

# DACIAN FORTIFIED SETTLEMENTS IN THE IRON GATES REGION DURING THE 1<sup>ST</sup> C. BC AND THEIR WARRIOR ELITES\*

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**Abstract:** The present article is going to discuss the manner in which the Danube was used as a route of communication during the Late Iron Age, the chronology and functions of the Dacian fortresses from this region, and the characteristics of the elites who controlled the local communities and resources both socially and politically. The appearance of Dacian settlements and fortresses in the Iron Gates region at the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC was part of the social and cultural evolution of the communities from the entire Dacian territory during the LT D1. These settlements were established close to the fords crossing the Danube. They were meant to also control the circulation along the river, since the navigation was also possible there in ancient times, as in the medieval period. Therefore, the rulers of these settlements controlled not only the local resources and manufacturing output, but also the distant connections and exchanges. They can be seen as “guards of the passes” whose function was a result of the appearance and development of a particular cultural, social, political and economic model which was specific to the “Dacian horizon”. The destruction and subsequent rebuilding of these fortified settlements around the middle of the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC, during Burebista’s reign, reflect the orientation of local elites controlling the region in question towards the social and cultural models promoted by the Dacian kings from southern Transylvanian and their close followers.

## 1. Introduction

The Danube’s gorges in the Iron Gates area, also known as Clisură in Romanian or Djerdap in Serbian, is a region which always attracted human communities, from the times of the Lepenski Vir settlement until today (for the history of archaeological research on the right bank of the Danube, see Medeleț 1997). This was not caused only by the magic of local landscape, but mostly by the sub-Mediterranean climate of the gorges and the economic potential of the Danube. Still, the dam built at Turnu Severin – Kladovo and its reservoir covering the entire Iron Gates area led to changes in the natural environment of the region (Fig. 1).

The now-submerged Ada-Kaleh Island near Orșova was once a vivid example of the warmer climate in comparison with the surrounding areas, which was probably similar in ancient times (Fig. 2). The Danube was also an essential route connecting northern Balkans with Central Europe, and the gorges area functioned as an important crossing point. In this context, the role played by the Late Iron Age fortified settlements on the left bank of the Danube could also be understood from the viewpoint of the strategies developed by the local elites aiming to control the flow of goods and the resources from this region.

Starting from these observations, the present article is going to discuss the manner in which the Danube was used as a route of communication during the Late Iron Age, the chronology and

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functions of the Dacian fortresses from this region, and the characteristics of the elites who controlled the local communities and resources both socially and politically. Another aim is to discuss the ways in which the title of this symposium – “border guards of the passes” – should be interpreted in the context of the Dacian cultural and chronological horizon.

Going upstream along the Danube (Fig. 3), fortified settlements were identified at *Liubcova-Stenca* (Gumă 1977; Rustoiu 2005a, p. 61-63), *Coronini* (formerly *Pescari*)-*Culă* (Medeleț, Soroceanu, Gudea 1971; Matei, Uzum 1973; Gumă 1992, p. 39-40; Rustoiu 2005a, p. 63-64), *Divici-Grad* (Gumă *et alii* 1987; Gumă *et alii* 1995; Gumă *et alii* 1997; Gumă *et alii* 1999; Rustoiu 2005a, p. 64-67; Rustoiu 2006-2007) and *Socol-Palanački breg* (Gumă *et alii* 1997, p. 381; Rustoiu 2005a, p. 67-68)<sup>1</sup>. The settlement at *Orešac-Židovar* on the Caraș valley can also be added; its ethnic and cultural identity was highly debated over time, but archaeological evidence indicates that it had a quite similar fate (Uželac *et alii* 1997; Sladić 1997; Jovanović 1997; Jevtić, Sladić 1999; Jevtić, Lazić, Sladić 2006; Jevtić, Ljuština 2008; Ljuština 2013a; Ljuština 2013b).

## 2. Danube as a waterway

Regarding the navigation in the Iron Gates region, among the earliest evidence is the military campaign of Alexander the Great towards the Danube in 335 BC. Writing about this subject, Florin Medeleț considered a few decades ago that the Macedonian expedition reached the river upstream the Iron Gates, close to the mouth of the Morava River (Medeleț 1982; Medeleț 2002; *contra* Vulpe, Zahariade 1987, p. 98, 115, n. 27; Vulpe 2001, p. 458). If his identification is correct, then according to the accounts of Ptolemy of Lagus, who participated in this campaign, when Alexander reached the Danube to besiege the island on which king Syrmos of the Triballi took refuge, he met the large ships that arrived from Byzantium and attempted to use them to transport his troops (Arrian I, 3, 3-4).

Some researchers considered that such ships could not pass the Danube's cataracts which occurred close to Orșova (Fig. 4), since they made navigation impossible before the construction of a channel at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Vulpe, Zahariade 1987, p. 98, 115, n. 27; Vulpe 2001, p. 458). However, some medieval documents of the 15<sup>th</sup> century and later, when navigation encountered more-or-less similar conditions to the ones of the ancient times, mention ships originating from Istanbul being towed by people or pack animals on their way to Belgrade during Ottoman military campaigns. The famous letter written by Neacșu of Câmpulung in 1521 is relevant in this case (Hurmuzaki, Iorga 1900, no. 843 *apud* CIMEC.ro). Besides its value for the history of Romanian language, the letter also offers important information regarding the aforementioned question. More precisely, the said Neacșu of Câmpulung was informing Hans Benkner, the mayor of Brașov, about the movements of the Ottoman troops advancing on boats “upstream the Danube”. According to Neacșu, the Ottomans seized “50 people from each town to help with the boats”. They also hired specialists (“craftsmen”) from Istanbul, needed to pull the boats through the “narrow passages” of the river, which were also well-known by the Saxon mayor of Brașov. Accordingly, the document is attesting that the Ottoman boats were towed across the

<sup>1</sup> More recently (between 2001 and 2006), Caius Săcărin excavated at Socol. His brief and often confusing published report suggests that the Late Iron Age fortress had at least two phases (one earth rampart superposed by a stone wall?). The habitation extended outside the fortified enclosure. However, it is impossible to say how many Late Iron Age phases of habitation have been identified, since the report only mentions one “Dacian” phase, which is hard to believe: Săcărin, Rancu 2009.

