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VOLUME II



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*These proceedings are dedicated to the memory of
C. Sebastian Sommer,
dear friend and colleague,
man who dedicated his entire life to the Roman limes.*

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The Location of 6th-Century *Βιμινάκιον*. Status *quaestionis* and Hypotheses*

ABSTRACT

During the 6th century, the city of *Viminacium* was restored thanks to the return of the imperial authority in the province of *Moesia Prima*, after the great crisis of the 5th century. The settlement had been already mentioned as a πόλις by Procopius, Hierocles and Theophylact Simocatta, but none of these sources provide detailed descriptions nor its precise location. Theophylact also defined the city as a νῆσος, when recalling the military events that took place some years after the Avar attack of 584. The current knowledge of the topography of the site allows the word νῆσος to raise even more questions about the possible location of the settlement during the 6th century. It has been proposed that the settlement was not reconstructed over the old Roman town, since the original settlement was not established on a river island or peninsula after all. By providing a careful analysis of the literary and archaeological data gathered on the site, and by comparing them to historical references to similar settlements, we will explore the possibility that the 6th century *Viminacium* developed in the vicinity of the Roman colonia.

KEY WORDS: LATE ANTIQUITY, VIMINACIUM, JUSTINIAN, ILLYRICUM, AVARS, TOPOGRAPHY, THEOPHYLACT SIMOCATTA, LOCALISATION.

Historical overview and topographical issue

Viminacium, the capital of *Moesia Prima*, had experienced a significant period of economic develop-

ment from the end of the 3rd century and during the 4th in particular. In that period several emperors resided in the city¹, as the settlement was considered an important military center that garrisoned the majority of troops in

*DANUBIUS Project (ANR / I-SITE ULNE) – Université de Lille / HALMA-UMR 8164, and Pontificio Istituto di Archeologia Cristiana
¹Diocletian between August and September 293 and between September and October of 294 (*Codex Iustinianus*, II, 19, 8 – V, 16, 20 – VI, 2, 11 – VIII, 35, 5 – 44, 22–50 16 – IX, 22, 12). Constantine in May of 321 (*Codex Iustinianus*, VIII, 10, 6) and in August of 334 (*Codex Theodosianus* XII, 1, 21). Here in 337, Constantius II met Athanasius (Athanasius *Apologia ad Constantium Imperatorem* V, 21, ed. Szymusiak 1958 LXI, 93; *Codex Theodosianus* X, 10, 4). Gratian visited the city in 382 (*Codex Theodosianus* XII, 1, 89).

the province². During the 4th and 5th centuries *Viminacium* was also an episcopal see³, as well as an important commercial hub for Roman and Hun traders⁴. According to Priscus, the city was conquered by the Huns in 441. After the agreements made by the raiders and the Empire regarding the control of conquered territories, *Viminacium* was included in a buffer zone established in the area that stretched from Pannonia to the cities of *Naissus* and *Novae*⁵, cutting off the city from the Empire's authority.

The city was reconquered later on under Justinian, following the ambitious imperial program to take back the lost Balkan territories described in Procopius' *De Aedificiis*⁶. Following the successful recovery of the settlement, the emperor re-established the province of *Moesia Prima* and once again bestowed upon it the status of episcopal see⁷, which had a double authority: administrative and religious, like the other episcopal sees restored by the Emperor in the Balkans⁸. It seems reasonable that these measures could also have been associated with a reorganization of the site's defensive system.

The city was attacked and sacked again in 584 by Avar and Slav raiders⁹. Although the site was soon recovered by imperial forces, at the beginning of the 7th century the area was definitively lost. The last mention of *Viminacium* is provided in Theophylact Symocatta's *History*, in a section dedicated to the events of the *biennium* 599–600. The author reports that after the reoccupation of the site, the imperial forces organized an attack from *Viminacium* towards the *Barbaricum*, which resulted in the victory of the Romans over the Avars in three different battles. As for the years 601–602, however, the

author doesn't provide further indications, due to the definitive loss of the settlement following the collapse of the imperial authority over central *Illyricum*.

Regarding these last events, we ought to bear in mind the historical-literary evidence provided by Theophylact Simocatta and Theophanes. When Theophylact describes the events that took place in 599–600¹⁰, in fact, the historian identifies Βιμινάκιον no longer as a πόλις but as an island on the Danube. In his *History*, the author mentions the site twice using the term πόλις in relation to the events of 584, whereas he uses the word νῆσος when referring to the military operations that followed¹¹. Hence we could suspect that during the last years of the 6th century the settlement may have undergone depopulation and a change in its institutional status, possibly as a result of the crisis caused by Avar attacks.

