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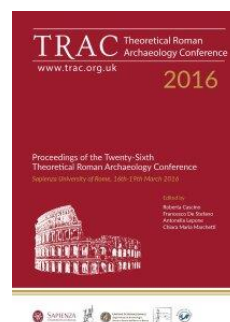
Under the High Empire?

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# Were there Large Villages in the Balkan Provinces Under the High Empire?

*Damjan Donev*

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## *Introduction*

Within the frame of the project “An Empire of 2000 cities” we have been collecting data for the towns of the Balkans, the Middle and Lower Danube provinces during the period of the High Empire ([www.empireof2000cities.org](http://www.empireof2000cities.org)). One of the basic goals of this research project is the reconstruction of the regional urban networks, with a special accent on the various categories of urban and para-urban settlements and the settlement hierarchy. The research is almost entirely based on legacy data, topographic surveys, and excavation reports complemented by the information contained in the epigraphic and historic sources. Inevitably the critical reading of the available archaeological literature becomes one of the main methodological challenges. The importance of source-criticism becomes ever more paramount once we consider the disparate character of the archaeological studies and reports that document the urban settlements in this study area in the period of the High Empire. With the exception of a small number of well-researched sites or regions, for much of our study area the available legacy data is highly deficient and in some cases non-existent. The problem is particularly acute as we are interested in the extent and topography of the towns and their chronology, aspects that have often remained in the shadow of the major architectural monuments, the defences, temples or spectacle buildings. In this context it has to be observed that it is the occurrence of size-figures and dates based solely on implicit assumptions or impressions that is more detrimental to our study goals than the complete absence of data. The experience acquired from the study of this material over the past three years says that most of the dates and figures that appear in the literature unsupported by some form of technical documentation or explicit field methodology have to be treated with a great deal of suspicion.

The other major challenge faced by this research is more theoretical and it concerns the definition of the subject matter and by extension, the limits of the dataset. Given the limited space and the topic of this paper we can't afford to explicate our theoretical positions regarding the problematic urban/rural divide at any greater lengths. These are modern concepts that inevitably sit at odds with the empirical data from the past (Finley 1977; Parkins 1997; Bowman and Wilson 2011). Even if one adopts the narrowest, juridical approach, because of the deficiencies in the primary sources the contours of the category of urban settlements remain ill-defined. But in the case of our study area and especially the provinces of the

Balkan interior it is necessary to assume a broader perspective, one that takes into account the socio-economic profile of the settlements and their possible roles in provincial society. Otherwise one is left with an extremely reduced urban infrastructure, a model that, although not entirely implausible (and maintained by some scholars e.g. Velkov 1979), begets a re-examination. Entire micro regions rich in agricultural resources and densely populated in other periods of the past lacked a proper urban centre during the period of the High Empire. This circumstance obliged us to look at the alternatives to the official Roman towns and consider the presence, frequency, and possible role of the minor, semi-urban agglomerations in our study-area. There are a large number of precedents in other less urbanized provinces, and the few examples of Late Roman towns that emerged from road-stations or military outposts hint at a similar process of spontaneous urbanization on the periphery of the official urban network. This extension of the initial research scope was bound to take us into the grey zone of para-urbanism, where the urban/rural divide becomes impossible to maintain.

The study of the size of the urban settlements in our study region didn't bring particularly big surprises. Similar to other provinces especially in the western part of the Empire, the Early Roman towns of the Balkan and Danube provinces were relatively small (Laurence *et al.* 2011). About 50% of the official towns measure not more than 20 hectares and 75% have built-up areas smaller than 40 hectares (Fig. 1). Rather typically, the urban hierarchy comprised a large number of small and averagely sized towns, and a small group of large or very large urban settlements. However going through the literature that pertains to the countryside in various parts of the study area we were surprised to discover a number of non-urban settlements whose extents were often estimated at 10, 20 or even 30 hectares. Archaeological survey reports and site gazetteers make relatively frequent mentions of large rural settlements, both in the densely urbanized parts of the region and in the rural outback (Šašel 1976; Bojanovski 1981; Dinčev 1997; Gudea 2009) As most of the available legacy data consists of descriptive records, it is often very difficult to get an idea of the precise location or the physical aspects of these settlements. It is in any case evident that they lacked public buildings or other elements of monumentality. In fact even walls constructed in stone and mortar are extremely rare. It makes little sense to argue that this is a possible symptom of the poor state of research. Architectural sculpture or walls

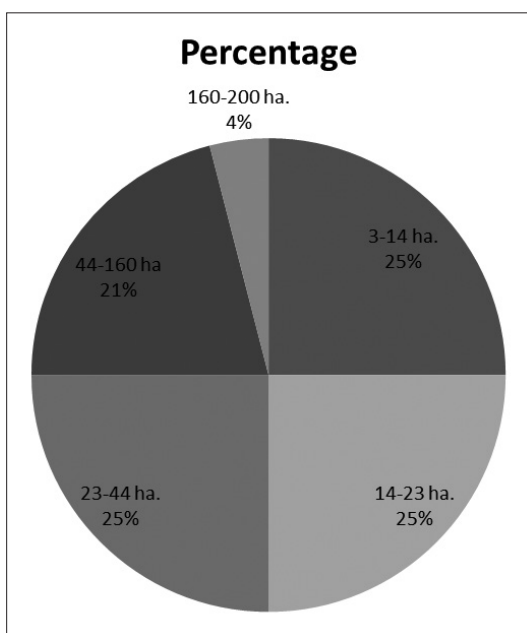


Figure 1: The distribution of the autonomous towns by maximum built-up area, in percentage.

built of stone are artefact categories that are the least likely to escape the archaeologist's notice. Not surprisingly the great majority of these settlements did not enter the historical or epigraphic record. In some cases attempts have been made to relate the names of settlements that appear in the itineraries or on inscriptions to some of these archaeological sites, but the identifications inevitably remain highly tentative.

