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# NORTHERN DANUBIAN BRIDGE-HEADS FROM OLTENIA, FROM THE FIRST WAR OF THE EMPEROR TRAIAN AGAINST THE DACIANS (101-102 A.D.)

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The purpose of this paper is to point out a less known aspect of the Roman invasion in Dacia, in 101 A.D. In fact, it is the moment when the Romans disembarked in Oltenia (the southern part of today's Romania), and when they set out here the first Northern-Danubian bridge-heads. This episode of the wars between the Dacians and the Romans has not been particularly analyzed in the specific literature. In fact, the image was not rendered on the Column of Traian either. The researches have been mainly focused on the strategically concentrations of the Roman troops in Moesia Superior, and on the military operations in Banat, that is the western part of Dacia, where the most important scene of the war between the Dacians and the Romans took place<sup>1</sup>. From this place, the Roman troops forced their moving to the royal Sarmizegetusa, causing, in the end, the collapse of the Dacian state, that inevitably, was turned into a Roman province.

In order to ensure the left flank of the Roman troops from Banat, and also the efficiency of the attacks on the centre of the Dacian state, inside the Carpathian chain, a series of other military units crossed the Danube to the Oltenian and Muntenian sectors of this river. In this area, there were set out bridge-heads, and from here, the Roman forces of invasion advanced to Transylvania.

In this paper, I have retaken into discussion the possible Northern-Danubian bridge-heads from Oltenia, during the time of the first war against the Dacians (101-102 A.D.). This paper has been drawn up based on the published archaeological information.

## 1. Schela Cladovei, Mehedinți County.

In the area of this locality, 50 m North from the Danube (**Fig. 1**), during the time of the Roman invasion in Dacia, a big earthen quadrilateral camp was built. Sizes: 650 x 576m. It is the largest Roman camp from Oltenia.

Marsigli had information about this camp and he registered it under the name *Castrametatio* at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century (1698-1699), when it was still well preserved. At that moment, Marsigli made a plan of the camp (**Fig. 2**). According to his information, the camp had two gates on the southern side, and one on each of the other sides.

At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, at Schela Cladovei, two eminent archaeologists, Gr. Tocilescu and P. Polonic, made some surface researches. The two scientific explorers

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<sup>1</sup> a general presentation of the events, at Cizek 1980, p. 255-303; Petolescu 2000, p. 105-156, etc..

investigated the camp as a whole and drew a plan (Fig. 3). The data registered by Tocilescu and Polonic are similar to the ones recorded by Marsigli. The plan published by D. Tudor was redrawn by N. Gudea nowadays (Fig. 4). The elements of fortification are: a *vallum* with the preserved width of 10 m and the height of 1 m, and a *fossa*, 7 m wide and 0.50 m deep.

The camp seems to have been still functional after the Dacian wars ended; inside it, there were discovered traces of buildings. Moreover, in the specific literature, there have been taken into discussion an underground aqueduct, which led to a cistern. At present, the surface of the camp is covered by modern buildings<sup>2</sup>. We have no information about the military unit or units camped there. Around the camp, on the surface of the ground, there are bricks and ceramic fragments; this fact suggests the existence of a civilian settlement.

Its big size and also its characteristics of *castra aestiva*, prove that at Schela Cladovei occurred a penetration of the Roman invasion troops in 101 A.D.<sup>3</sup> and in this place a big earthen camp was built.

## 2. Bistreț, Dolj County.

In the area of this locality, right on the Northern bank of the Danube, there are traces of two Roman camps. One of them was built in stone, and the other in earth. The camps were discovered at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century by P. Polonic, who drew plans of each camp (Fig. 5). One of these camps was built in stone during the Late Roman period (the 4<sup>th</sup> century), but this is not the subject of this paper.

Now, I am interested in the earthen camp (Fig. 6). When P. Polonic saw it, it had been already more than half-destroyed. There had been only one side completely preserved, 440 m long; the other two sides were 180 m (the Western one) and respectively 260 m long (the Eastern side).