On the other hand, archaeological research has not yet provided any evidence of the infrastructure, religious buildings and houses that would commonly define a *civitas* or a πόλις, and neither has it traced its exact location. Furthermore, it remains fairly uncertain whether the πόλις was rebuilt *ex-novo* on the left bank of the Mlava river¹², or whether the Justinianic settlement was built upon the Roman *colonia*, originally located on the right bank¹³.

An Interpretation of Archaeological and Historical Data

Traces of the occupation of the area during the 6th century have been brought to light on the left bank of the old Mlava River where the remains of some de-

²*Notitia Dignitatum partibus orientis* XLI (ed. Seeck O. 1876, 92–94).

³Athanasius, *Epistola* XLVI (transl. Schaff 1892), *Ep. ad Episcopos Aegypti et Lybiae* I, 8 (P. G. XXV, 537); *Epistolae et Decreta Celistini*, III (P. L., L, 427).

⁴Priscus, *Fragmenta* VIII (ed. Carolla 2008).

⁵Liebeschuetz 2007, 105. See also Ivanišević, Kazanski 2014, 137.

⁶Procopius, *De Aedificiis* IV, 5 (ed. Dell'Osso 2018, 319).

⁷Under the control of the archbishop of *Iustiniana Prima*, see *Iustiniani Novellae* XI (ed. Schöll, Kroll 1928).

⁸For example, we can mention the case of the religious and civil prerogatives of which the bishop of the city of *Aquae*, in *Dacia Ripensis*, was invested. On the topic see Curta 2001, Madgearu 2010.

⁹Theophylact Simocatta *Historiae* I, 3, 4. (ed. De Boor 1972)

¹⁰Bury 1889, 140.

¹¹Theophylact Simocatta, *Historiae* VIII, 1, 2 (ed. De Boor 1972)

¹²Mali Grad area.

¹³Fig. 1.

fensive structures have been partially investigated.¹⁴ Count Marsigli was the first to notice the remains of a quadrangular fortress with circular towers known then as Castolatz¹⁵. Traces of this fortress (in the area of Todićeva Crkva)¹⁶ were briefly surveyed by Vasić¹⁷ and Popović¹⁸, and further excavations took place in 2016/2017, but the results are yet to be published.

The first excavations outlined the perimeter of the fortress¹⁹ along with traces of four corner towers and a 3 m. wide rampart²⁰, although the chronology of these remains is still largely debated and the lack of monographic publications hinders the development of informed hypotheses. Nevertheless, through articles published on the topic we can infer that this area had been used for defensive purposes until the 12th century, as the two linked fortifications of Mali Grad and Veliki Grad were still garrisoned up to that time. In these fortifications, archaeologists have made finds dated to the 10th and 12th centuries²¹.

Through the similarity to other forts built along the Danubian *limes* in the 6th century²², Vasić and Popović have recognized the features of Justinianic military architecture²³ in the remains attested at Todićeva Crkva / Mali Grad²⁴. On this basis Popović has surmised that the Byzantine city of Βιμινάκιον may have been established on the left bank of the Mlava, after the older Roman city structures on the right bank of the river were abandoned. Even though this hypothesis reiterates previous interpretations based on Vasić's research²⁵, it is important to consider a recent article where it is clearly stated that during the latest excavations by Ivanišević, which took place in the same site, archaeologists have not attested any layers²⁶ from the

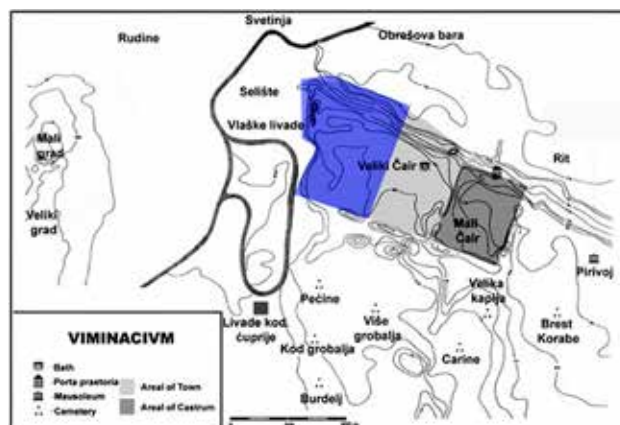


Fig. 1 - Špehar 2010. The area and its toponyms. Βιμινάκιον's hypothetical location in the ancient city area (blue).