Danube's cataracts using locally-recruited people, the entire operation being organized by specialised individuals brought over from the empire's capital.

The same means of crossing the cataracts was possibly used during the Late Iron Age for ships owned by Greek merchants on their way upstream the Danube, reaching then major tributaries like the Tisza, the Mureş or the Sava rivers. The large number of amphorae discovered in the Iron Gates region, for example at Divici, is a good example of this kind of trading activities (Drăgan 2018).

During the same events of 335 BC, the ancient author also mentions the presence of many dugout boats used by the local population for fishing or crossing the river and sometimes also for piracy (Arrian I, 3, 5). These mentions are relevant for the discussion concerning the inter-community connections in the Iron Gates region. In this context, the existence of fords crossing the Danube was also important (Fig. 5). The medieval fortress at Coronini, superposing the Dacian fortified settlement, was built next to one such ford, its pair on the opposite bank being the fortress at Golubac (Fig. 6) (Matei, Uzum 1973). Thus the Dacian fortresses more likely also had a similar function of controlling the river crossings.

### 3. Chronology of the Dacian fortified settlements

Returning to the Dacian fortified settlements from the region in question, their chronology is an important element in the aforementioned discussion concerning their appearance (Fig. 7/1) (see Rustoiu *et alii* 2017, with further considerations). All of these settlements and fortresses had several habitation layers corresponding to different phases of fortification (Fig. 7/2). From the stratigraphic and chronological viewpoint, the earliest layers from Liubcova, Coronini (Pescari), Divici and Židovar can be dated to the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century and the first half of the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC. The settlements corresponding to this phase were fortified with earth ramparts and timber palisades (Fig. 7/2-3) (perhaps with the exception of the one at Židovar, whose fortifications are not attested archaeologically; information M. Ljuština). All of them ended in a fire accompanying violent destructions.

Afterwards, the settlements in question were rebuilt while their fortifications were repaired using different techniques. The archaeological situation is better known at Liubcova (Fig. 8) and Divici (Fig. 9), where dry stone walls made of local stone were built on top of the existing earth ramparts. One rectangular tower having a dry stone ground level and the upper level made of bricks and timber was built inside the fortress at Divici and perhaps also at Liubcova. The settlements corresponding to these fortifications were dated to the second half of the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC and the beginning of the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, also ending in a fire and violent destruction.

The settlements from Divici and Židovar were again rebuilt and continued to be used throughout the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD until the Roman conquest. On the other hand, the settlement from Liubcova ceased to exist more likely due to the Roman military activities on the right bank of the Danube though other explanations could also be possible.

### 4. The “Dacian” cultural model: the organization and functions of fortified settlements

Regarding the appearance of fortified settlements in the Iron Gates region, the discussion has to take into consideration the general model that is specific to the “Dacian” cultural and historical horizon. From the perspective of habitat organization, some fortified settlements and fortresses built on dominant hilltops already appeared in the second half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC. Each of them was supported by an agricultural hinterland which was dotted with dependant rural settlements. The fortresses from Piatra Craivii, Cugir or Divici provide relevant examples of this

hierarchical model of social and economic organization of the territory and the habitat (Fig. 10) (Rustoiu 2015a; Rustoiu 2015b; Rustoiu, Ferencz 2017, p. 215, 227; Rustoiu, Berecki 2018).

This model differed from the one identified in Central and Western Europe, where numerous Celtic *oppida* were investigated. Unlike the Dacian settlements whose fortified enclosure was not larger than 1 ha (the ones at Socol, Divici and Pescari have a surface area of 0.6-0.8 ha), Celtic *oppida* have a surface area of several dozens, hundreds or even thousands of ha. The fortified enclosures comprised residential and manufacturing quarters and sacred areas (see, for example, Büchsenschütz 1995). From this point of view, Celtic *oppida* are closer in what concerns their organization to the early medieval towns and marketplaces from temperate Europe, whereas Dacian fortresses more likely resemble the early medieval ones. The organization of Celtic *oppida* seems to be the product of a heterarchical social structure, whereas the Dacian society of the kingdom period had the characteristics of a hierarchical model dominated by aristocracy (for these sociological concepts, see Crumley 1995).

The aristocracy who ruled over these settlements was also controlling not only the local resources and agricultural and manufacturing output on their realms, but also their distant connections and exchanges. This could largely explain the location of fortified settlements in “strategic” places, which enabled them to control the circulation along the main land routes and waterways. The pattern gives the impression that these members of the aristocracy were some kind of “guards of the passes”. These distant connections are attested by the presence of numerous artefacts originating from the Mediterranean area, including the so-called “desirable goods”, in the settlements’ inventories. These are “goods perceived as having a higher social, political or/and economic relevance in a given society” (Egri 2014a, p. 233). In Dacian settlements from the Iron Gates region, these distant connections are attested, for example, by the aforementioned amphorae discovered at Divici, or the late Republican Roman bronze vessels (Rustoiu 2005b; Egri 2014b).