The regular recurrence in the literature of relatively large anonymous settlements in the countryside carries along a few important implications that have hardly been given a thought. Firstly it makes the goal of complementing the existing map of urban settlements entirely unattainable. One has no way of telling even the approximate number of large rural settlements in the area solely on the basis of the published legacy data. We do not know what percentage of this settlement category has survived in the archaeological record and/or what portion archaeological surveys or excavations have recorded. In other words there are no solid bases to extrapolate their true number in the different regions of our study area. The only certainty is that but a small fraction of these settlements is represented in the archaeological literature.

If there were large rural settlements in this study region, the overall rate of urbanization would be extremely low – probably dropping well below 10%, which is much lower than even the most pessimistic predictions (specific figures are lacking but see the general observations by Wilkes 1969; Mócsy 1970). This would mean that not only a very large portion of the population in these provinces lived in the countryside, outside the official towns, but that it was also distributed across settlements of various rank and size, including relatively large agglomerations. It amounts to saying that there was an entire settlement hierarchy that co-existed with the official urban hierarchy leaving no traces in the historical records. Otherwise it becomes difficult to account for the differential growth among the rural settlements. The sheer differences in size necessitate a set of conditions that would have favoured the concentration of the rural populace on certain location, e.g. the old pre-conquest settlement hierarchy was simply put to the service of the new provincial government.

Other implications follow suit. They concern the nature of the town-country relations in the area; another hotly debated issue that can only receive a passing mention on this occasion (Rich and Wallace-Hadrill 1991; Bowman and Wilson 2009). The size and structure of the rural settlement is hardly telling of the status and well-being of its inhabitants, but were the traditional rural settlements (unwarrantedly identified with the settlements of the 'natives', e.g. Protase 1980) as large as the official towns, it must follow that they required large agricultural territories to secure their subsistence needs. This will further imply that either the urban territories were of a rather limited extent or that the bulk of the land on their territories was exploited indirectly, via subordinate tax paying communities. Both solutions seem to indicate a substantial non-agricultural sector in the official towns.

Because of the exclusively descriptive nature of the great majority of the archaeological field reports they offer hardly any room for critical reading. One simply has to rely on the reputation of the archaeologists or the publisher. But even so the scenario implied in these studies is not contradicted by the known socio-economic and cultural circumstances in most of the provinces of our study area. Both the small size of the official towns and the relative sparseness of the urban network should be inductive to the emergence of a large number of

secondary, non-official agglomerations. On the surface there seem to be plenty of parallels for similar developments in some of the western provinces, although one cannot readily equate the so-called small towns of Britain or Gaul to our large *vici* (Bekker-Nielsen 1989; Burnham and Wachter 1990; Rorison 2001). The fact that many aspects of the material culture (e.g. pottery, vernacular architecture) retain the pre-Roman character until Late Antiquity in many regions of our study-area lends further support to this model of urbanization.

On the other hand if we solely weigh the archaeological evidence, the case for the large *vici* appears rather unconvincing. The great majority of these sites remain poorly documented. In fact not a single example is demonstrated by a plan of the surface remains. Hence all size-estimates must be seen with due caution. Knowing the method employed in traditional archaeological surveys, these figures are in all likelihood based on impressionistic observations gathered by informers or at best, unsystematic field-walking. At the same time the large-scale rescue research and the few systematic surveys of the countryside point to the presence of a peculiar settlement type that can easily be mistaken for very large, compact agglomerations. We will argue that inadvertently, and mostly due to the imperfect method of fieldwork, traditional archaeological surveys have posited the presence of a settlement category that has serious repercussions for the urbanization process in the area under the High Empire. In what follows we will briefly present four well-documented case studies from the interior of the Balkan Peninsula (Fig. 2). These should not be taken as the representatives of the same settlement form. The only common feature shared by these settlements is the relatively high degree of settlement dispersal. Our chief aim is to demonstrate that the scattered nature of

