

A "VIRGIN" WILDERNESS? THE BEIDAUD ARCHAEOLOGICAL MICROZONE

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Abstract: There is a need in Romania for projects and means of action aimed not only at discussing the archaeological remains, but also establishing a "best practice" for heritage management, both regarding conservation, as well as tourism. Until now, projects such as "Frontiers of the Roman Empire" and "Danube Limes" have included the Lower Danube region in activities connected to the international research framework, but as the names imply, they focused on settlements and fortifications on the frontier, thus neglecting inland settlements, still as important for understanding the past.

In our paper we wish to preview the Beidaud Archaeological Microzone, situated in the Romanian Dobruja, and discuss common problems and potential, taking into account the achievements, as well as future plans for the project implemented by the University of Bucharest and the "Gavrilă Simion" Eco-Museum Research Institute of Tulcea.

This archaeological microzone would be especially fit for being introduced in the tourist circuit, as the archaeological sites that compose it pertain to different historical periods (Greek and Roman) and are intrinsically connected to the natural landscape that defined them and, at the same time, was shaped by the human settlements. Therefore, it would be a very relevant example, with a fortified settlement and a rural one, both connected to the area's commercial and agricultural potential and, moreover, supported by all the area's resources.

Keywords: heritage management, tourism, Lower Danube, Roman settlement.

INTRODUCTION

In a country, albeit a member of the European Union, where the Ministry of Culture is being financed with approx. 270 million Euros,¹ it is truly a herculean task to preserve and promote cultural heritage. This amount represented 0.57 % of the total budget of Romania in 2022, although archaeology was nowhere near a priority, the annual grant for archaeological research amounting to the utterly inappropriate sum of 175.500 Euros.²

Nevertheless, there is still hope for ambitious projects aiming to not only excavate, but also to protect and bring value to the community through archaeology. One of the objectives of such a project must be establishing a "best practice" for heritage management, both regarding conservation as well as responsible/sustainable tourism.

¹ Official data for 2022 at https://mfinante.gov.ro/static/10/Mfp/buget2022/Anexa_3/Ministerul_Culturii.pdf.

² http://www.cultura.ro/sites/default/files/inline-files/rezultate%20dupa%20contestati%20pe%20site_2.pdf.

Until now, projects such as "Frontiers of the Roman Empire"³ and "Danube Limes"⁴ have included the Lower Danube region in activities connected to the international research framework, but as the names imply, they focused more on fortifications on the frontier and less on settlements, thus neglecting inland settlements, which constitute an important aspect for understanding the past. In the following lines we wish to present and argue in favour of a project that aims to change this situation.

WHAT IS BAM?

Due to numerous discoveries in the southern half of the Casimcea foothills at the end of the 1970s, a series of land surveys were conducted by members of the Danube Delta Museum (now ICEM), which yielded the necessary information to start understanding the archaeological potential, both in terms of isolated finds and archaeological perimeters. Therefore, in the article published in 1980,⁵ Gavrilă Simion and Elena Lăzurcă mention a Neolithic settlement, a multi-layered fortified settlement (spanning from the Early Iron Age up to the Late Roman period), a tumular funerary space and a rural Roman era settlement in the area of the commune of Beidaud.

From this short, but chronologically diverse list of points of interest, a project was initiated in 2020 by the joint efforts of the University of Bucharest and ICEM Tulcea, marking the inception of the Beidaud Archaeological Microzone (or BAM).⁶ The microzone under scrutiny is situated roughly 30 km southwest from Orgame/*Argamum*, and similarly west from Istros/*Histria*, in a hydrologically bountiful area (observable even today) in an otherwise arid landscape.

THE SITES

This research project proposes a complex approach for understanding the habitation in and use of the area known today as the Hamangia Valley (Fig. 1), spanning multiple time periods and implying a multi-disciplinary perspective.

There is not enough data about the Neolithic settlement to form a firm opinion, as it is only mentioned in the first article about the Iron Age fortified settlement.⁷ Nevertheless, several pottery sherds (dated in phase III of the Hamangia culture) were discovered at the easternmost edge of the village of Beidaud, in the so-called "La Grădină" point (Fig. 2). Since this land is currently in use for agriculture, it is difficult to research and protect it, at the very least until suitable project-partners can be found.