The masters of these settlements and fortresses were members of the warlike elite, at least according to the funerary inventories which consisted of panoplies of weapons and other types of military equipment. Their graves were grouped in small flat or tumulus cremation cemeteries, usually located in the close vicinity of the fortresses controlled by the ruling families. These cemeteries were dated to the 2<sup>nd</sup>-1<sup>st</sup> centuries BC, the latest ones belonging to the Augustan age. They were identified on a wide area from Bulgaria to the upper Tisza basin and from the Iron Gates region to north-eastern Bulgaria, Wallachia and Moldova (Rustoiu 2005c; Rustoiu 2012; Łuczkiwicz, Schönfelder 2008 etc.).

No graves of this kind are so far attested in the vicinity of the fortified settlements from the Iron Gates region discussed in this article. Still, one (or several?) graves containing the characteristic panoply of weapons was discovered at ca. 50 km downstream the settlement from Liubcova-Stenca, at Dubova (or perhaps at Ogradena), during the preventive archaeological investigations carried out before the construction of the Iron Gates hydroelectric power plant (Fig. 11) (Zirra 1976, p. 179-180, figs. 3/18, 4/4-5,9; it was also published in Spânu 2001-2002 and Spânu 2003 with errors, for corrections see Rustoiu 2007). The deceased belonged to the local warlike elite.

Lastly, a series of customs are also associated with the aristocratic status of the rulers in question, including hunting which was an important symbolic means of expressing the martial identity. The archaeozoological analysis of bone remains recovered from Liubcova-Stenca and Divici-Grad has shown that venison represented around one third of the total number of identified individuals (El Susi 1996, p. 263-265; El Susi 1997a). The hunted species include mostly red deer and boar, but also the European bison which was mentioned by C. Julius Caesar among the fauna

from the Hercynian Forest. Unlike in the Iron Gates region, venison is poorly attested among the bone remains recovered from the inventories of the civilian and rural settlements in Transylvania, like the Sighișoara-Wietenberg, or the Danube's plain. The percentage of venison varies between 14 % at Sighișoara and 4-5 % in settlements on the plain (El Susi 1997b). A similar differentiation was observed in rural settlements of the Early Iron Age, for example at Remetea Mare-Gomila lui Pituț, where venison represents ca. 13 % of the total number of skeletal remains (El Susi 1997a).

### **5. Burebista and the Dacians from the Iron Gates region. The integration into the Dacian kingdom and the reconfiguration of cultural models**

Regarding the violent destruction of the first settlements around the middle of the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC, this could have been the result of the military campaigns of Burebista towards Macedonia. The manner of rebuilding the fortresses and the inventories from settlements indicate a reorientation of the local elites towards the social and cultural models promoted by the rulers from Sarmizegetusa Regia. Among the arguments supporting this idea are the appearance of dry stone walls and rectangular towers with the upper levels made of bricks and timber (see Rustoiu, Ferencz 2018 with previous bibliography).

Similar dry stone walls and towers were also identified in other fortresses from Dacia (Fig. 12), for example at Cetățeni (Chițescu 1976, p. 156-158, fig. 2) or Piatra Neamț-Bâtca Doamnei (Gostar 1969, p. 19-22). While the ashlar walls and towers from the area of Sarmizegetusa Regia and the neighbouring regions, for example from Tilișca and Ardeu, could have been made by Greek stonemasons working for the Dacian kings and their close followers (Fig. 13), the dry stone constructions were perhaps the creation of local stonemasons who either were not familiar with the Greek technique or lacked access to good quality materials. These local craftsmen worked for chieftains from the periphery of the kingdom, aiming to imitate the monumental structures from the capital's area. It has to be mentioned that these constructions played an important symbolic role in the visual expression of a dominant social status and authority.

Consequently, the destruction of the first settlements from the Iron Gates region and their subsequent reorganization could be interpreted from the perspective of their integration into the power structures of the Dacian kingdom during Burebista's reign (Rustoiu, Ferencz 2018).

### **6. Conclusions**

In conclusion, the appearance of Dacian settlements and fortresses in the Iron Gates region at the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC was part of the social and cultural evolution of the communities from the entire Dacian territory during the LT D1.

These settlements were established close to the fords crossing the Danube. They were meant to also control the circulation along the river, since the navigation was also possible there in ancient times, as in the medieval period. Therefore, the rulers of these settlements controlled not only the local resources and manufacturing output, but also the distant connections and exchanges. They can be seen as "guards of the passes" whose function was a result of the appearance and development of a particular cultural, social, political and economic model which was specific to the "Dacian horizon".