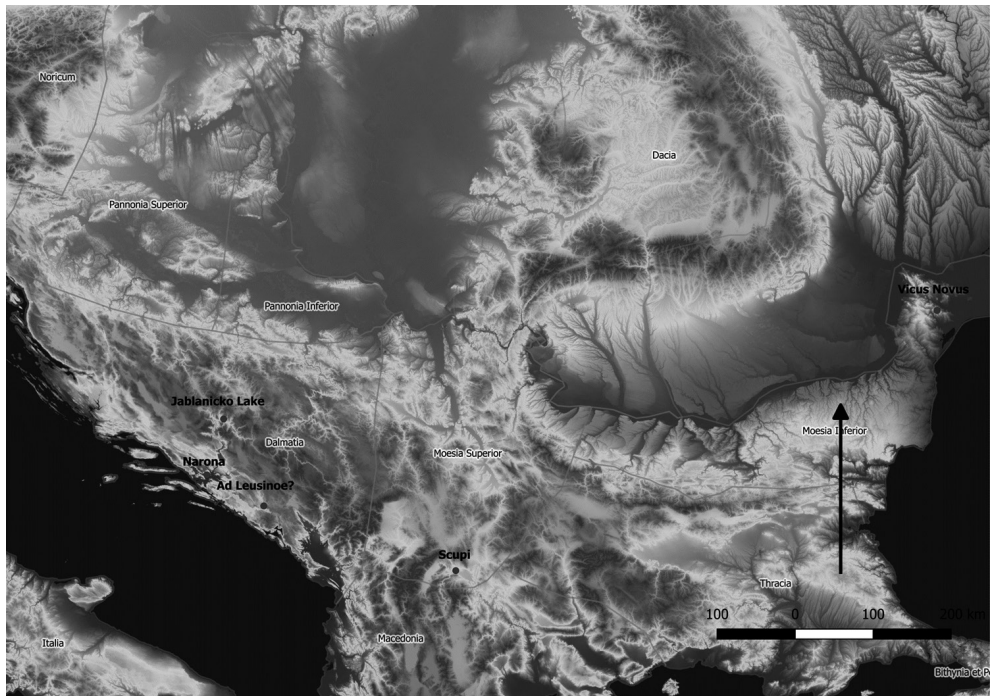


Figure 2: A general map of the study-area with the locations of the case studies

these settlements in conjunction with the traditional method of field survey have potentially produced a distorted image of the settlement pattern in the rural sector. In this respect the greatest value of the insights gained from the systematic research of the countryside is their contribution to a more critical reading of the available legacy data.

### *Case Study 1: The ager of Roman Skopje*

The first example comes from an intensive ceramic survey of a small section of the hinterland of the Flavian colony *Scupi*, near modern Skopje in the upper Vardar valley (Donev 2015). The survey area is located about 9 km to the north of the colony, away from the major interregional roads that cut across the Skopje Basin (Fig. 3). The systematic quantification of the ceramic finds followed by total collections by regular grid units from the zones of high artefact density ensured that even the smallest clusters of surface finds were carefully documented. At a certain point of time during the period of the High Empire, or in the early fourth century A.D. at the latest, the entire eastern half of the survey area was densely occupied. After the initial quantification of the surface finds and on the basis of the sample collections, it appeared that much of the eastern half of the survey area was consumed by a large agglomeration measuring between 30 and 40 hectares (Fig. 4). Only after the highly intensive grid surveys of a number of different sections of the terrain did the true structure of this ceramic carpet become clarified. Rather than a compact, continuously spread cluster of ceramic finds, the grid survey revealed a number of closely spaced, distinct clusters of various size and

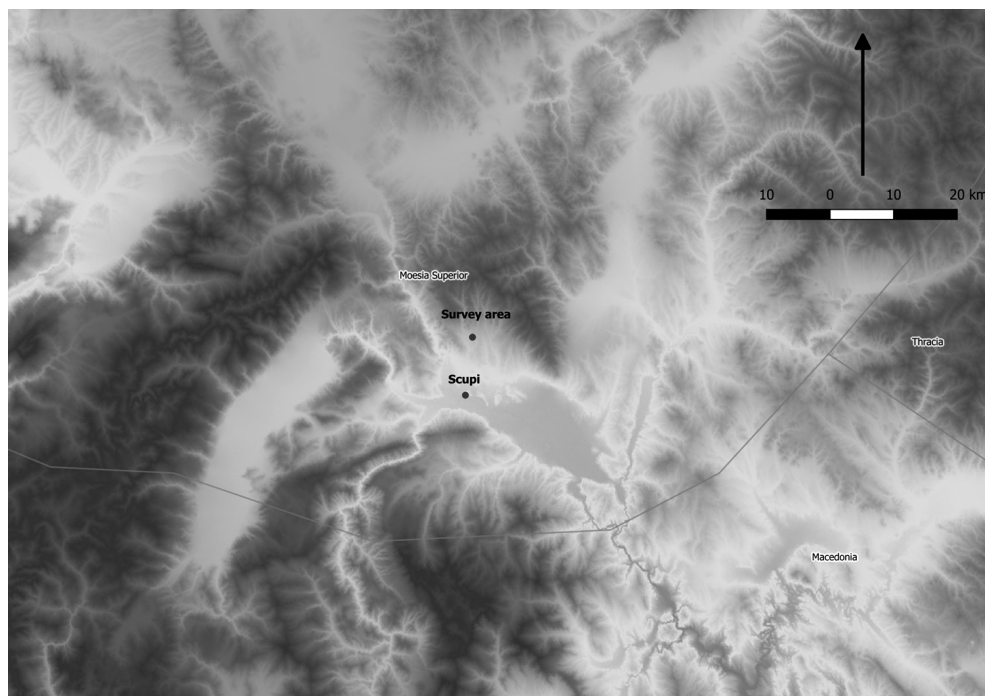


Figure 3: The survey area and the location of *Scupi*.