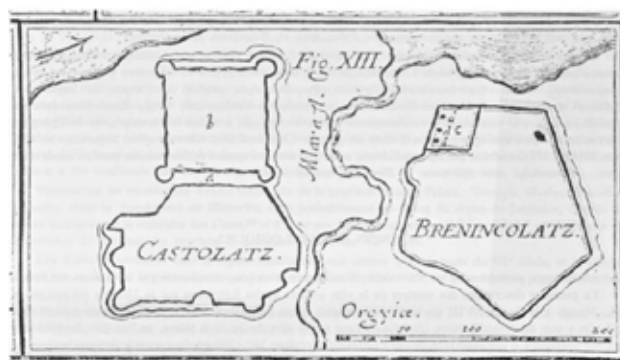


Fig. 2 - Marsigli 1726.

6th century. The results of these excavations are still unpublished, but they seem to suggest the total absence of creditable evidence dating to that century, hence disproving the hypothesis that identified Mali Grad with a Justinianic fortress. More reliable evidence is provided by a site unearthed during the 80's in Svetinja²⁷, roughly a kilometer and half away from Mali Grad, where a defensive structure dating back to the 6th century has

¹⁴See Popović 1967, Popović 1988, Milošević 1988, Popović, Ivanišević 1989.

¹⁵Marsigli 1726, *Danubius II*, tav. XII. The settlement of Castolatz, today Kostolac. Fig. 2.

¹⁶Fig. 3, Fig. 4.

¹⁷Vasić 1906.

¹⁸Popović 1967, 34.

¹⁹Vujović 2005, 588.

²⁰Popović 1967, 32. Popović 1988, 32. Fig. 5.

²¹Fig. 4.

²²Popović 1988, 32.

²³Vasić 1906, 66–70. Popović 1988. Popović, Ivanišević 1989.

²⁴Fig. 1, 3, 4.

²⁵Vasić 1906, 56–70. The same interpretation was already proposed by Jireček, see Jireček 1887. This identification is still accepted by several scholars, see Vujović 2005, Komatina 2016.

²⁶Ivanišević 2017.

²⁷Fig. 4, 5.



Fig. 3 - The hill of Todićeva Crkva. 44°44'21.72"N and 21°11'13.61". Google Earth. May 10, 2018. February 25, 2019.

been found. The site holds the remains of a fortress that had been erected on the ruins of a previous building²⁸ when the Imperial authorities built the 100 m. long fortified wall to seal off the strip of land between the Mlava and a secondary branch of the Danube, from north to south. This wall was strengthened with two towers raised on its western side²⁹.

To this first phase belongs also a house built on the eastern side of the wall, along with another 18 m. long wall perpendicular to the main one near the north tower that continues towards the east. Its purpose was probably to watch over a river dock nearby, and control the roads towards the surrounding areas³⁰ and the hinterland. The construction of other houses along the eastern side of the main fortification wall is also dated to the 6th century³¹. On the basis of the presence of Germanic weapons within these buildings and of a Germanic burial ground in the vicinity, it has been suggested that these structures form the barracks for a garrison of *foederati*³² who served under the Empire. The deployment of such troops at the borders dates back to the 30s of the 6th century: from the amphoras LR1 and LR2 discovered within these buildings we can infer that the Roman authorities provided the garrison with

food supplies.³³ The signs of destruction and restorations carried out in the last years of the century are due however to the effects of the Avaro-Slavic offensive in 584, which was followed fifteen years later by the reorganization of the imperial forces under Priscus and Comentiolus. In fact, the most recent archaeological traces of the Byzantine site do not go beyond the first years of the 7th century, when the site was abandoned for good after the definitive breakthrough of the *limes* by Slavic populations, consistent with Theophylact's silence after AD 600.

