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Newly-discovered Traces of the Roman *Naissus–Ratiaria* Road and the Problem of Locating Two *Timacum* Stations

The valley of the Timok river in eastern Serbia was one of the oldest and most important Balkan routes in antiquity – the old itinerary road *Naissus–Ratiaria* connecting the central Balkans with the Danube Basin. The road started in the area of Naissus (modern Niš), a city at the crossroads of other trans-Balkan land routes leading in four directions: northward to Viminacium and Singidunum; westward to Lissus and the Adriatic coast; southward to Thessalonica and the Aegean; and eastward to Serdica and Constantinopolis. The goal of this paper is to propose a solution to the as yet unresolved problem of the location of two *Timacum* stations on the *Naissus–Ratiaria* itinerary road. Based on plentiful material evidence, a more reliable picture of the route of this Roman road and its newly-discovered traces will be outlined. Also, possibilities will be suggested for a completely new interpretation of the sources relevant to this issue. The scholarly method adopted is based on the data provided by the Roman itineraries and the archaeological and epigraphic evidence.

The famous fourth-century Roman itinerary *Tabula Peutingeriana* records the section between Naissus and Ratiaria in the following way: *Naisso XXVII Timaco Maiori X Timaco Minori XXVII Combustica XXVII Ratiaria*.¹ The intervening distances are expressed in Roman miles (1 Roman mile = 1481 m). Our attention will be focused on the present-day Svrljig Valley, the first area after Naissus to offer favourable natural conditions for developing a larger Roman settlement and possibly the first station on the Roman road – *Timacum Maius*.

Let us first take a look at the geography and history of the area. Situated in the middle course of the Svrljiški Timok river, the Svrljig Valley is

¹ Miller 1916; TIR, K-34, Naissus.

a geographic whole bounded on all sides by the Svrljiške Mountains and the tall peaks of Kalafat and Tresibaba.² This is one of the largest valleys in Serbia and one of the most prominent transversal valleys in the Carpatho-Balkan mountain arc in eastern Serbia.³ Its easiest connection with the Niš Valley and the roads starting there is the Gramada Pass (at 555 m), a former checkpoint on the border between Serbia and the Ottoman Empire, but also the site of a smaller settlement dated to the third century AD. To the north, the Svrljig Valley connects the Morava and Nišava drainages with the areas along the Timok and the Danube. The earliest evidence of continuous human occupation in the region is a Palaeolithic cave site (Prekonoška cave),⁴ while a strong presence of the *Triballi* and their settlements and fortifications is documented in the Early Iron Age.⁵ The area became part of the Roman Empire in the final period of Augustus' rule, about 15 AD, when, following the conquest of areas south of the Sava and Danube rivers, the province of Moesia was created.⁶ In the reign of Domitian (in 86 AD), Moesia was subdivided into Upper (Moesia Superior) and Lower (Moesia Inferior), and the Timok area became part of Upper Moesia. In the late third century, after the loss of Dacia, Rome carried out administrative reforms and the Timok area was included into a newly-formed province, Dacia Ripensis. This division continued into Byzantine times and the reign of Justinian (sixth century).⁷

In Roman times the Timok area was inhabited by the *Timachi*, as inferable from a passage in Pliny pertaining to the mid-second century AD: *Pannoniae iungitur provincia, quae Moesia appellatur [...] In eo Dardani, Celegeri, Triballi, Timachi, Moesi, Thraces, Pontoque contermini Scythae* (In the neighbourhood of Pannonia lies the province called Moesia [...] In it are the Dardani, the Celegeri, the Triballi, the Timachi, the Moesi, the Thracians, and, on the Pontus, the Scythians).⁸ The *Timachi* most probably were a branch of the formerly powerful *Triballi* inhabiting the territory between the Morava river (in modern Serbia) and the Iskar river (in modern Bulgaria) at the end of the Iron Age. In later periods, the southern Timok was taken by the *Dardanians* expanding to present-day Ravna (Timacum Minus ?) and Knjaževac, and giving their name to the Roman cohort sta-

² Golubović 1992, 21.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Kaludjerović 1992.

