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# Locating the *Timacum Maius S*tation on the Roman Road *Lissus–Naissus–Ratiaria*: New Archaeological Research

**Abstract**: As the exact location of two *Timacum* stations remains an open issue, the results of the latest archaeological investigations in the environs of Svrljig, southeast Serbia, seem to offer some corroborative evidence for the hypothesis proposed in our previous contribution that this might be the location of Roman *Timacum Maius*. A small-scale trial excavation was undertaken on the Roman site at Kalnica in the Niševac village area in July 2008. A trench 4 by 2m was opened in the zone of the site that had yielded plentiful fragments of building debris as well as small finds. A massive wall over 1m thick was found immediately beneath the surface. Built of broken limestone and pebbles bound with lime mortar, it obviously was part of a larger structure. To the northeast of the wall was an area covered with fragmented roof tiles. The discovery of two ceramic *tumuli* embedded in the wall, indicating a wall-heating system so far unregistered on the representative Roman urban and settlement sites in Serbia, gives additional grounds to presume that this was a larger Roman settlement extending over an area of more than 5ha, possibly *Timacum Maius*, a station on the Roman road *Lissus–Ratiaria–Naissus*.

**Keywords**: Niševac, eastern Serbia, archaeological excavation, new results, Roman road, *tubuli*

The Roman itinerary road *Lissus–Naissus–Ratiaria* was, as is well-known, a transversal communication across the central Balkans connecting the Adriatic coast and the Danube Basin. Taking into account the maritime route between the Italic port of *Brundisium* and Lissus, it was the shortest link between the capital of the Empire and the Danubian limes. Namely, the Appian Way led from Rome to Brundisium, and thence ships sailed to the Balkan Peninsula, where an overland route from Lissus continued along the Drim valley and across the highlands of present-day Albania and Serbia (mostly Kosovo and Metohija) to the Niš Basin with the ancient city of Naissus at its centre. From Naissus, the road ran along the Timok river valley, took a northeast turn across Kadibogaz, a pass on Stara Planina (northwestern part of the Balkan Mountain range), and ended at *Ratiaria*, a Roman colony (present-day Archar on the Danube, Bulgaria). In the period of the Empire's expansion and consolidation of the border on the Danube, the road was predominantly used for military purposes, for the transportation of troops and supplies to the Danubian limes. With the onset of mining activities in Upper Moesia, this important road began to be used for exporting ores and thus assumed economic, i.e. commercial, importance.

The famous fourth-century itinerary *Tabula Peutingeriana* records the following stations on the section of the road between Naissus and Ratiaria: *Naisso* XXVII *Timaco Maiori* X *Timaco Minori* XXVII *Combustica* XXVII *Ratiaria*.[1]

The exact location of the two *Timacum* stations being an as yet unresolved issue, this paper seeks to offer further corroboration of the hypothesis put forward in our previous consideration of this subject,[2] this time in the light of the latest archaeological investigations conducted in the area of Niševac, a village near Svrljig.

In July 2008 small-scale archaeological excavation on the ancient site of Kalnica near Niševac was undertaken in order to assess the archaeological potential of the Svrljig area as a prerequisite for planning systematic excavations on proto- and early-historic sites.[3]

Most of Kalnica site stretches between the Kalnica river and the left bank of the Svrljiški Timok, but it also extends across the latter river into the locality known as Selište. Situated in the fertile and flat Timok river valley at an altitude of 350–360m above sea level, the site is sheltered on all sides by hills over 420m in height. The first visible structure from the direction of Svrljig has been registered on the left side of the modern Niš–Zaječar Railway and the Timok, at the locality known as "Bazilika" at the eastern foot of Gravište hill. The structural remains, partly damaged by the construction of this railway in 1920/21, are now overgrown with shrubbery. The original area and size of the building is therefore impossible to establish without excavation, but it obviously was a larger one and built of stone and Roman-sized brick. The *thermae* referred to in our previous paper[4] could not be located. The locals have, however, reported about the remains of a larger mosaic-floored building near the river (Svrljiški Timok), which perhaps are the vestiges of the *thermae* discovered in 1956.[5] The reported structure is