Chronologically, the first excavated archaeological site is the Iron Age fortified settlement on Calebair Hill, thanks to the involvement of G. Simion and E. Lăzurcă. Nevertheless, by modern standards, its name is misleading, since the published material exhibits evidence of human habitation and activity starting from the Late Bronze Age (Coslogeni)⁸, Hallstatt period⁹, Greek and Hellenistic periods,¹⁰ up until the Late Roman period, with a few traces of Medieval (10th-11th centuries AD) interventions in the area.¹¹

The site presents itself as a promontory settlement (Fig. 2-3), accessible through three gates (the main one situated on the northern side) safeguarded by steep cliffs on two sides (east and southeast), while the rest of the perimeter is encircled by what seems to be a *fossa et vallum* type system. The total surface of the settlement amounts to 2.5 ha, as it reigns over the surroundings, flanked by the Hamangia river to the west and one of its tributaries, the Solojan, to the east. The excavation of two trenches, perpendicular to one another (N-S and W-E), allowed the partial study of the fortification system (composed of a defence ditch between either two earthen *valla* or two rows of wooden walls filled with earth and stone),¹² built roughly in the second half of the 6th century BC, as well as the investigation of several features (mainly dwellings and waste pits) ranging

³ For an introduction see Breeze, Jilek 2008.

⁴ <https://www.danube-limes.eu/homepage/>.

⁵ Simion, Lăzurcă 1980.

⁶ Bottez 2021, 243. For a more thorough presentation of the project see Bottez 2021; Bottez 2022, 35-38.

⁷ Simion, Lăzurcă 1980, 37, pl. IV, fig. 1.

⁸ Initially formulated in Simion, Lăzurcă 1980, 42, it is recently disputed in Ailincăi 2020, 119.

⁹ Ailincăi 2020.

¹⁰ Lungu, Dupont, Simion 2007; Dupont, Lungu 2010.

¹¹ Iliescu, Stănescu forthcoming.

¹² Ailincăi 2020, 108.

from the Early Iron Age to the Early Roman period.¹³ However, the excavated trenches should be considered only as a pilot project: even if it yielded important information, the total researched surface can be considered insufficient by modern standards, especially in order to conceive an effective plan to integrate in a project of responsible/sustainable tourism.



Fig. 1. The Hamangia Valley and the fortified settlement (photo Valentin Bottez).

Nearly half a century after the first investigations made on the hills west of the Iron Age settlement, a team composed of scholars from both the University of Bucharest and ICEM Tulcea conducted three field surveys.¹⁴ These were necessary to verify and more efficiently register the boundary of the Roman settlement, as well as the extent of the tumular funerary space mentioned by Gavrilă Simion. The results were twofold: evidence of habitation during the Early and Late Roman periods was confirmed by pottery analysis; the surface occupied by the rural settlement is much larger, stretching out to a nearby hill to the southwest (or it may be a different phase/settlement).¹⁵ At a later stage, non-invasive methods started being used to map the entire settlement and some of the results (in this case, a magnetic anomaly) were corroborated through archaeological excavation.¹⁶ The main part of the rural settlement has an impressive vista to the south, where one can admire steep rocky cliffs and a small ravine, crowned by shrubs, as well as the "Cola Gudam" spring.

To the north and northwest of the area considered as the maximum extent of the rural settlement, one can hardly observe small prominences on the rocky soil, during seasons in which the vegetation is scarce. These are, in fact, *tumuli* weathered by time (Fig. 4), in the present reaching less than 1 meter in height. Some of them are so damaged that only slight traces on the ground can be seen today, therefore their total number cannot be stated yet (a planned LIDAR scan will shed more light on this subject). Before starting the systematic investigation of these mounds, the cultural horizon they belonged to was uncertain. But the 2021 archaeological campaign¹⁷ proved to be revealing in this respect, since in the first excavated complex (still

¹³ Even though Late Roman artifacts were discovered, no structures or complexes linked to this habitation phase have been identified so far.

¹⁴ Iliescu, Stănescu, Bottez 2022, 113, Fig. 3.

¹⁵ Iliescu, Stănescu, Bottez 2022, 94-96.

¹⁶ Bottez et al. 2023a, 52-55.

¹⁷ Our institutional partner for this sector is Aix-Marseille Université, represented by dr. Gaëlle Granier, specialist in archeoethanatology.

ongoing), named T01 (Fig. 5), were identified a series of funerary structures belonging exclusively to the Early Roman period (2nd-3rd centuries AD).¹⁸



Fig. 2. The Beidaud Archaeological Microzone (orthophotoplan Mihai Florea, MNIR).

To summarize, two areas of interest are currently being researched (the Roman rural settlement and the funerary space), while both non-invasive and invasive research methods are planned for the fortified settlement in the near future. The area with Neolithic discoveries, as well as supplementary field surveys in areas where there could be Roman *villae rusticae* (e.g., the Roman *villa* at Sarighiol de Deal, situated westward from our current area of interest), are planned and will be explored at a later date.