⁵ Filipović 2007.

⁶ Mirković 1968, 22.

⁷ Petrović P. 1995, 35–36.

⁸ Plinius, *Naturalis historia* III, 149.



Fig. 1 Remains of the road with visible embankments at the entrance to the Svrnjiški Timok gorge

tioned at Ravna (cohors II Aurelia Dardanorum).⁹ In the far northeast of the region was the land of the *Moesi*, where the town of Ratiaria (Ratiaria, colonia Mesorum) developed, modern Arčar on the Danube. The confluence of the Timok and Danube rivers was inhabited by the Little *Scordisci*, a branch of the powerful Celtic tribe who had settled in present-day Srem (region between the Danube and the Sava) in the fourth century BC.¹⁰

Under Roman rule the Timok region was characterized by busy mining activities. It was organized in the same way as the other mining districts of the Dardanian mines (*metalli dardanici*), i.e. as a fiscal *territorium* governed by the *praefectus territorii* headquartered at Ravna (Timacum Minus?).¹¹ The epigraphic evidence informs about a *librarius* at the prefect's office. This Ulpus Aquilinus was a member of *legio VII Claudia*, which suggests that the affairs controlled by the army were in charge of the Upper Moesian 7th Claudian legion.¹²

It is not quite certain what the extent was of the *territorium* of Ravna. It is likely to have included the Svrnjiški, Trgoviški and Beli (White) Timok

⁹ Petrović P. 1995, 31.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 31–32.

¹¹ On Roman mining in the Timok river basin, see Dušanić 1977, 52–94; 1980, 7–56; and 2003, 247–270.

¹² Petrović P. 1995, note 31.

river valleys in the south, the Balkan Mountains (Haemus Mons) in the east, and the Crni (Black) Timok river valley and the mineral-rich area of the present-day city of Bor in the north. That the *res metallica* was the backbone of the regional economy is shown by the fact that a *cohors equitata* (II Aurelia Dardanorum) was stationed at Ravna continually from the second to the fourth century with the task of protecting the mines and escorting ore transports. The epigraphic evidence also points to connections between the ancient population of Ravna and the mining centres of Kosmaj, Domavia (Srebrenica) and Aquileia.¹³

Let us now return to the Svrljig Valley and its archaeological record.

Niševac

The site lies on a low terrace on the left bank of the Svrljiški Timok. As early as the mid-nineteenth century some researchers located *Timacum Maius* there, most prominently Kanitz¹⁴ and Dragašević.¹⁵ P. Petrović, who repeatedly addressed the problem of locating both *Timacum* stations,¹⁶ allowed the possibility of a Roman *Timacum Maius* at Niševac, but he had reservations given the obvious discrepancy with the inter-station distances on the *Naissus–Ratiaria* road indicated by the *Tabula Peutingeriana*.

On the site Crkvice-Kalnica at Niševac large amounts of diverse archaeological finds, including building materials such as bricks, *tegulae* and *imbrices*, are brought to the surface by ploughing. Covering an area of at least several hectares, the site stretches westward, while being bounded by the Timok in the east. During the construction of the Svrljig–Knjaževac Railway, a large brick-built structure was cut through and damaged, but its remains are still visible. Kostić noted¹⁷ that the remains of Roman *thermae* had been excavated in Niševac by the Timok in 1956. Unfortunately, nothing of them has survived into our times. Similarly, on the left terrace of the nearby Kalnica river, a left tributary of the Timok, the local population have drawn attention to the remains of a necropolis with inhumation burials, possibly the cemetery of the Roman settlement at Niševac. On a hillside in the southern section of the site there is a strong spring protected by walls directing water flow. Given the absence of any medieval or later structures

¹³ *Ibid.*, 31–32.

¹⁴ Kanic 1986, 350.

¹⁵ Dragašević 1877, 54.

¹⁶ Petrović P. 1968, 1976a, 1976b, 1992, 1995 and 1997.

¹⁷ Kostić 1970, 59.

there, we may cautiously assume that this spring might have supplied water to the Roman settlement at Niševac.