Figure 4: The distribution of surface finds by field blocks.

shape. At least eight such clusters were discovered, but we suspect that their number was higher, probably reaching a dozen within the survey limits and an unknown number beyond the limits of the survey area (Fig. 5) (*cf.* Rathbone 2008: 305–332). The individual clusters measured between 0.1 and 0.5 hectares and they were spaced 150 to 400 meters apart. In between two neighbouring clusters both the quantity and the quality of the ceramic material declined significantly indicating that only small sections of the terrain were built-up. This settlement does not show signs of planning, although its integrity is faintly underlined by the presence of a small concentration of *sigillata* sherds on the highest point of the site and by the fact that all remains dating to this time period were located in the eastern survey half. In the rest of the survey sectors there were only tiny amounts of this material, showing that we are not seeing a small section of a much more extensive network of farms or villas, but a fairly discrete settlement comprising not more than a couple of dozens of households dispersed over a relatively large area.

The character of this settlement is indicated by quite a few facts from the archaeology of the surveyed micro-region and the Skopje Basin in general. Almost all finds from the immediate surroundings of the survey area consist of funerary inscriptions of the official magistrates of the colony. At least five funerary monuments from this area were commissioned by the veterans of the VII Claudia (Josifovska-Dragojević 1982), and from some of these examples it is evident that the funerary steles came from the family mausoleums of the city elite, located on their private properties (Basotova and Visočnik 2007). The other

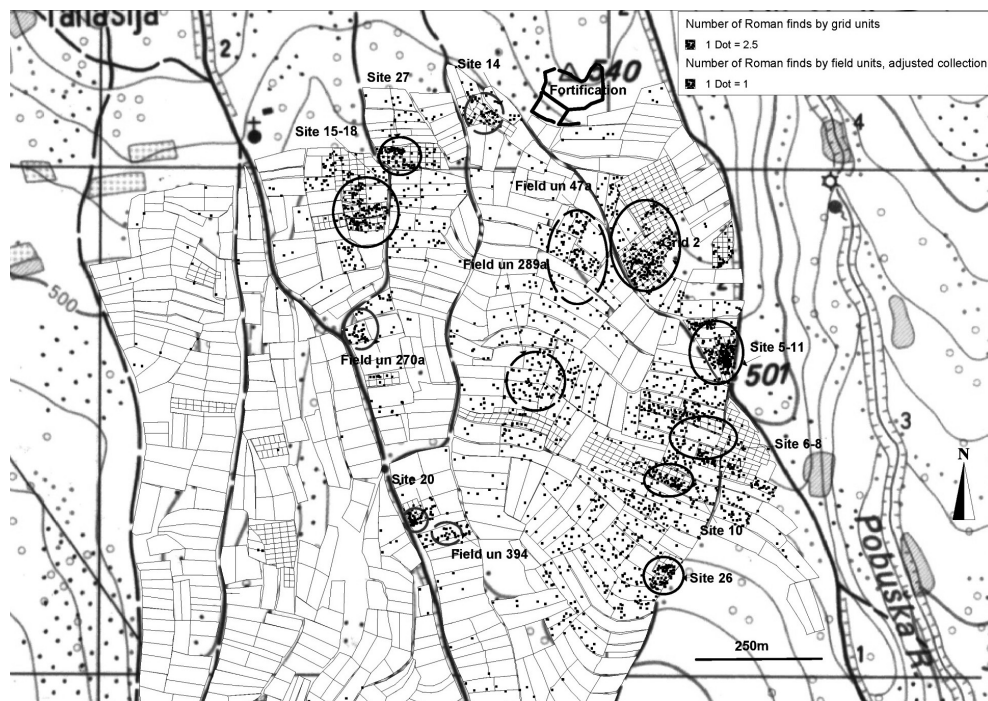


Figure 5: An interpretative map of the survey results near Scupi.

two findings from this area offer further support to the proposed reading of the survey data. One comes from a rescue excavation carried out 3–4 km to the west of the survey, the other from the careful inspection of the aerial imagery of the survey area (Bilbija 1978). In both instances the discovered archaeological remains can only be interpreted as Roman villas. The layout of the buildings and the surrounding topography leave little room for alternative interpretations (Fig. 6).

We suspect that a similar pattern of villas appearing isolated or in clusters prevailed over the entire *ager* of the colony. This is again reinforced by the epigraphic evidence from the Skopje Basin, demonstrating that the colonists owned land-property at distances of over 15 km from the town. It explains the fact that over 70% of the Early Roman sites registered in the archaeological atlas for the Skopje Basin can only be defined as small necropoleis or mausoleums (Koco 1996). The accompanying farms and villas were only preserved as clusters of building ceramics and pottery and as such were either misinterpreted or were not documented by the archaeologists.

### *Case Study 2: The Villa-Settlements on the Territory of Narona and in the Interior of Dalmatia*

Thanks to the modern developments and construction, the settlement patterns in the countryside of some parts of the Balkan Peninsula are much better documented in comparison





Figure 6: The remains of a villa building in the survey area, north of Scupi.

to the Skopje Basin. Unfortunately only a small portion of these rescue researches has been published properly. Moreover in the available publications the accent is always on the individual buildings, their plan and decoration rather than on the micro-locations and surrounding topography. Good topographic maps are a true rarity in these studies. In order to get a better understanding of the patterns of rural settlements, we have tried to locate the toponyms mentioned in the literature on 1: 50000 topographic maps of the areas in question.