Recent researches, made in 1993, show differences of approximate 40 m<sup>2</sup>; for the moment I cannot explain this situation and the lack of information prevents me from continuing the discussion. I have visited the place of the fortification; nowadays the area is covered with forest and dense vegetation. The elements of defense are two *valla* and two *fossae*. Their breaking off in the middle of the northern side, may suggest that there could have been a gate. We have no information about the military unit or units camped there.

The archaeological excavations made inside the fortification, pointed out a thick medieval level; this fact suggests a subsequent functioning of the camp during the Middle Ages<sup>5</sup>. The few Roman traces could prove precisely the type of fortification, namely *castra aestiva*.

## 3. Zăvalul, Gighera Commune, Dolj County.

There was a (Roman?) fortress in the area of this locality (Fig. 7), in the place called *Cetățuia*, near the point where the river Jiu flew into the Danube<sup>6</sup>. It was registered by Gr. Tocilescu and P. Polonic<sup>7</sup>. Unfortunately, the information could not and cannot be

<sup>2</sup> Davidescu 1980, p. 70.

<sup>3</sup> Petolescu 2000, p. 125.

<sup>4</sup> Avram, Amon, Stoica 1999, p. 43.

<sup>5</sup> Avram, Amon, Stoica 1999, p. 42-47.

<sup>6</sup> Tudor 1978, p. 266, fig. 68/1.

verified. At a certain moment, at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the river Jiu changed its flow and the traces of the fortress were covered by the alluvial deposits. A few years ago, I searched this area in detail, but I found no traces of Roman fortification. Therefore, I do not want to deny its existence, but I can say that it is uncertain. Moreover, inside the fortress, there were discovered many bits and arrows and this fact may suggest its medieval origin. All these, even the setting out of a Roman bridge-head in the point where the river Jiu flew into the Danube, was absolutely necessary for the military control of the valley of this river, and also for the destruction of the Dacian fortifications placed near the river.

#### 4. Sucidava (Celei, Olt County).

Archaeological excavations to point out a Roman fortification of *castra aestivalis* type are not possible today, because of the modern village, that superposed the entire Roman settlement. No doubt, the *Oescus-Sucidava* crossing was used by the Romans to transit invasion forces from Moesia Inferior to Dacia. First of all, it is about Legio V Macedonica camped at Oescus, but also about other units, as we shall see below. Some scholars considered that *Oescus-Sucidava* crossing was used by the emperor Traian himself to transit the Roman army to Dacia<sup>8</sup>, but this is just a hypothesis. The existence of a Roman camp during the time of the first Roman-Dacian war is certified by some archaeological and epigraphical evidence.

Thus, during the excavations between 1957 and 1958 made in the garden of the Primary and Secondary School from Celei, pointed out a *fossa*, 5-6 m wide and 3-3.50 m deep (Fig. 8). The scholars who led the excavations appreciated that this *fossa* must have come only from an earthen camp<sup>9</sup>. The oldest coins found here come from the emperor Traian, and on the ground of the *fossa* a fragment of tile with the stamp of *cohors I Lingonum* was discovered (see below). Unfortunately, the shape and the size of the camp could not have been estimated. Regarding the minor epigraphics, we know some military stamps on bricks or tiles.

*Legio I Italica* is certified at Sucidava by a fragment of stamped tile (Fig. 9) with the reading *Leg(io) I (Italica)*<sup>10</sup>. Although the camp of this *legio* was at Novae and therefore its action area was a little towards the East, it seems that it sent a unit to Sucidava during the time of the Daco-Roman wars.

*Cohors I Lingonum* (Fig. 10) left at Sucidava many stamps on tiles during the first war against the Dacians. One of them was discovered in the *fossa* of the earthen camp built in that time, as I have already mentioned.

It seems that the two troops ensured the garrison and the guard of the Northern-Danubian bridge-head from Sucidava.

#### 5. Islaz, Teleorman County.

In the specific literature, there has been written about three fortifications<sup>11</sup> in the

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<sup>7</sup> acc. to Tudor 1978, p. 309, no. 54.