AN ISSUE OF ECONOMICS?

Economics plays a significant role in the public's relationship with archaeology and cultural heritage, being described as one of the chief reasons¹⁹ that our field has relevance for governments and individuals. It would be ideal, if not becoming outright mandatory, that every archaeologist has a basic grasp of both archaeological economics and how archaeology can operate as an economic asset.

The use of archaeology as an economic asset can have negative aspects: on one hand, restricting access or even distorting cultural values, and on the other a commercialization for tourism damages the physical fabric of sites and objects found therein²⁰, while looting motivated by economic gain utterly destroys sites and the information they contain. The latter is of immediate concern in our country if we look at recent trends on social media, for example, as well as an acknowledgement by the National Commission for Archaeology and its willingness to address the issue from a scientific and legal standpoint.²¹

¹⁸ Bottez 2022, 40-42; Bottez et al. 2023b, 56-59.

¹⁹ Burtenshaw 2017, 31; for a broader discussion see Flatman 2012.

²⁰ Burtenshaw 2017, 41.

²¹ Meeting held at Târgoviște, 31st May 2023, during the Annual Archaeology Reports Session.

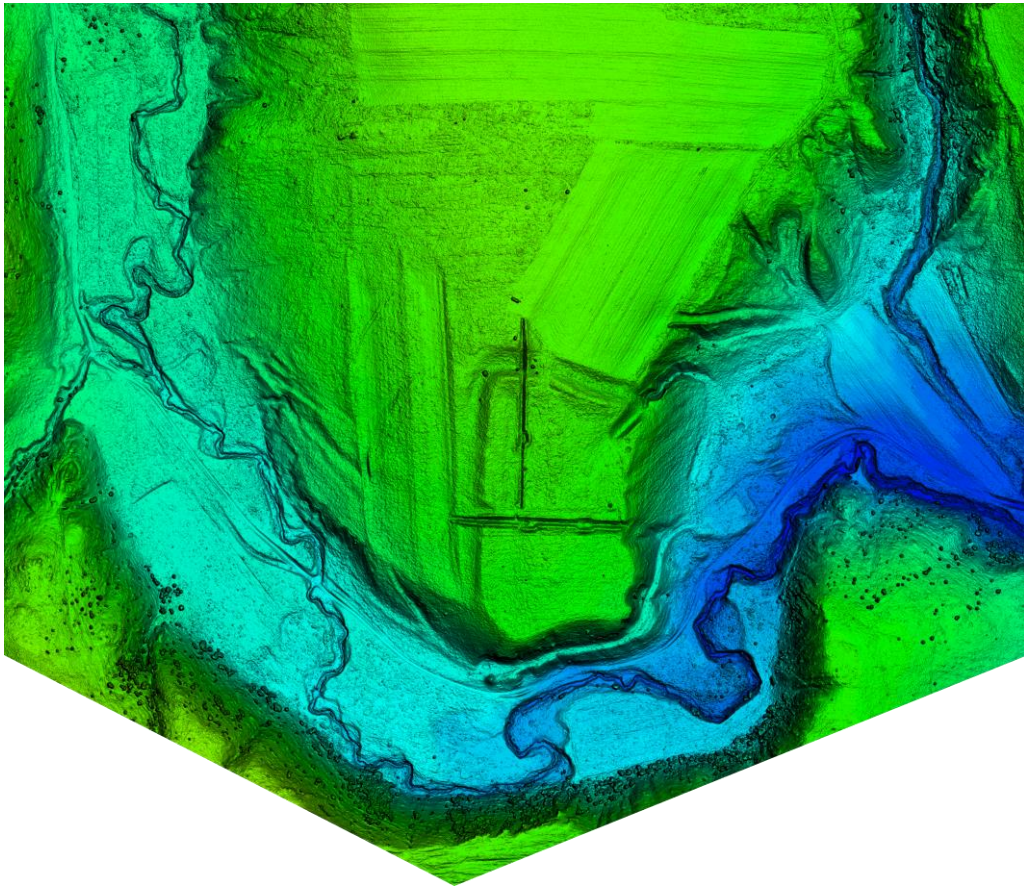


Fig. 3. DEM of the fortified settlement and the surrounding valley (Florin Nache).