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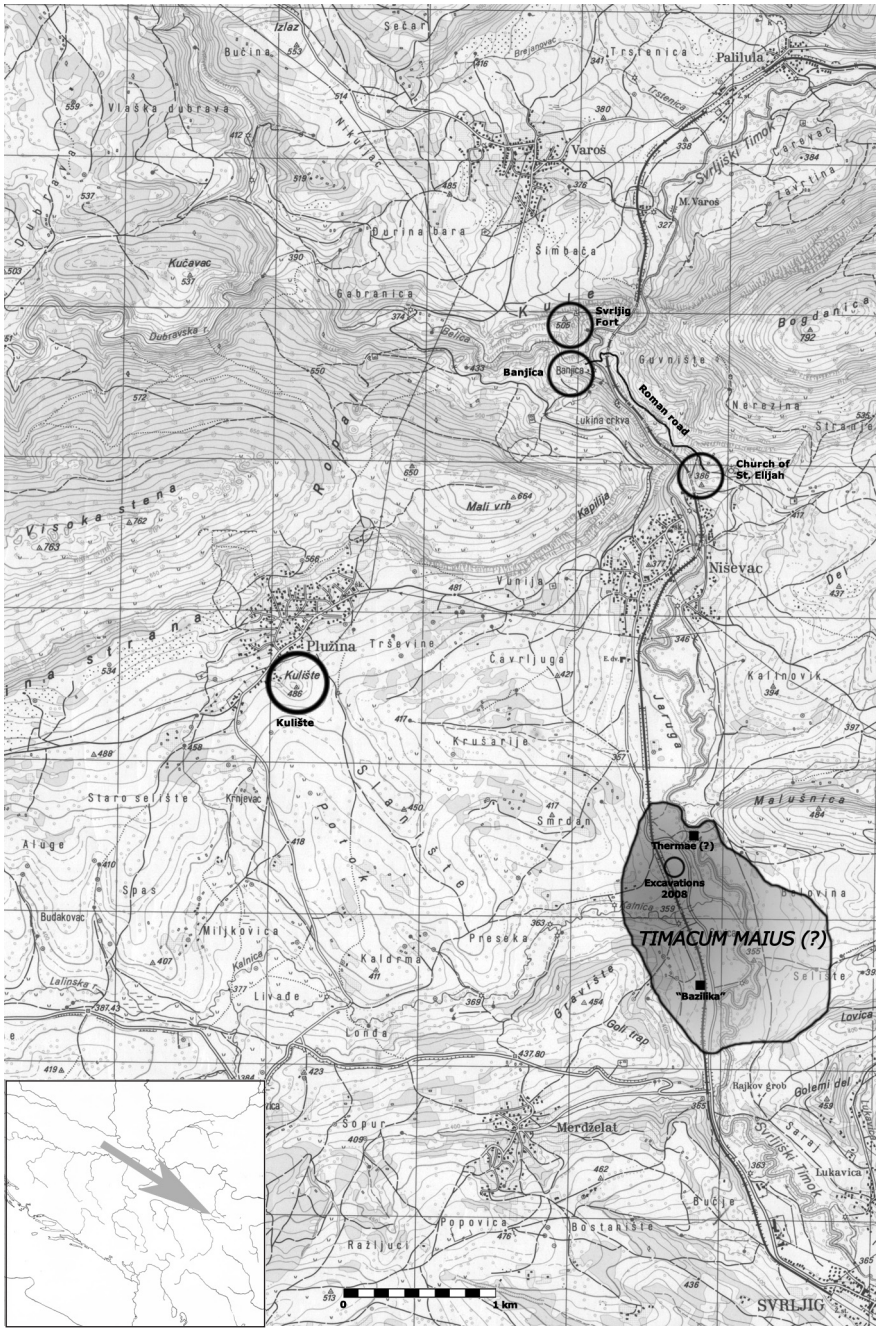
[1] Miller 1916; TIR, K-34, Naissus.