The *ager* of the Augustan colony *Narona* in the Lower Neretva is perhaps one of the most intensively researched regions in the interior of Roman Dalmatia (Fig. 7). The prevalent view is that the colony was founded on a site of an earlier Greek *emporium* (for the history of *Narona* see Marin 2003). Its location is ideally suited to control the flow of goods along the Neretva, though at the cost of the agricultural potential, especially in the marshy areas in the river delta to the west of the colony. It is no accident that most of the evidence for colonists comes from the areas to the east and north of the town. A particularly high concentration of villas has been observed on the left bank of the Neretva, between modern Metković and Čapljina (Fig. 8). Here it was possible to identify at least four sites with villa remains along a six km long section. The pattern continues to the west of the Neretva valley, along the river Bregavina. The river banks were chosen not only because of their fertility, but also because of the proximity to one of the most important roads that crosses Roman Dalmatia, linking *Aquileia* and *Dyrrhachium* (the Roman road: Bojanovski 1973; villas on the Neretva and the Bregavina: Cremošnik 1965; Šiljeg 2003; Vasilj 2012).

Of a special interest for the present study is the concentration of villas between modern Visići and Klepci, where I. Cremošnik observed a pattern strikingly similar to the one revealed by the intensive survey near Roman Skopje (Cremošnik 1965: 147–260). The author

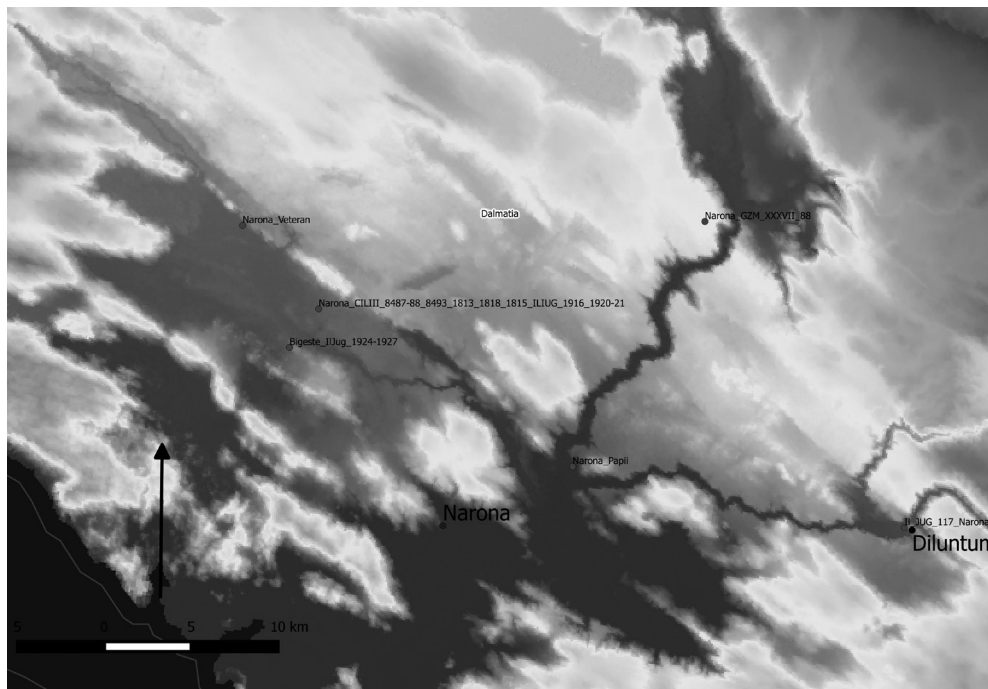


Figure 7: The ager of Naron, with the epigraphic evidence for the settlement of colonists.

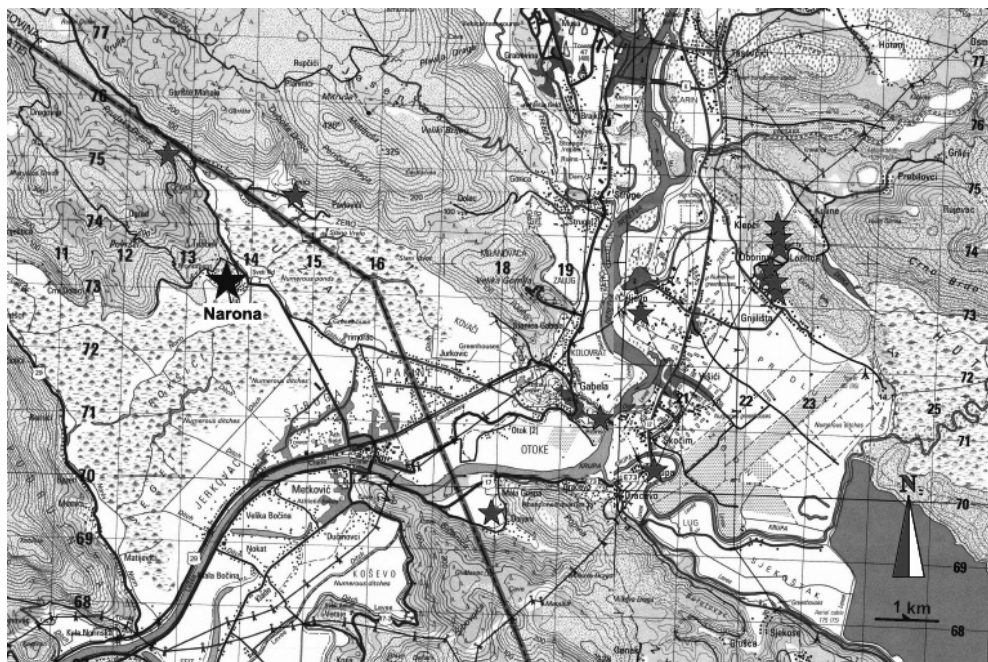


Figure 8: The Roman villas in the ager of Naron, approximate locations marked with small stars.