<sup>8</sup> Miclea, Florescu 1980, p. 37-38.

<sup>9</sup> Tudor, Bujor, Matrosenco 1960, p. 484; Tudor 1966, p. 11.

<sup>10</sup> Tudor 1942, SE 242; Tudor 1958, SE 165; Tudor 1968, SE 219; IDR, II, 235.

<sup>11</sup> Tudor 1978, p. 279, no. 20.

area of this locality (Fig. 11). One of them could be dated in the time of the Roman invasion in Dacia. It is the fortification named *Racovița* (Fig. 12). According to the information published by D. Tudor, the fortification would have been surrounded by two or three earthen walls and defense ditches and it was considered a *castra aestiva*<sup>12</sup>.

Unfortunately, the publishing of this information was made vaguely and confusedly, and at present we cannot verify on the spot, because the area of the fortification is covered by the graveyard of the village Islaz. The drawing published by D. Tudor in the last edition of his monography, *Oltenia romană*<sup>13</sup>, has been redrawn by N. Gudea recently, in a book that analyses the Limes of Roman Dacia<sup>14</sup>.

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These are the Northern bridge-heads, certain or possible (Fig. 13), meaning the Roman camps of *castra aestiva* type set out by the Roman invasion forces in Oltenia, during the time of the first war against the Dacians in 101 A.D. Just 2 fortifications are certain: Schela Cladovei and *Sucidava*. I do not want to deny totally the other three fortifications (Bistreț, Zăval and Islaz), but for the moment we have not certain evidence to prove their existence.

The crossing of the Danube could have been done by *classis Flavia Moesica*, perhaps by other Roman naval squadrons, by setting out some bridges of ships. Surely, what I have said before reflects just the present stage of the investigations (Fig. 14).

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<sup>12</sup> Tudor 1978, p. 279, no. 20.

<sup>13</sup> Tudor 1978, p. 278, fig. 75/1.

<sup>14</sup> Gudea 1997, p. 82, no. 67.