As we have seen, although the "Byzantine" structures show prominent defensive-military features, the site lacks evidence of civil and religious structures. Although the exact location of Βιμινάκιον remains unsure, the absence of developed civilian facilities along the left bank of the Mlava and further considerations on the Roman *Viminacium* may provide significant clues. All we know about the ancient Roman city, originally located on the right bank of the Mlava River, comes from a site unearthed by the north-eastern district of the *castra*. The latest publications on the topic point out the absence of chronological accounts beyond the middle of the 5th century. Although the excavations have covered only a small part of the urban perimeter, it can't be excluded that the absence of chronological accounts may be due both to the gradual abandonment of this area during the 6th century and to the recovery program pursued by the Empire. It is possible, in fact, that the restoration may have affected only certain areas of the Roman city, by reshaping and refurbishing older buildings on the basis of *praxis* also attested in other settlements. In fact, between the end of the 4th and the 6th century the consolidation of the urban centers into segments of the original city is commonly found³⁴ among different cities in *Illyricum*³⁵. In *Sirmium*, for example, the contraction of urban spaces around the southern

²⁸Popović 1988, 5.

²⁹Milošević 1988. The towers were built with the same technique as the main wall, with bricks, stones, reused material and *spolia* from the necropolis of the Roman city, Mirković 1999, 19. Fig. 5.

³⁰On this topic Mirković 1999, 20–23.

³¹Milošević 1988, 57–58. Fig. 5.

³²Ivanišević 2016, 91.

³³On the historical value of the imperial supplies along the Danube *limes* see Karagiorgou 2001. About the other the ceramic finds see Popović 1988, 19–23.

³⁴About the changes in city life in Late Antique *Illyricum* see Poulter 2007, Dintchev 1999 and Snyvelyn 2008.

³⁵At *Oescus* and *Serdica*, a contraction of the urban area is documented from the 5th century. Dintchev 1999, 42–43, 47.

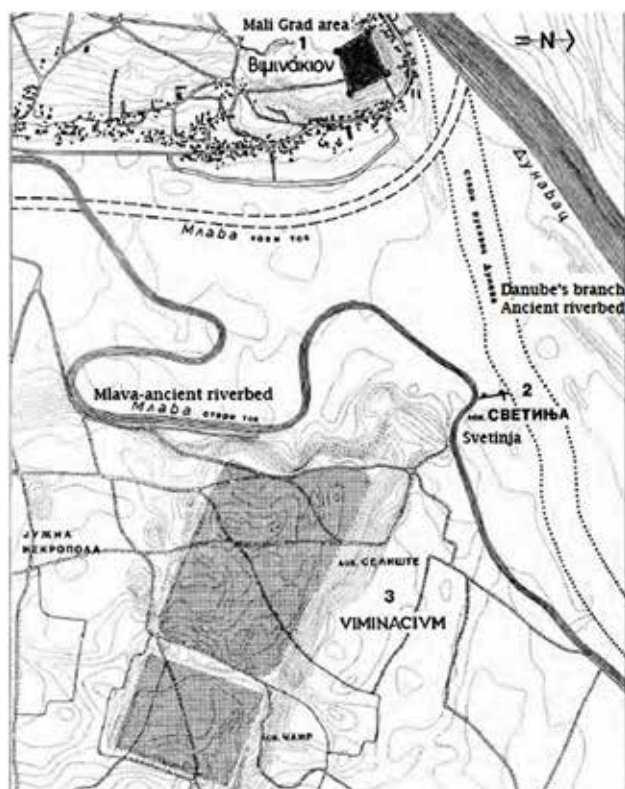


Fig. 4 - After Popović, Ivanišević 1989.
The situation on the Mlava's left bank.

area of the site, toward the Sava River is attested as early as the 5th century.³⁶ Indeed in *Singidunum*³⁷, the progressive abandonment of several neighborhoods in the city³⁸ can be traced back to the end of the 4th century, along with the concentration of the suburbs around the *castra*³⁹ by the Sava.

Based on the evidence gathered so far, it seems realistic to suppose that *Viminacium* might have undergone the same process during the 6th or even the 5th century, when most of the population presumably left the ea-

stern quarters of the settlement for the western ones, closer to the Mlava. This movement would be justified by the need to control the river docks and the bridge, while gaining direct access to water resources closer to the Svetinja fortress. The fort had in fact an important logistical role in protecting the connections between the Danube area and the provincial hinterland, all the while ensuring a safe loading hub for food supplies⁴⁰.