describes the archaeological remains in this area as a dispersed complex of villas spaced at distances of between 200 and 500 meters. From the description it is unclear if they are aligned in a strictly linear pattern or form an irregular cluster as the presented case from the Skopje Basin. On the other hand the excavated buildings leave no doubts as to their socio-economic and cultural interpretation. Judging by the plans, the size of an individual villa was at least 0.5 hectares and in this respect they are somewhat larger than the farms or the villas from the Skopje Basin. According to the researcher of this area, after a caesura of about 1 km the pattern reappears to the north of Visići (Fig. 8).

These groups of villas are located between 5.5 and 7 km from *Narona*. As in the case of *Scupi* they fall within the day-return radius from the colony. Given the proximity of the colonies, these patterns are to be expected. In fact it would have been surprising if a more nucleated pattern appeared on the narrower territories of the colony. Truly unexpected was the persistence of the same or very similar dispersed settlement patterns at much greater distances from the urban centres. Discussing the case of the Skopje Basin it was mentioned that villas appear at distances of over 15 km from the colony. Judging by the epigraphic evidence and archaeological remains a similar pattern characterized the Trebižat valley, over 12 km to the north of *Narona* (Bojanovski 1988: 116–128). Indeed in the entire *ager* of *Narona* it is difficult to find evidence for larger nucleated settlements in the archaeological publications.

In fact it is often difficult to see changes in the settlement patterns in the countryside at even greater distances from the colonies. Thus very similar clusters of villas to those near *Scupi* and *Narona* were discovered during the rescue excavations and extensive surveys in the upper Neretva, about 70 km to the north of *Narona* (Cremošnik 1954; Cremošnik 1955; Basler 1955; Cremošnik 1957). In this area nearly a dozen villa sites were discovered along the 12 km long section between modern Kostajnica and Konjić. As on the lower Neretva they are aligned along the riverbank, and along the banks of the Neretva's tributaries, marking the directions of the local and regional roads (Fig. 9). Furthermore in the areas of modern Lisičići and Konjić, the researchers have observed patterns almost identical to those discovered in the near vicinities of the colonies. Both in Lisičići and in Konjić the groups of villas spaced at distances ranging from as little as 50 to over 300–400 meters were accompanied by *Mithraeums*, possibly serving as foci for the dispersed communities (Basler 1955: 219–229; Cremošnik 1957: 143–162). The published plans of the excavations show walled complexes, measuring between 0.2 and 0.4 hectares. Were there no excavations on some of these sites, it would have been very difficult to understand their inner topography and socio-economic character.

Although belonging to a very different class of rural settlements, the example of the villa at Panik in the south of Roman Dalmatia is particularly illustrative for the present debate. This site is located on the same road that runs between *Aquileia* and *Dyrrhachium* passing along the western half of Dalmatia. There are no major urban settlements in this region, the nearest are lying at distances of over 30 km from modern Panik. The earliest researchers that have dealt with this site have characterized it as a large agglomeration, measuring about 20 hectares (Sergejevski 1962). Being the largest and most monumental site in the area, it has





Figure 9: Distribution of villas in the region of Jablaničko Lake, villas marked by stars, *Mithraeums* by squares.

been identified with a road station called *Leusinoe* (Bojanovski 1973: 164–166). But instead of a nucleated settlement the excavations carried out in the late 1960s revealed a very large and elaborate villa, organized around two courtyards and accompanied by a series of ancillary buildings spread for hundreds of meters from the main complex (Cremošnik 1976: plan 1, 2). The villa had its own necropolis, located about 500 meters from the central building. In this particular case, both the dispersed layout of the complex and the field clearance in the area in the post-antique period produced an impression of a large and continuous agglomeration. In reality the site consists of one, possibly two major residential buildings and an unknown number of ancillary structures.

### Case Study 3: *vicus Novus* in Moesia Inferior

So far we have presented rural sites coming from the wider surroundings of the official urban settlements or at least from the demilitarized provinces of our study area. The final example included in this study is located in the frontier province of *Moesia Inferior*, on the Dobroudja plateau about 35 km from the Lower Danube limes (Fig. 2). There are no major urban settlements in this area. The nearest town is *Histria* lying at the other side of the north Dobroudja hills, 35 km to the south as the crow flies (Fig. 10). During much of the period of the High Empire the urban territories in this region were limited to the coastal belt, to the surroundings of the Greek colonies on the Black Sea coast. The major agglomerations along the Danube mainly consisted of garrison settlements, the auxiliary *vici* and *canabae*. The processes of