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fig. 1

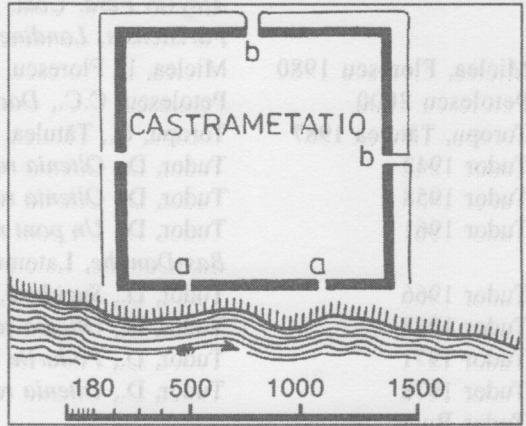


fig. 2

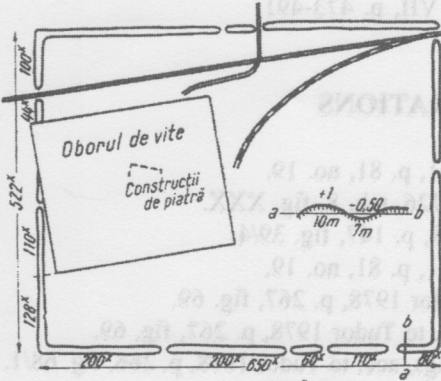


fig. 3

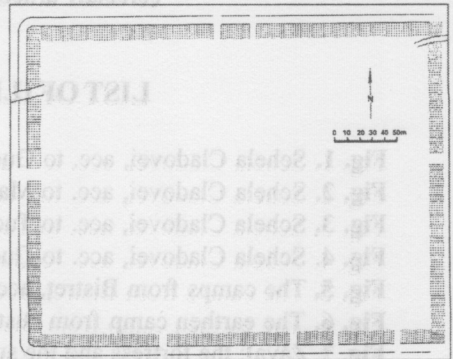


fig. 4

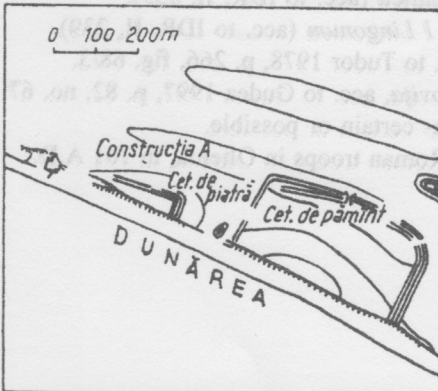


fig. 5

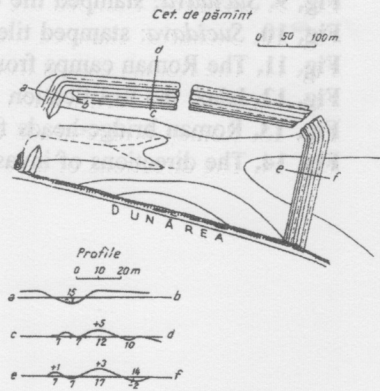


fig. 6

Northern Danubian bridge-heads from Oltenia,  
from the first war of the emperor Traian against the dacians (101-102 A.D.)

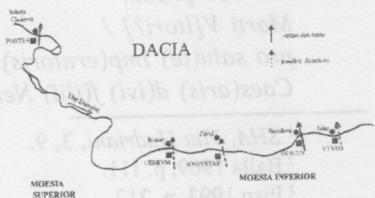
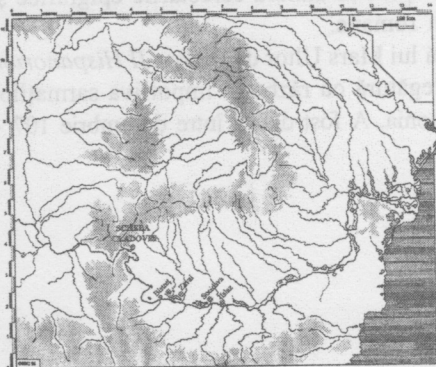
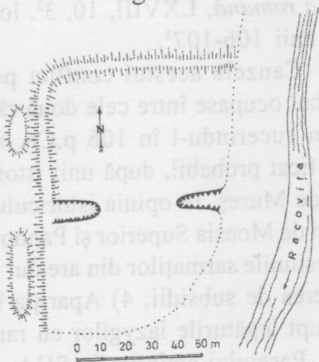
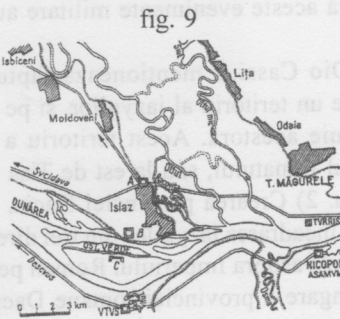
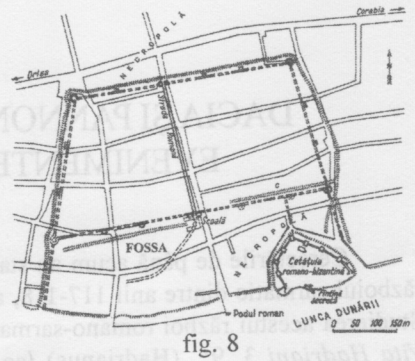
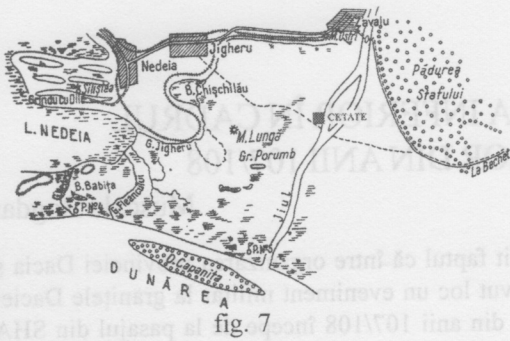


fig. 13

fig. 14