Today, the western portion of the town is known only from a drawing made by Kanitz⁴¹ and through a few surveys. The geomagnetic surveys⁴² carried out in this area have in fact revealed the existence of a fortified annex of 8 hectares⁴³ added to the city perimeter⁴⁴. From the survey it can be seen how this annex is equipped with at least eight circular towers protruding from the rampart⁴⁵, in accordance with the features of a defensive architecture style in use from the 4th century⁴⁶ through the 6th. Furthermore, artifacts dating from between the 1st and the 6th century have been brought to light in this area as well. This set of evidence provides a significant chronological horizon that accounts for the longer-lasting inhabitation of this area, unlike the eastern sector of the ancient city.

The architecture of the city rampart is of primary importance, as it points out the fundamental problematic of this article in regards to the exact location of Βιμινάκιον. The remains of this annex, the chronology suggested by the findings and the style of the defensive system could represent solid evidence for the possibility that Βιμινάκιον is to be located in the western sector of the older Roman city⁴⁷. Considering that the area over the annex may have been settled as early as the 4th century, we could surmise that the Byzantine

³⁶Bavant 1984, 263, and Jeremić 2002. About the reduction of urban areas in the central *Illyricum*, see Popović 1982, Ciglenečki 2014. Fig. 6.

³⁷Popović 1997, 16–18

³⁸See Ivanišević, Kazanski 2002.

³⁹Popović 1997, 17. The author assumes that during the 6th century the population may have moved into the demilitarized areas of the *castra*. See also Popović 1982.

⁴⁰On the topic see Mirković 1999.

⁴¹Kanitz 1868, 413. Fig. 7.

⁴²Mrđić, Milovanović 2005, 396.

⁴³Mrđić, Milovanović 2005, 396. The annex is clearly visible even from satellite images. Fig. 9.

⁴⁴Mrđić, Milovanović 2005, 397.

⁴⁵Mrđić, Milovanović 2005, 396.

⁴⁶*Augustae, Oescus, and Novae*.

⁴⁷It has been already pointed out how the eastern sector of the city does not present traces of occupation beyond the middle of the 5th century.

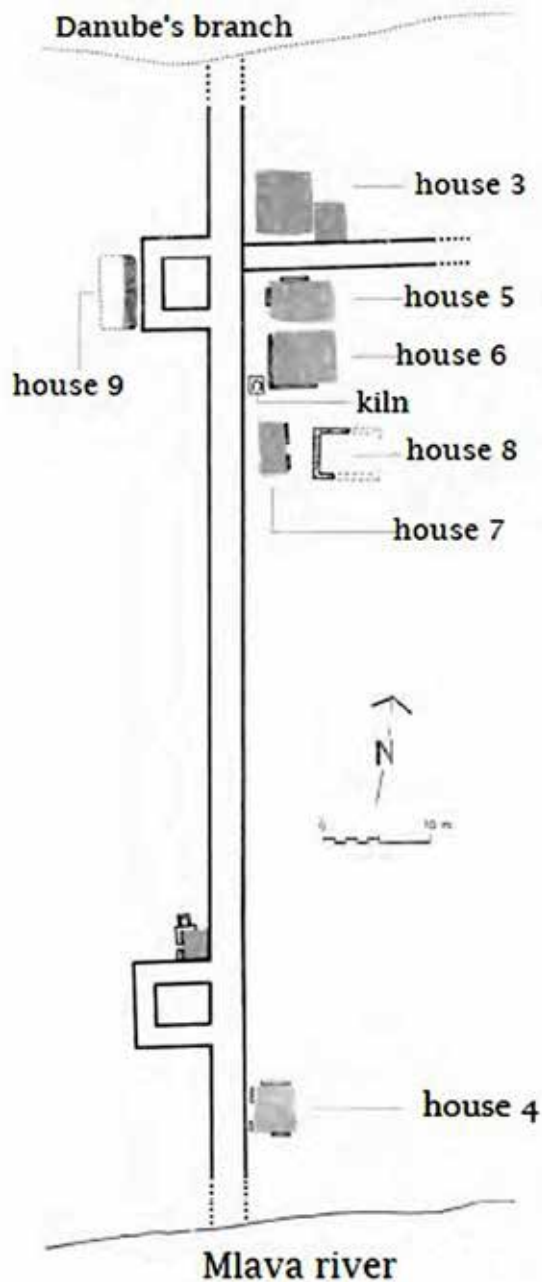


Fig. 5 - After Popović 1988, The Svetinja fortification.

settlement rebuilt by Justinian was indeed concentrated in this area.