[2] Petrović and Filipović 2008 (with a bibliography) have proposed a revision to the inter-station distances on the Naissus–Ratiaria section as recorded in the Peutinger Map, namely: Naisso XVII *Timaco Maiori* XX *Timaco Minori* XXVII *Combustica* XXVII *Ratiaria*. The station *Timacum Maius* should be looked for in the area of Niševac, a village near Svrljig, while *Timacum Minus* is commonly associated with the village of Ravna, 8km north of Knjaževac.

[3] The excavation was carried out under the auspices of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, the Institute for Balkan Studies and the Local Museum Collection at Svrljig; for the already published preliminary report, see Petrović, Filipović and Milivojević 2008.

[4] Petrović and Filipović 2008, 32.

[5] Kostić 1970, 59; the piece of information obtained from the villagers of Niševac, according to whom the owner (meanwhile departed) re-covered the mosaic-floored struc-




Topographic map showing the possible site of *Timacum Maius*
and the other Roman sites in its environs

probably on the left side of the Svrljiški Timok, opposite Malušnica hill. The survey of the area south of Malušnica, on the localities known as Belovina and Selište, registered fragmented Roman pottery and a few coins dateable to the third and fourth centuries. Niševac has already yielded an altar sacred to Jupiter,[6] dated to the early third century; it was probably discovered in the section of the site along the Kalnica and Svrljiški Timok rivers. It should be noted that from the left side of the Svrljiški Timok and both sides of the Kalnica come many and diverse movable finds; the discovered Roman coins suggest that this part of the site was in existence in the first century BC and continued until the fourth century AD.[7] This Roman site, possibly *Timacum Maius*, is likely to have been founded on the left side of the Svrljiški Timok and to have expanded across the river in the third and fourth centuries.

*Archaeological excavations in 2008*

With all background knowledge and unresolved issues in mind, the site of Kalnica near the village of Niševac was subjected to a small-scale trial excavation. The excavated area was on the left side of the Timok, some 150m west of the present-day river course. A trench 4m by 2m was opened in the section of the site where plentiful building debris and movable finds had previously been registered.[8] Just below the surface, at a depth of only 0.10m, was discovered a massive, more than one-metre-thick wall of undetermined length built of broken limestone and pebbles bound with lime mortar, obviously part of an as yet unexplored structure. It ran to a depth of 0.90m. On the northeast side of the wall was an area covered with fragmented roof tiles, and embedded in the wall were two vertical ceramic pipes (*tubuli*) spaced at 0.30m. Abutting to its east side was a smaller dry stone wall, probably a subsequent addition. South of the dry stone wall and abutting to the structure's exposed wall, at a depth of 0.55m, was an inhumation burial with the deceased laid on a west-to-east axis. The burial pit, lined with larger stones and some brick, is probably later than the structure, but no chronological precision is possible at this point. The skeleton was about 1.55m long, with both

ture with earth and ceased tilling that parcel of land.

[6] Petrović 1992, 129.

[7] We express our gratitude to Mr Slaviša Milivojević, director of the Local Collection at Svrljig, for assistance and access to the numismatic data. The oldest are the coins of Mark Antony and Octavian August, and the youngest is Valentinian I's piece minted at Thessalonica in 364–367.

[8] The trench was opened on the estate of Ljubiša Rašić; the excavated area coordinates: X–43°26.432´, Y–22°06.137´ and Z–366m, were established with a GPS device Garmin Geko 201.

Wall of the structure with embedded ceramic *tubuli*

elbows flexed, the right hand resting on the chest, and the left on the belly. Apart from soil, grave backfill contained lumps of mortar, fragmented brick and pebbles, and was quite firmly consolidated. No personal adornments or grave goods were found. Finds of prehistoric pottery dateable to the Early Iron Age were discovered below the grave, but not within an identifiable layer of that date. The upper layer of the excavated area yielded numerous movable finds, mostly ceramics and iron nails, but also a bronze fibula with a broken pin and ends in the form of bird's heads, decorated with circular mother-of-pearl ornaments set with four black stones. Preliminary analysis of the ceramic fragments and the bronze fibula suggests that the structure may be dated between the first and third centuries. Given the small excavated area and the lack of a broader context, however, this date should be taken as highly tentative.