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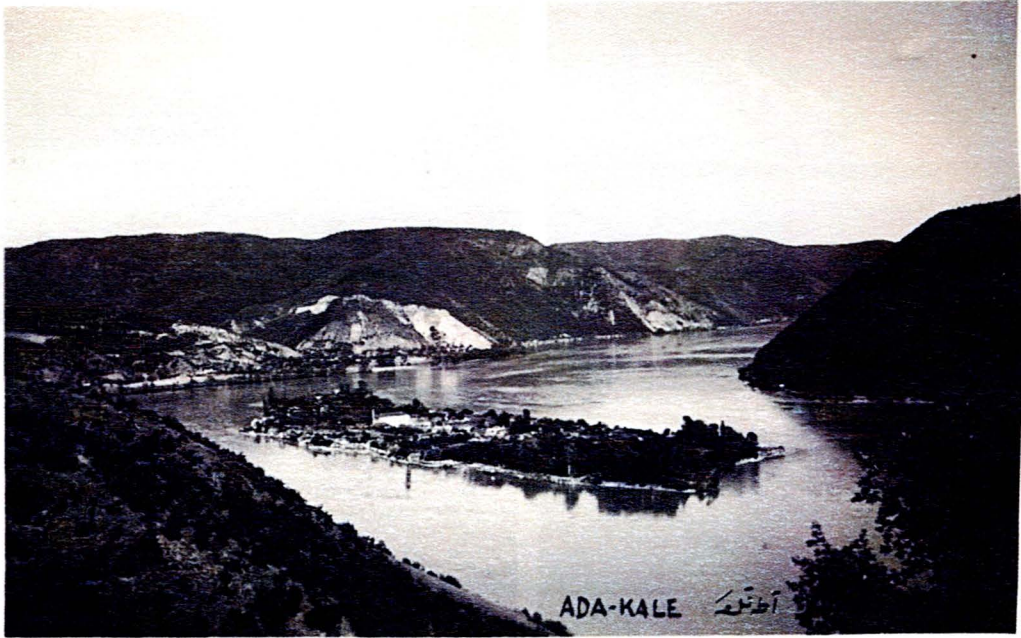
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**Fig. 1.** Images from the Danube's gorges: 1. Socol-Palanački breg. 2. Divici-Grad; 3. Coronini (formerly Pescari)-Culă. 4. Liubcova-Stenca. 5. Cazane (photos by A. Rustoiu and I. Ferencz).





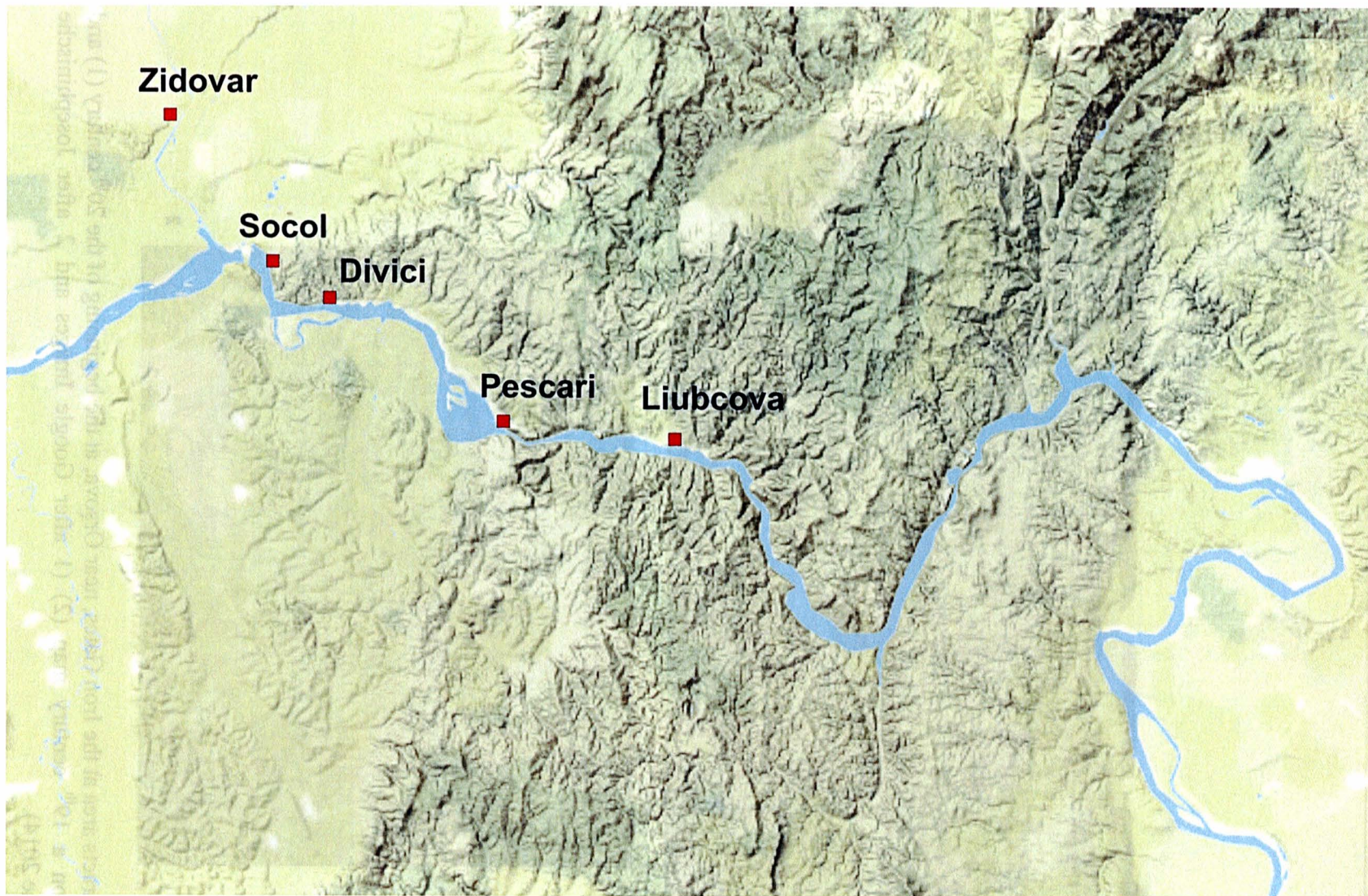
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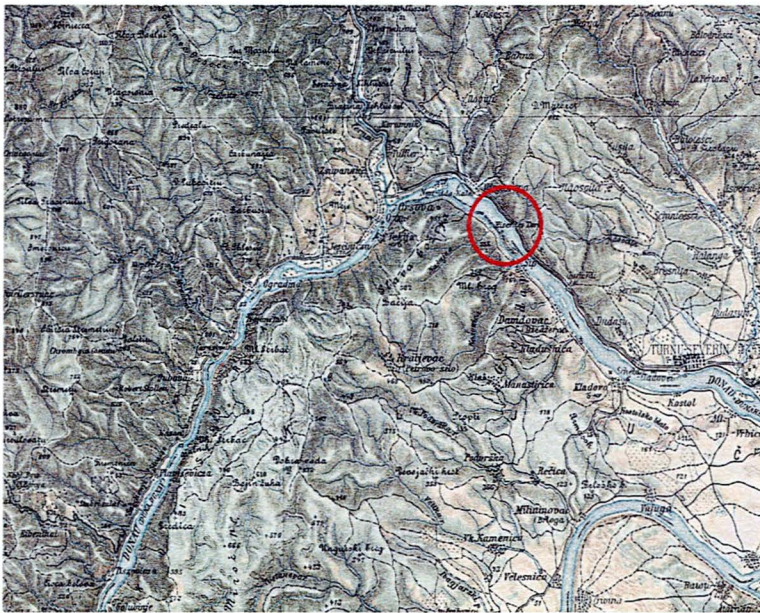
Fig. 2. Ada-Kaleh Island near Orșova, now submerged (after Google Images).