Such urban development finds a close parallel in the city of *Nicopolis ad Istrum*⁴⁸, where the construction of a fortified annex⁴⁹ within which dwellers had settled during the 6th century, after the abandonment of the other neighborhoods, is documented from the

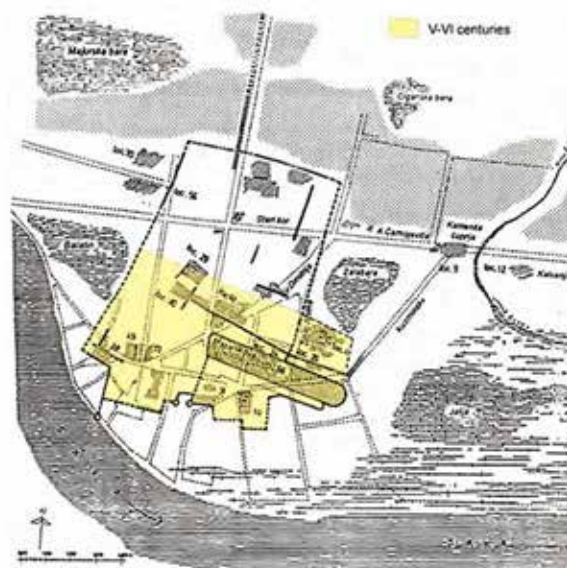


Fig. 6 - Ivanišević 2017, Sirmium, 5-6th century inhabited area.



Fig. 7 - Kanitz 1868. Roman's city western sector (right) and the Mali Grad fortification (left).

second half of the 5th century.⁵⁰ In order to strengthen this hypothesis, we should reevaluate Theophylact's accounts regarding the years 599-600, according to which Βιμινάκιον was regarded as a great island in the Danube. Following this description and the morphology of the territory, in fact, one could argue that locating Βιμινάκιον on the left bank of the Mlava River, rather than over the ancient Roman City, would better

⁴⁸Poulter 2007, 51–82.

⁴⁹Attached to the ancient Antonine walls.

⁵⁰Poulter 2007, 51–82.



Fig. 8 - Viminacium and Ostrovo, satellite view, 44°44'28.70"N and 21°12'18.55"E. Google Earth, November 30, 2018. February 25, 2019. 1. Roman city area, 2. Mali Grad-Todićeva Crkva, 3. Ostrovo, 4. Svetinja.

fit the indications provided by Theophylact. The sites of Todićeva Crkva and Svetinja lie on a strip of land wedged between the ancient bed of the Mlava and a secondary branch of the Danube⁵¹. The peculiar shape of this spit of land enclosed by the Svetinja fortress on its north-eastern side does indeed match the description of an “island”, as mentioned by Theophylact. Equally, however, it would seem possible to assume that he might have had in mind a great river island in the middle of the Danube just north of the site. As shown by satellite images, the Danube's secondary branch, east of Todićeva Crkva, did indeed delimit the contours of a large river island in front of the Byzantine wall of Svetinja⁵².

The mention of an island poses therefore a unresolved topographic problem, as on the basis of this indication and on the presence of the remains attested in Svetinja and Mali Grad it was assumed that Viminacium must have been located on the peninsula washed by the

Mlava River, rather than on the remains of the ancient Roman city⁵³.

However it should be considered that the scarcity of 6th century remains along the left bank of the river Mlava, where there is no evidence of houses, religious buildings or other infrastructures except for the wall of Svetinja⁵⁴, does not match with the status of πόλις held by the city.

Regarding this ambiguity, it might be worth considering the historical context in which Theophylact places his description of the river island. The account, in fact, recalls the events that took place between 599 and 600, when the Imperial army led a victorious campaign against the Avars settled near the site of *Costantiola*⁵⁵, about fifteen years after the destruction of the city Βιμινάκιον.

Theophylact describes with precision that the Romans had reached the “*island Viminacium*”. Here they based

⁵¹Fig. 4.

⁵²Fig. 8, n. 3–4.

⁵³Popović 1988, Popović, Ivanišević 1989. Fig. 4.

⁵⁴Following the destruction of the city in 584, Byzantine authority still managed to keep at least one outpost on the middle course of the Danube, safeguarding the fortified port of Svetinja.

⁵⁵Modern Kovin.