The massive wall fitted with ceramic *tubuli*[9] leads to several hypotheses as regards the structure's architecture and purpose. Namely, sporadically perforated *tubuli* embedded in a solid-built wall (stone and mortar) formed part of the hypocaust system for heating a particular room or the whole building.[10] In our case, the *tubuli* appear to be elements of an archaeologically attested wall-heating system, as additionally corroborated by the absence of soot residues inside the *tubuli*.[11] That it was hot air that was carried through the *tubuli* seems clear from analogies found on other sites in the Balkans and across the Empire. For the reason of fire safety the structures with such heating systems as a rule were on the fringes of settlements.[12] Those were mostly public or private baths, whereas heated rooms in villas,[13] which were representative buildings, were very rare.[14] Even in cases where there were wall-heating systems, the *tubuli* were often spaced at long intervals, because the system must have been very expensive. Briefly, the use of wall heating was quite rare. That our building was not a typical bathhouse, but possibly a smaller private bath–*piscina*, is indicated by its distance from the river and the wall's solid waterproof structure. Given that analogous heating systems

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[9] "*Tubuli* are diverse ceramic objects joined to each other. They transmitted the heat given off by flame or vapours." Seneca, Epist. XC, 25.

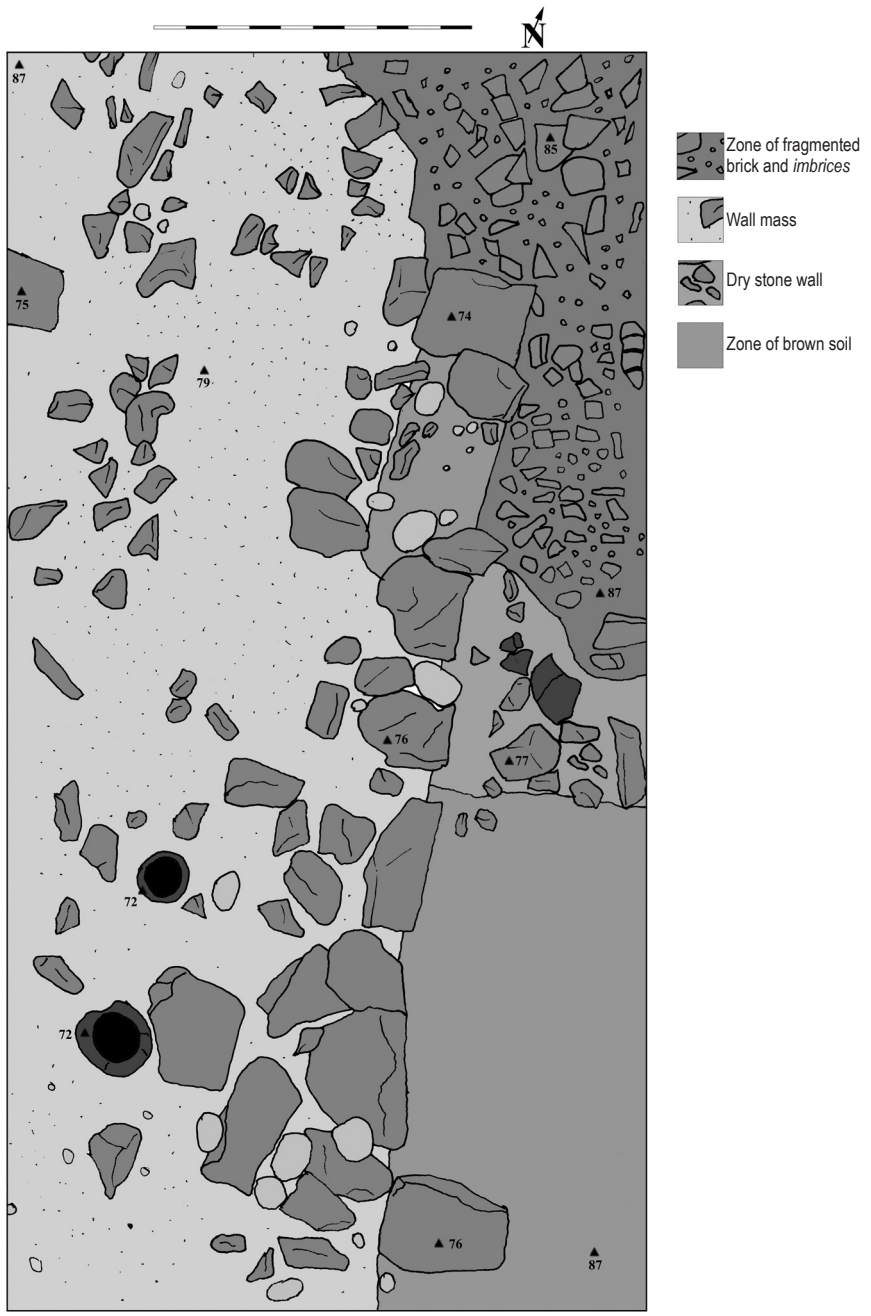
[10] *RE* 1916, col. 333–336; excavations often discover *in situ* only the *tubuli* embedded in the very wall base, practically between the *suspensura* and the wall, cf. Degbomont 1984, 140–145. Our discovery seems to be one such case. On heating methods in antiquity, see Forbes 1955, 1–100.