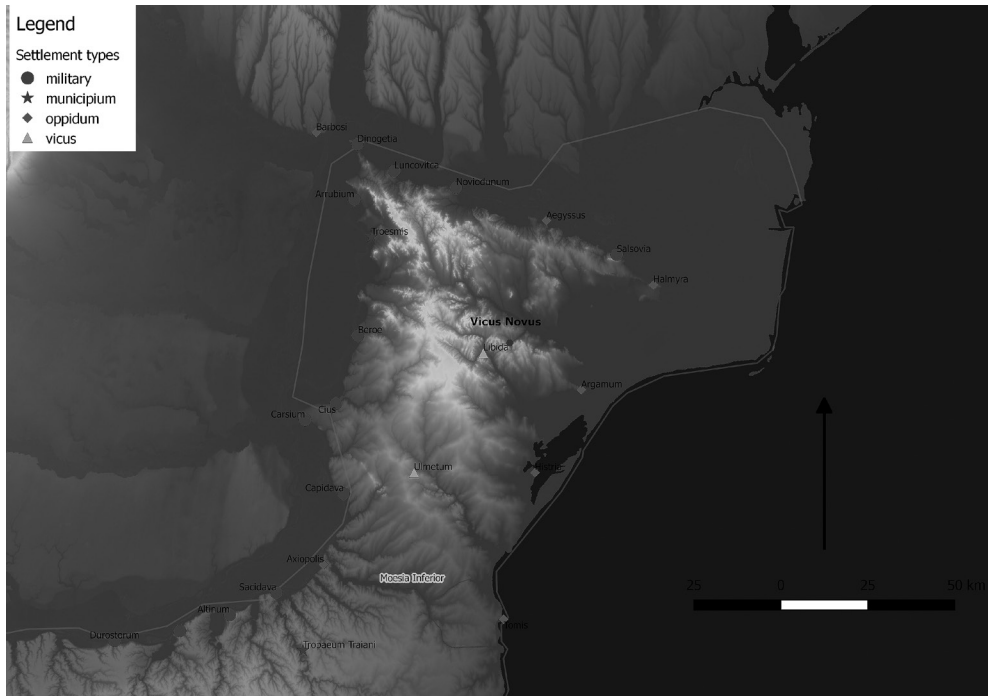


Figure 10: A map of northern Dobroudja.

municipalisation in the frontier zone were limited and begun to unfold only after the conquest of Dacia at the beginning of the second century A.D. (Suceveanu and Barnea 1991). One may assume that here the agrarian relations differed from those on the territories of the official towns in the interior of the peninsula. This is perhaps reflected in the epigraphic heritage of the wider region, where *vici* feature far more prominently than on the territories of Scupi or *Narona* (Martemianov 2012). Yet, the better-documented examples of rural sites show similar tendencies of dispersal in their layouts.

The settlement in question occupies the foothills southeast of modern Babadag, the eponymous site of the regional Iron Age culture. The Roman settlement is located about 5 km to the southwest from the Iron Age *oppidum* (Fig. 11). It is land-locked and off the main regional roads. Nonetheless, the site has caught the attention of the archaeologists, producing significant amounts of surface material and coins. In earlier surveys the site area was estimated at about 50 hectares, which roughly coincides with the size of the micro-topographic unit occupied by the settlement (Baumann 1983). The later researches on this site consisting of small test-pits, more intensive field walking and the study of aerial imagery have resulted in a more moderate estimate of about 20 hectares (Nuțu 2009). This is still a large agglomeration by local standards. It practically equals the size of *Histria* at its peak, one of the largest towns in this part of *Moesia Inferior* (Alexandrescu 1978). It is thanks to the perceived size that the researchers have tentatively identified the Roman remains near Babadag with a *vicus* mentioned on an inscription found nearby.



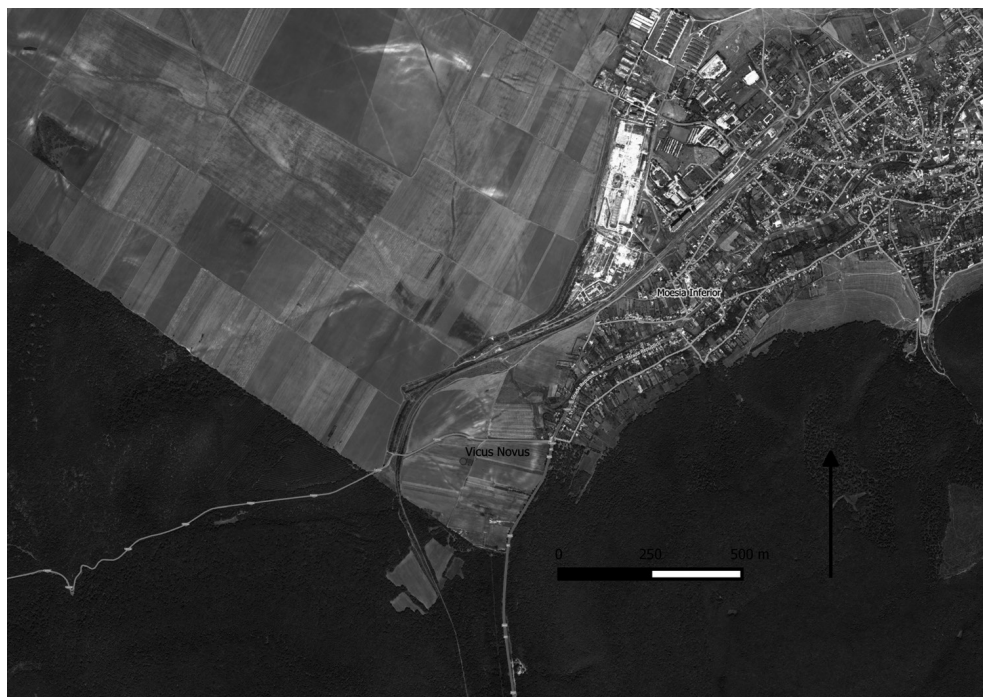


Figure 11: The location of "vicus Novus".