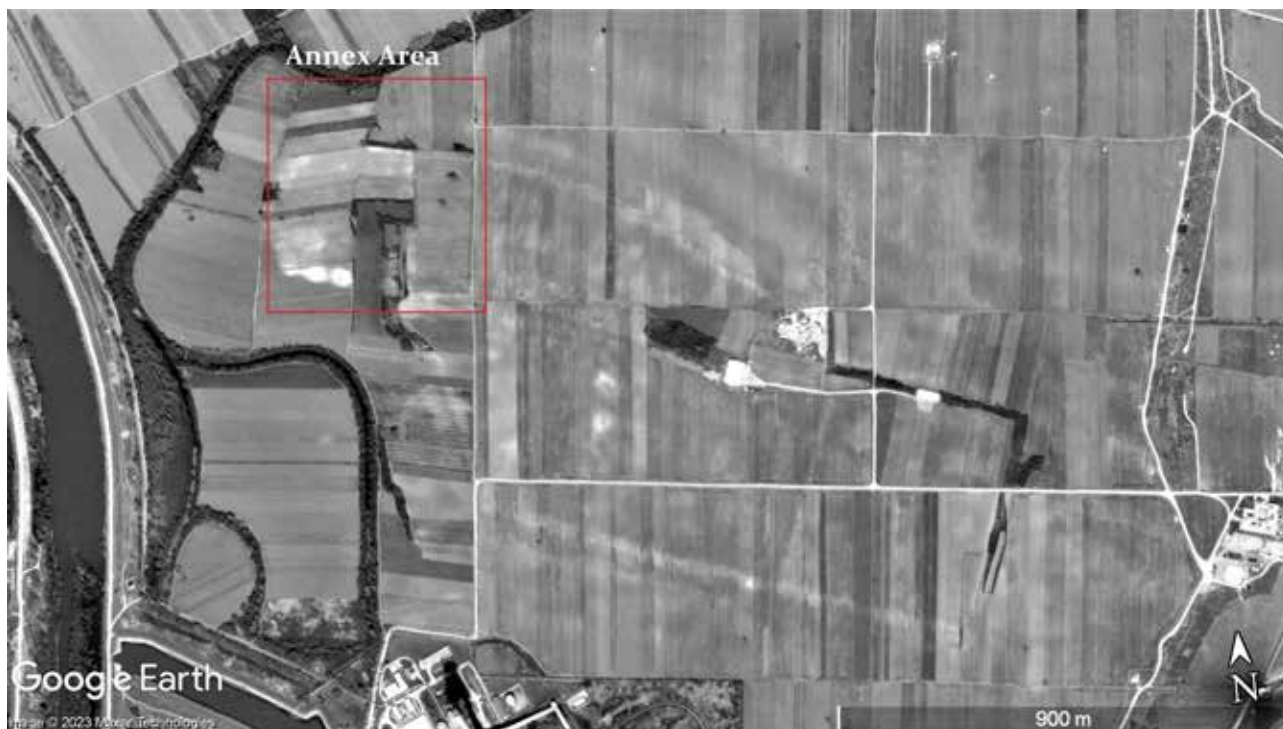


Fig. 9 - Viminacium, the annex area, satellite view, 44°44'15.71"N and 21°12'53.98"E. Google Earth, March 28, 2012. July 10, 2023.

a military camp and a landing for their fleet, which supported the operations carried out in the *Barbaricum*⁵⁶. So, actually, he seems to be simply indicating that on the “island” there were structures related only to military logistics rather than a civil settlement. In fact, he makes no mention about the presence of civilians, in contrast to his accurate account of civilians when reporting all the events about the neighboring city the neighboring city of *Singidunum* in the same years. Today's Belgrade was conquered by the Avars in 583⁵⁷, just before *Viminacium*, but it was not abandoned by the civilians, whose presence is still clearly documented until the last years of the century through the accounts of Theophylact, as he describes in three distinct passages of his *History*⁵⁸ the loss and subsequent recovery of the city by the Romans.

The mention of *Viminacium* as an island in 599-600, therefore, may highlight how the city was no longer inhabited in the last years of the century, possibly excluding the existence of an urban settlement after 584⁵⁹. Because of this, the mention of an island should not be considered as an appropriate topographical indication to surmise the exact location of the Byzantine city.