[11] Wall *tubuli* as a rule have no soot residues inside, while chimney *tubuli*, naturally, show significant traces of burning, cf. Degbomont 1984, 143.

[12] Degbomont 1984, 51.

[13] *RE* 1958, col. 2139–2159.

[14] On the heating system for villas, see Plinius, Epist. II, 17, 9; Palladius I, 39, 5.




Base plan showing the wall fitted with ceramic *tubuli* unearthed in 2008

have been only rarely documented in the Balkan provinces of the Empire — e.g. Bansko-Strumica,[15] Bargala,[16] Aquae Iasae/Varaždinske Toplice,[17] the late antique *balneum* in the church of St George in Sofia,[18] Nicopolis ad Istrum[19] — this building may be considered a curiosity. In all the cases listed above, the structures were used for balneological purposes.

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Sites in the immediate vicinity of the excavated area at Kalnica near Niševac (possibly a small part of the larger-sized Roman settlement of *Timacum Maius*, the first station on the road section between Naissus and Ratiaria) and their dates testify to dynamic development processes in Roman times. Some of the sites have already been discussed,[20] but they were resurveyed during the 2008 campaign in order to establish their communicational and chronological connection with the presumed settlement in the Svrljiški Timok valley. Some two kilometres northwest of the Roman settlement (*Timacum Maius*?) is the village of Plužina. As noted earlier, the main Roman road ran past Plužina and continued towards the Timok river gorge, while a branch took a turn towards the settlement in the Kalnica river valley. In the vicinity of Plužina was in 1934 unearthed a milestone dedicated to the emperor Caius Vibius Trebonianus Gallus.[21] The Local Museum Collection at Svrljig has recently acquired Roman coins discovered near the present-day church of St Elijah sited near the beginning of the located section of the Naissus–Ratiaria road.[22] One of these coins is roughly dated to 120 BC, while most date from the third and fourth centuries. This was probably the site of the structure which in late antiquity "guarded" the entrance to the gorge and which had not been there in the first and second centuries.[23] The surviving section of the Roman road runs along the right side of the Svrljiški Timok and ends at Banjica, a site on the river at the foot

[15] Taseva and Sekulov 2003, 261–272.

[16] Beldedoski 2003, 57–69.

[17] Belančić-Gorenc 1961, 203–206.

[18] Ivanov 2002.

[19] Ibid., 222.

[20] Petrović and Filipović 2008.