**Fig. 3.** The Dacian fortified settlements in the Iron Gates region (after Rustoiu *et alii* 2017).



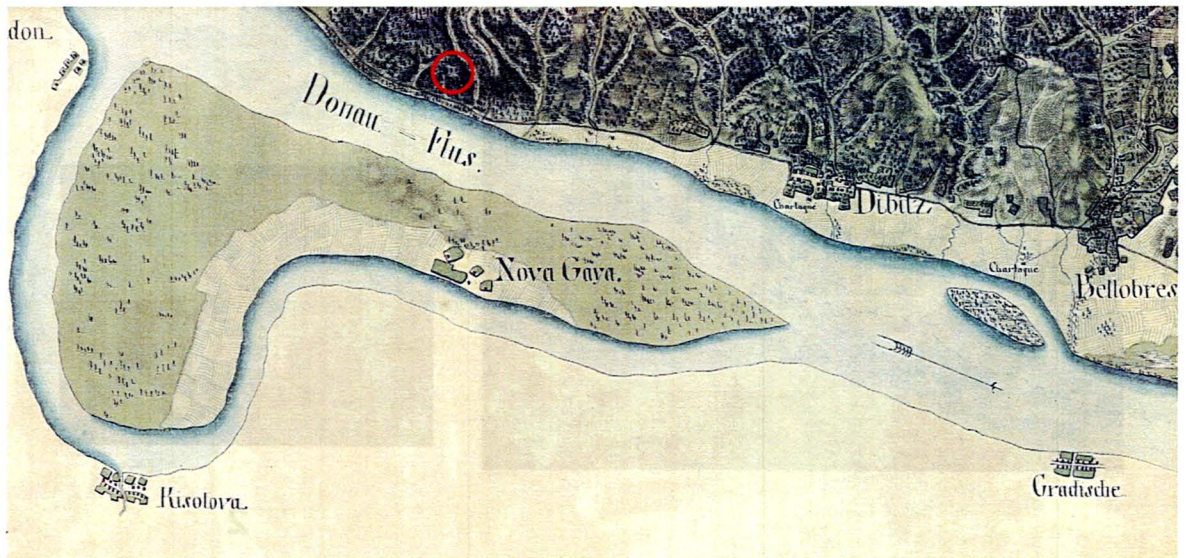


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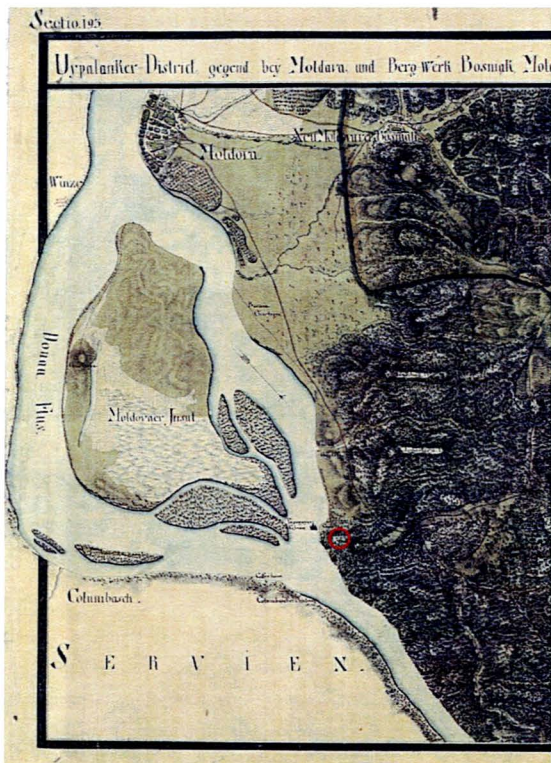
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**Fig. 4.** The cataracts area at the Iron Gates, near Orșova, at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (1) and their location on a 19<sup>th</sup> century map (2) (1 after Google Images and 2 after Josephinische Landesaufnahme 2014).