Conclusion

Following the archaeological, topographical and historical-literary evidence discussed in this paper, it seems unlikely that the site of Βιμινάκιον could be located on the left bank of the Mlava River, whereas the hypothesis that the Justinianic settlement ought to be found in the area occupied by the western quarter (annex) of the

⁵⁶During this operation the fort in Svetinja could have still maintained connections with the rural hinterland and a safe base for some of the imperial ships. About the control of the rivers held by the imperial fleet see Mirković 1999.

⁵⁷Theophylact Simocatta, *Historiae* I, 3, 4 (ed. De Boor 1972, 40).

⁵⁸Theophylact Simocatta, *Historiae* VII (ed. De Boor 1972)

⁵⁹This statement does not exclude the presence of a small rural population scattered in the hinterland, which may have contributed to the sustenance of the Germanic garrison of Svetinja. In fact, locally produced ceramics (Mirković 1999) have been found near the discovered dwellings, which could testify to this collaboration.

old Roman city, on the opposite bank is more feasible⁶⁰. It is also important to underline how in Theophylact's historical work, the adoption of two different terms to identify the site, in relation to diverse chronological horizons, is actually a reflection of the changes that occurred on the site between 584 and 599-600. We could conclude that the two mentions made by the historian thus refer to two different historical-topographical realities that should not be confused while trying to locate the Justinianic settlement.

It is obvious, however, that all the topographical and demographic aspects of the discussion can be properly clarified only through systematic archaeological investigations and surveys of the western district of the old Roman settlement. Further studies would help shed light on the location of the city during the 6th century, its organization on the territory, the exact entity of the recovery program promoted by Justinian and its defensive arrangements. Additionally, we ought to bear in mind that an investigation of all aspects regarding the demographic oscillations related to the events of the 5th century – such as the Hun raids, the Germanic occupation⁶¹ and the renewed imperial phase – would undoubtedly present important new information beyond what we can already retrieve from the chronicles of the "classical" period. Ultimately, with more accurate data we will be able to contextualize the case of *Viminacium* in the broader context of the social and urban adjustments that took place in *Illyricum* during Late Antiquity.

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⁶⁰Fig 1, in blue. In the western sector, survey finds have suggested a continuous occupation of the area from the 1st to the 6th centuries, see Mrđić 2005, 396.

⁶¹See Ivanišević, Kazanski, Mastykova 2006 and Ivanišević, Kazanski 2014.

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Résumé

Détruit par les Huns en 441, le camp romain de Viminacium n'a été restauré qu'au VI^e siècle. Les sources littéraires nous relatent cette restauration, sans toutefois nous fournir de description détaillée de la « nouvelle » agglomération. Le témoignage le plus explicite est celui de Théophylacte Simocatta qui, à la fin du VI^e siècle, utilise deux termes différents pour la qualifier, l'un renvoyant à son statut, l'autre à sa localisation géographique : πόλις et νῆσος. Compte tenu du second de ces deux termes, il a été proposé que l'agglomération ait été relocalisée sur un site différent de celui de la ville romaine, qui se situe sur la rive droite du fleuve Mlava et qui n'a aucunement l'aspect ni d'une île ni d'une péninsule fluviale.

Les restes d'une forteresse ayant été découverts sur la rive gauche dudit fleuve, on a déjà supposé qu'ils pouvaient correspondre à la Viminacium tardive, même si le qualificatif de νῆσος est aussi ici difficilement applicable. C'est que ces structures ont été datées du VI^e siècle. En outre, des fouilles récentes ont démontré qu'il ne faille pas non plus exclure d'autres localisations. L'application à Viminacium du qualificatif de νῆσος remontant à une époque à une époque où l'agglomération du VI^e siècle avait elle-même été abandonnée, il serait même parfaitement légitime de s'interroger sur la valeur de cette référence pour sa localisation.

En l'absence de détail plus précis, il n'apparaît cependant pas prudent de rejeter trop rapidement le témoignage de Théophylacte Simocatta. Aucun élément proto-byzantin n'a été relevé sur la Viminacium romaine jusqu'à maintenant et dont seule la partie orientale, la plus éloignée du fleuve, a été fouillée. En l'occurrence, il semble que, à ce stade de l'exploration archéologique de la Viminacium romaine, il ne faille pas exclure la possibilité que, entre V^e et VI^e siècle, le centre de l'agglomération a été déplacé vers l'ouest en bordure du fleuve Mlava, selon des modalités attestées à Sirmium, mais aussi dans d'autres agglomérations militaires du nord des Balkans romains.

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