However if we look into the plan of the excavated features, their distribution and the designated site-area, we will quickly discover that even the 20 hectares estimate is too high for the actual built-up area of this settlement. The plan shows that the agglomeration comprises eight cores or buildings, each covering an area of approximately 200–300 square meters and spaced at intervals ranging between 100 and 300 meters (Nuțu 2009: fig. 2). Allowing that the structure of the agglomeration did not change outside the studied area and that the distances between the neighbouring buildings remained the same, there was room for not more than 30 individual buildings within the limits of the micro-topographic unit occupied by this settlement. Moreover as the archaeological material suggests a continuous occupation between the early second and the late fourth century, it is likely that not all the buildings were occupied simultaneously. Similar patterns have been indicated in the hinterland of *Noviodunum*, 10–12 km from the Danube limes, though at least in some of these cases the villas seem to be accompanied by small, nucleated settlements (Baumann 2003).

### Conclusion

From a purely demographic point of view the Roman settlement near modern Babadag was a typical hamlet or small village, with a population of not more than 30 families. As in the rest of the cases discussed in this study, the large extent of the physical remains is a result of the distribution of the individual housing units and the off-site material accompanying all perma-

nently occupied sites (Bintliff 2000). By simply strolling over the fields in an unsystematic fashion – which is essentially the method of fieldwork applied in traditional archaeological surveys – one can easily over-estimate the extent of the site areas. In fact as we learned from the example of the survey in the hinterland of *Scupi*, even when the material is quantified systematically by larger field blocks, it is very easy to get a wrong impression of the true size and nature of these sites. It is no wonder that most of the very large rural settlements from this area are for the greater part known solely from traditional survey reports or site gazetteers. In the rare cases when they have been subjected to a more thorough and systematic research, the resulting image is one of a loose settlement structure. By the number of the housing units these settlements do not differ from the villages typical for the pre-Roman and later periods.

In this study we included examples of rural sites from distant parts of the study area in order to demonstrate that similar tendencies of settlement dispersal occurred in territories with a variable administrative and juridical status. We looked at the patterns of rural settlements on the territories of colonies, in areas that possibly belonged to the *civitates peregrinae* and in the hinterland of the frontier zone. We had no intention of hinting at a widespread settlement type that characterized the countryside during the period of the High Empire. It is purely formal features that bring these sites together in the same group. Obviously one cannot equate the large villa near modern Panik with the small farms in the hinterland of *Scupi* nor the Babadag settlement with the richly adorned villas from the *ager* of *Narona*. As far as we know, the only common feature for these settlements is their scattered, irregular structure. As such, with the exception of Panik, they all fall outside of the conventional categories of nucleated rural settlement – the prototype of the Medieval or Early Modern village – and isolated villa estates, a divide which again stems from our perceptions of modern society rather than from the written or archaeological evidence.

It should be stressed that the principle aim of this paper is not to reject the possible presence of large nucleated settlements in the countryside during the period of the High Empire. Obviously the examples presented on the preceding pages are too few to form a basis for such a far-reaching and generalizing observation. We are still far from the moment in which one can attempt to reconstruct the patterns and hierarchy of settlements in the countryside of our study area. In this respect much of the Balkan interior will stay in darkness in the coming decades. Our goal was rather to point to some of the problems of using the published legacy data for the purposes of reconstructing the settlement patterns in the past. The uncritical acceptance of the figures and qualifications that appear in the archaeological publications can easily lead the researcher into developing models and explanations which find no support in the empirical reality. In this context we felt that the results of the intensive ceramic surveys and excavations of rural sites can offer valuable feedback for a more critical reading of the archaeological gazetteers and reports of traditional surveys.

As for the observed tendency of dispersal of the housing units, one possible explanation lies in the age and genesis of these settlements. All the case studies presented in this paper were newly founded settlements. They were created only after the final incorporation of their wider regions in the provincial administrative system of the High Empire. At least in the case of the colonies one has to count with freshly distributed land-plots to settlers

who had little or no previous connection to their new homeland. In these circumstances a dispersed settlement type is indeed a more practical solution than the compact, nucleated settlement with land-plots scattered around the settlement proper. That these communities lacked an unambiguous settlement focus is hardly a surprise. At least in the early phases of their existence and especially in the case of the villa and farm-settlements situated in the inner parts of the urban territories, their inhabitants probably maintained closer connections with the urban communities than among each other. One would expect to see a stronger incentive for nucleation in the less urbanized parts of the peninsula, where *vici* are indeed more prominent in the epigraphic record. But the current state of knowledge of the Balkan countryside in the period of the High Empire prevents us from further elaborations on this topic.

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