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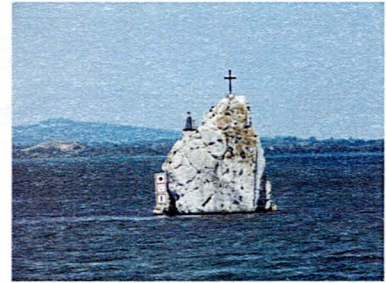
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**Fig. 5.** Location of the fortified settlements at Divici-Grad (1), Coronini (formerly Pescari)-Culă (2) and Liubcova-Stenca (3) on the Military Mapping Survey of the Habsburg Empire from the 18<sup>th</sup> century. They were established close to the fords crossing the Danube.





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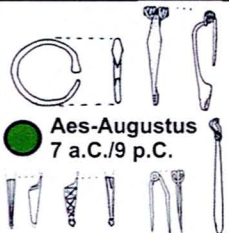
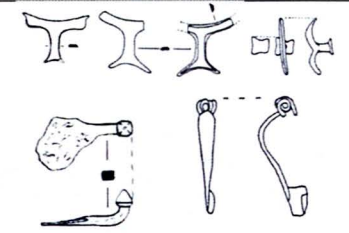

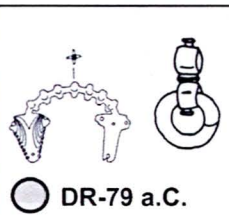

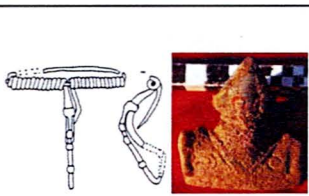
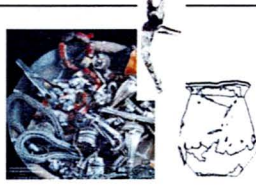
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










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**Fig. 6.** The Danube between the medieval St. László fortress at Coronini and the fortress at Golubac, with the Baba Caia rock, in a 19<sup>th</sup> century engraving (1) and today (2-3). (1 after Google Images; 2-3 photos by I.V. Ferencz and A. Rustoiu).



	LIUBCOVA	PESCARI	DIVICI	ŽIDOVAR
Nivel III 10/25 - 87/88/101 p. Chr.		?	 Aes-Claudius Titus Vespasian	
Nivel II 50 a. Chr. - 10/25 p. Chr.	 Aes-Augustus 7 a.C./9 p.C.	?		
Nivel I 125 - 50 a. Chr.	 DR-79 a.C.	 Drch-Apollonia Dyrrachium		

1

	125-50 a. Chr.	50 a. Chr. - 10/25 p. Chr.	10/25 - 87/88 p. Chr.
Liubcova			
Pescari			?
Divici			
Socol			 ?
Zidovar	 ?	 ?	 ?

2



3

Fig. 7. 1. Chronological evolution of the settlements from the Iron Gates region. 2. Evolution of the elements of fortification from earth ramparts with timber palisades to dry stone walls and towers. 3. Divici: traces of the timber palisade preceding the dry stone precinct (after Rustoiu *et alii* 2017).



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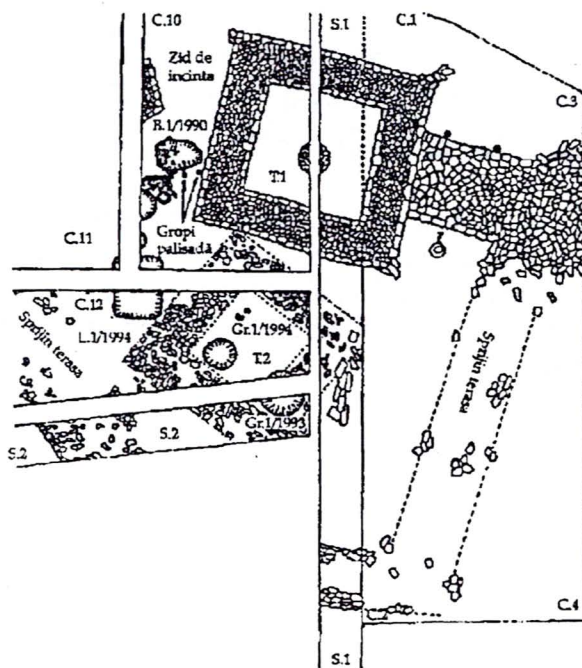
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**Fig. 8.** 1-2. The fortified settlement at Liubcova-Stenca and its defensive elements made of stone (photo by M. Gumă).