[21] Petrović 1979, 131–132, n° 127.

[22] An archaeological survey conducted in 2006 discovered remains of the Roman road Naissus–Ratiaria sporadically cut into the slope between the villages Niševac and Varoš in the Timok river gorge, Petrović and Filipović 2008, 34–35.

[23] The coins suggest the continuous use of this area until the 17th century. The area probably was a salient strategic point for controlling the road.

Eastern part of the foundation wall of the structure with embedded ceramic *tubuli*

of Svrljig Fort. In the area of Banjica several structures have been registered, including the site of the former church of St Stephen that can be reliably dated to late antiquity.[24] From Banjica comes an honorary inscription dedicated to one of the early-third-century emperors,[25] while numismatic finds confirm its uninterrupted use from the first to the fourth century. Svrljig Fort sits on the left side of the Svrljiški Timok, on a tall rock overlooking the inflow of the Belica stream. The recovered archaeological material suggests a long and continuous use of this area from the eight century BC until the nineteenth century AD. The fort has also yielded a marble votive plaque dedicated to Hera Sonketene (*Ἥρᾳ Σονκητηνῇ*) dated to the middle of the first century AD.[26]

The site at Niševac should be viewed in a broader spatial context as forming a whole with Svrljig Fort and Banjica.

*Concluding remarks*

Taking into account the discovery of wall heating, so far unrecorded on the excavated sites of Roman representative settlements and cities in Serbia, as well as the reported existence of a mosaic-floored structure at Niševac, we believe it reasonable to assume that there was a larger Roman settlement (*Timacum Maius*?) with major structures, some of which might have been used for balneological purposes. Also, given that this is the first excavation ever carried out on this site, and a small-scale one, we cannot propose the date of the settlement, although the coin finds suggest the turn of the BC and AD eras. The presumed existence of the settlement in the first century AD is favoured by the marble votive plaque discovered among the ruins of Svrljig Fort in 1886.[27] The fact that its dedicator was Tiberius Claudius Theopompus (Τι(βέριος) Κλαύδιος Θεοπόμπους), attested as a Thracian strategos in an inscription from Topeiros (Greece) dated between AD 46 and 54,[28] may suggest a Roman military presence at Svrljig Fort as early as the mid first century AD. Whether the settlement at Niševac in the Timok valley was a larger and open-type one is impossible to say with certainty at this point, but the answer is more likely affirmative than negative. On the other hand, the end of occupation at the site of Kalnica near Niševac (*Timacum Maius*?) may, from coin finds, be dated to the last quarter of the

[24] Bošković 1951.

[25] Petrović 1992, 129–130; Petrović 1995, 128, nº 100.

[26] Petrović 1992, 132; Petrović 1995, 128–129, nº 101.

[27] Petrović 1992, 132; Petrović 1995, 128–129, nº 101.

[28] Ibid.

fourth century. The archaeological evidence is far from being sufficient, but the decline of the Roman settlement was probably related to the Gothic invasion in the late fourth century, which is perhaps evidenced by the find of Valentinian I's coin minted at Thessalonica between 364 and 367. Namely, driven by the relentless Hunnic and Alanic attacks, the Goths crossed into the Empire in 376 and, pressed by famine and destitution, began to plunder crop fields and villas in the Balkan provinces. The first major attack and settlement of the Goths in both Dacias and Moesia Prima came in the autumn of 378, in the aftermath of their abortive sieges of Adrianople and Constantinople, when, according to Ammianus, the barbarians spread over the northern provinces reaching as far as the foot of the Alps.[29]

This investigation suggests that present-day Niševac may be the site of a larger Roman settlement covering an area of more than five hectares, possibly *Timacum Maius*, a recorded station on the Roman road Lissus–Naissus–Ratiaria.

**Abbreviations**

TIR, K-34, Naissus — *Tabula Imperii Romani, Naissus–Dyrrachion–Scupi–Serdica–Thessalonice*. Ljubljana 1968.

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[29] Amm. Mar. XXXI.

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