germanus.

The settlement of the local population from the 1st century AD is particularly interesting for its very distinctive pottery production. On the other hand, the grave complexes of the necropolis show an outstanding variety of grave gifts, including many imported goods. It is quite possible that the local inhabitants could have made a living in continuous contact with the militaries stationed along the Limes while it was most intensively developed.

In this regard, the study of the territories along the Lower Danube Limes, we could continue working in the years to come, especially in cases similar to the large excavations near Sinagovtsi. Excavations that provide plenty of new direct data from field archaeology, but also raise still more questions about and concerning the history of the military frontiers of the Roman Empire.

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