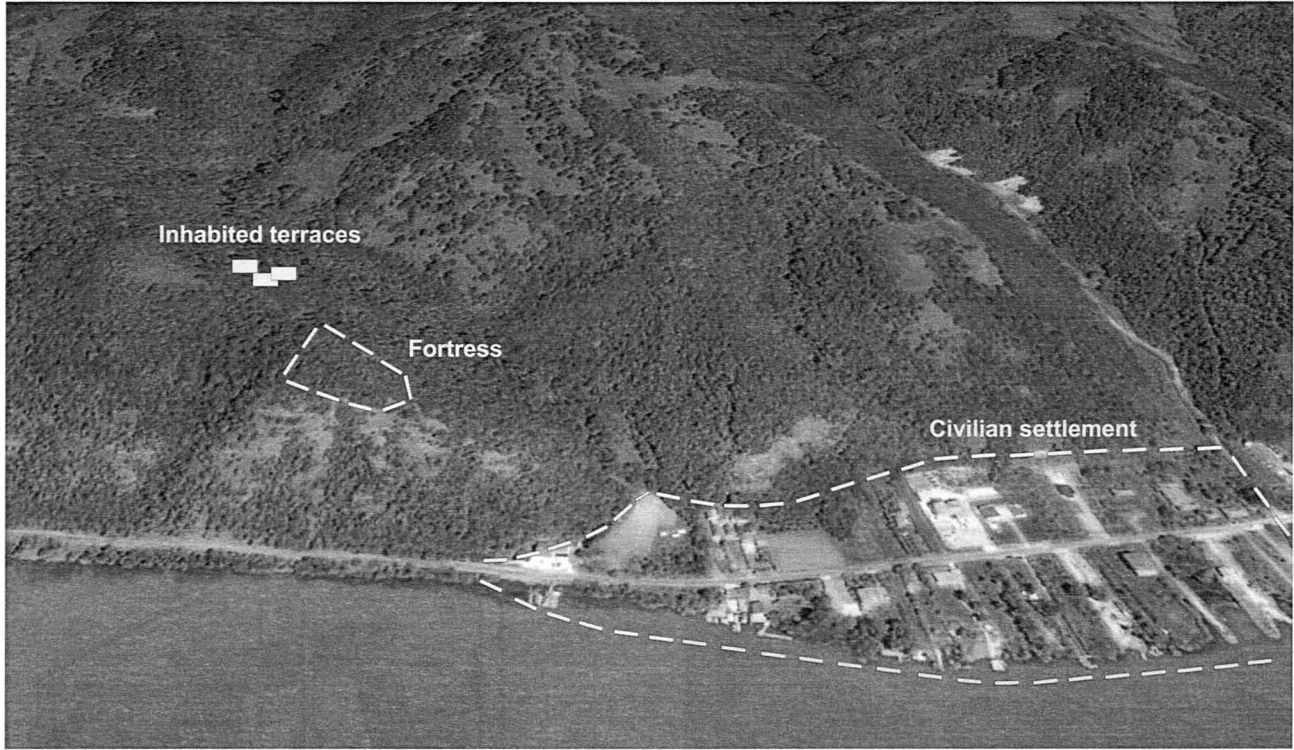
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Fig. 9. Stone towers at Divici and their construction technique (after Rustoiu *et alii* 2017).



**Fig. 10.** Spatial organization in the settlement at Divici is typical for the habitation style of the Dacian kingdom. The fortress is located on a hill on the Danube's left bank, dominating the wider surroundings; the inhabited terraces (the "ancillary" settlement) are located close to the fortress; the dependant rural settlement is located at the foothill, on the Danube's floodplain (after Rustoiu, Ferencz 2017).