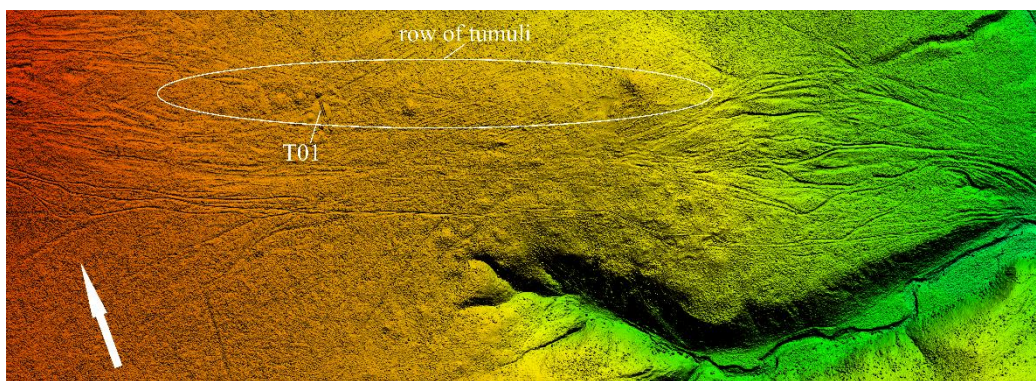


Fig. 4. DEM with row of tumuli and T01 (Florin Nache).

However, we ought to see the positive aspects as well: if not wholly ignorant, economic incentives can be used to halt more destructive processes, such as using responsible tourism to prevent looting (the jobs created can become a more powerful motivation to preserve sites instead). Moreover, the economic impact of preserving sites, especially in cities, can interact well with urban regeneration and a new view of urban planning.

The presentation of archaeological sites to the public,²² using R. Grima's wording, "encompasses a vast and bewildering array of encounters between a cacophony of audiences, each with their different needs, and an equally cacophonous variety of archaeological contexts, each of which presents its own problems and challenges".²³

²² For an expanded discussion, see Grima 2017.

²³ Grima 2017, 73.



Fig. 5. 2021 excavations in T01 (photo Valentin Bottez).



Fig. 6. 3D model - the fortified settlement (caption Florin Nache).

The Hamangia Valley, as explained earlier, has different areas/points of interest, although not all of them (or individually) are equally able to convey the importance of taking in the scale and context of the landscape as a continuum. Therefore, the notion of an "archaeological site" has to be challenged, requiring the use of a broad definition: any place where *in situ* archaeological remains may be encountered, ranging from a sprawling landscape, through the more conventional ruin with a gated access, to the archaeological fragments that survive on the busy streets or open fields.²⁴

A site (or more as is the case at Beidaud) presents challenges when it comes to accessibility, either physical and/or financial. Physical access to an archaeological site is one of the prerequisites for it to be enjoyed at first hand, its very setting in the landscape being an intrinsic component. If we observe the promontory settlement and the Roman rural one, only the bravest of visitors, owning off-road vehicles, could make the trip and enjoy it. It becomes even more difficult when considering the principle that "any public facility must provide access for all, without discriminating against persons with any form of disability"²⁵: the design of visitor infrastructure (from entry, pathways, public areas, amenities, etc.) has to provide for both conservation, sustainability and indiscriminate access. There is, however, good news: the physical relationship between people and places is being reshaped by technologies such as virtual reality and

²⁴ Grima 2017, 75.

²⁵ Grima 2017, 79.

augmented reality, making it possible for users to interact with a virtual, simulated space (e.g., a reconstructed environment from two millennia ago) without the arduous trek or drive. And a first step was already taken in this direction, with the creation of a 3D model of the entire area in question in 2021 (Fig. 6). This can be built upon, by introducing reconstructions of the ancient settlements and providing public access to all the 3D models via a dedicated internet site.

FINAL REMARKS

The method of presenting archaeological remains to the public takes shape before the design of facilities. It begins with the first discoveries, excavations and study, on one hand, and in the series of decisions about the preservation of remains, on the other. An interpretation of a site that is founded solely on chronology, phasing and artifact typology is unlikely to make the encounter memorable. However, an engagement with themes such as the crisis and prosperity of communities, locals and newcomers, or the relationship between people and landscape²⁶ (themes that are found in the Hamangia Valley and can be explored further) is more likely to do so.

Interactions with the public during the research phase is also to be considered if we desire to keep the public interest in view throughout the entire process. That is why since the first year of excavation, the Beidaud team tried to present their project to the public through interviews²⁷ and posts on social media. Another middle term objective is the creation of an internet site to promote the microzone's historical archaeological potential (and the research project), its natural environment, and its historical importance.

Nevertheless, the primary rule that should be followed is that each site will present unique conditions, difficulties and opportunities, and that no solution may be imported fully and applied without careful development to suit the situation. There is still a long way to go before the research project will reach its final stages.

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²⁶ Bottez 2021, 246.

²⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IUFRRUrzcKE&t=333s>.

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