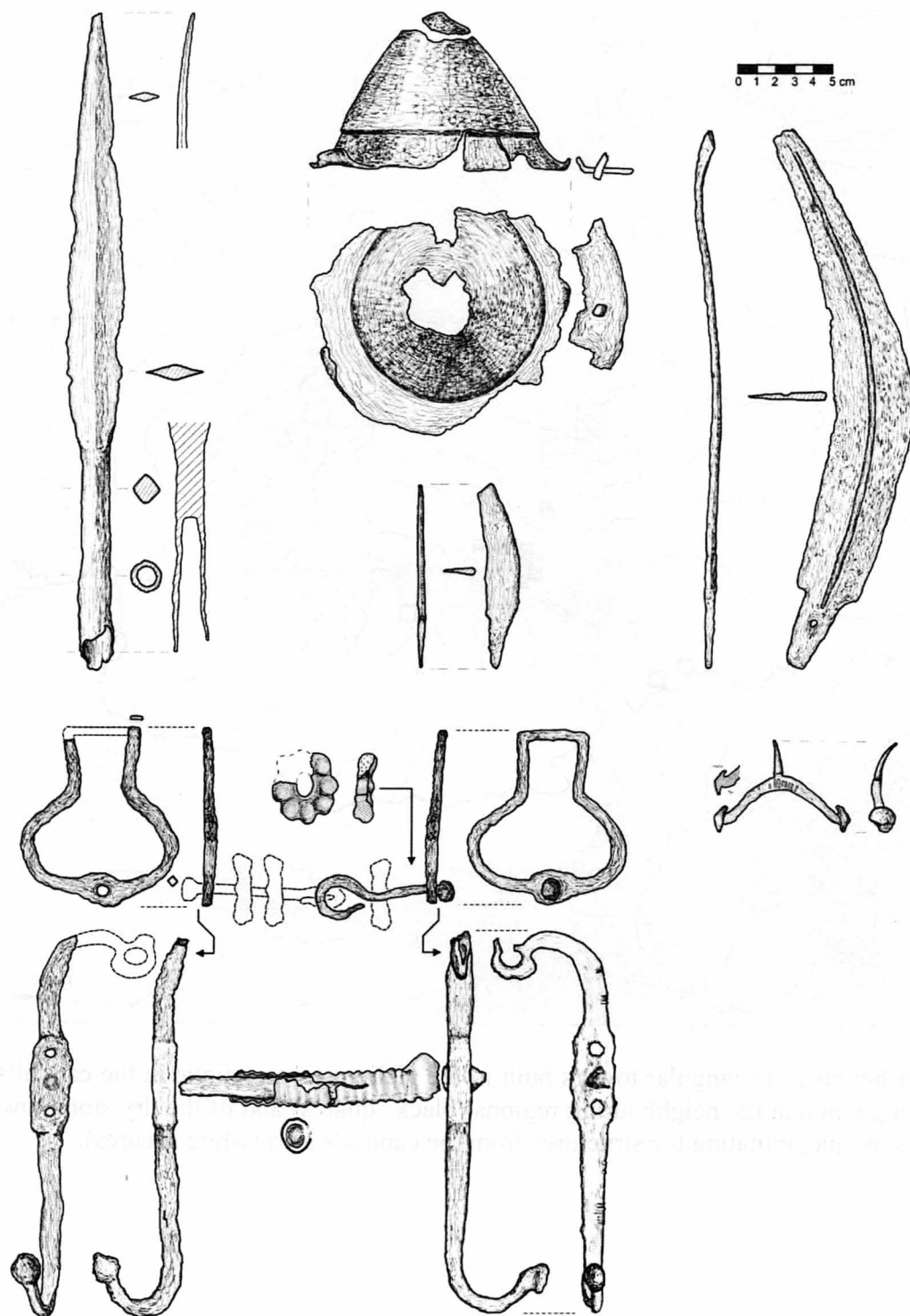
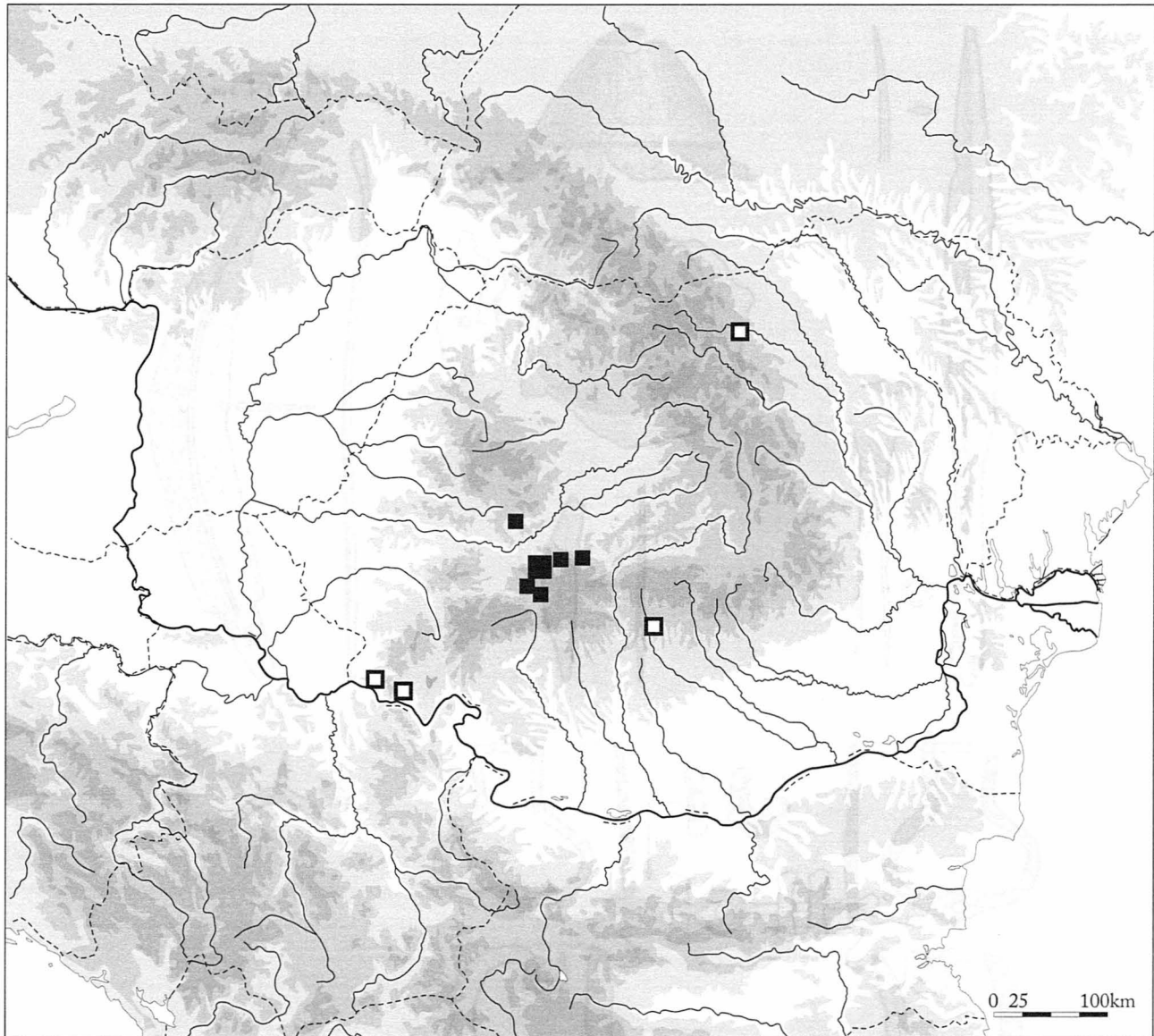


Fig. 11. Cremation grave from Dubova (after Spânu 2001-2002).





**Fig. 12.** Distribution of rectangular towers built in the Hellenistic technique in the capital's area of the Dacian kingdom and the neighbouring regions (black squares) and of the dry stone towers built in the local technique, imitating the structures from the capital's area (white squares).



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**Fig. 13.** Ashlar walls and towers built in the Hellenistic technique from the area of Sarmizegetusa Regia and the neighbouring regions. 1. Grădiştea de Munte. 2. Costeşti-Blidaru. 3. Consteşti-Cetăuie. 4. Tilişca (1, 3-4 photos by A. Rustoiu; 2 photo by Z. Czajlik).