From the abundant archaeological material, especially coins, the site of Niševac can be dated to the sixth century BC all through to the nineteenth century AD. The oldest Roman coins date from the reign of Mark Anthony and Augustus.¹⁸ The most plentiful and best preserved archaeological material comes from the Roman period. Noteworthy is also an *ara* dedicated to Jupiter, which has been dated to the third century AD.¹⁹ Seen in a broader geographical context, the site of Niševac should be considered as forming a whole with the Svrlijig Fort and the site of Banjica.²⁰



Fig. 2 Remains of the road viewed from the Svrlijig Fort

¹⁸ We are grateful to Slaviša Milivojević, Director of the Museum of Svrlijig, for his help and the archaeological material he readily made available for research.

¹⁹ Petrović P. 1979, 62; Petrović P. 1992, 129.

²⁰ Banjica is the southern *suburbium* of the Svrlijig Fort. The site has yielded plentiful finds covering a chronological span from the Late Neolithic to the end of the Middle Ages. A strong thermal spring, which may have been used for balneological purposes in Roman times, was registered in this area. During Ottoman rule, Svrlijig changed its name to Svrlijška Banja (Svrlijig Spa), which confirms the importance and character of this place. After strong earthquakes in the 18th century, the spring ran dry.

Svrljig Fort

The ancient Svrljig Fort is situated on the left bank of the Svrljiški Timok, on a tall rock above the point where the small stream of Belica joins the Svrljiški Timok. The fort can only be accessed from the northwest using a narrow path that leads to an artificially enlarged crack in the natural rock enabling access to the plateau. To the east are a 100-metre-deep chasm and a rock called Oblik, both rich sources of archaeological finds, including Roman brick.²¹ A good part of the Svrljig Museum collection comes from the fort and the zone at its foot. The archaeological material, notably the coins, suggests uninterrupted occupation from the eighth century BC to the nineteenth century AD. A first-century votive plaque dedicated to Hera²² also comes from the fort. The fort was obviously connected with the settlement at Niševac by the Roman road.

Niševac–Svrljig Fort, a newly-discovered section of the Roman road Naissus–Ratiaria

An archaeological survey conducted in 2006 discovered the remains of an ancient road sporadically cut into the slope between the villages Niševac and Varoš in the Svrljiški Timok river gorge.²³ The road is on the right side of the river, and can be traced along the length of some 1500 metres. Given the configuration and geology of the terrain, it was impossible to use the standard Roman method of road building. The level base was laid directly upon the bedrock and in some very narrow places the road was widened to the standard width of two metres, typical of similar landscapes. At the entrance to the gorge are visible some reinforcements of regularly laid stones covered with a layer of crushed stone and earth. This section ended at the Svrljiški Timok. There, at the site of Banjica beneath the Svrljig Fort, remains of an old bridge have been registered. From that point the route of the Roman road can no longer be followed.

In the area of Banjica, vestiges of four churches have been registered.²⁴ One, dedicated to St Stephen, may be dated with much certainty to the period of late antiquity.²⁵ From Banjica also comes an honorary in-

²¹ Filipović 2007.

²² Petrović P. 1992, 132; Petrović 1995, 101.

²³ Filipović 2007.

²⁴ The last church discovered was excavated by treasure hunters in 2007. It is nearest to the Timok and may be dated to the 12th century by the coins recovered from the churchyard.

²⁵ Bošković 1951, 221–244.

scription dedicated to one of the emperors from the beginning of the third century.²⁶

A small mound located on an enlargement in the gorge, almost certainly of a prehistoric date, testifies to the road's antiquity. The road is likely to have been in use ever since prehistoric times. Once the Romans conquered the area, they widened and reinforced it to conform to their road building standards. It remains uncertain whether this Roman road is indeed the "solid Roman road" Kanitz cited as being recorded in the notes of Ensign Pokorny.²⁷ A modern road in this region was constructed fifty years ago, but on the left bank of the Timok and without any connection with the Roman road.

Plužina

The site is situated on a small elevation south of the modern village, about 1.5 km west of the ancient settlement at Niševac. Still visible on the site are blocks of dressed stone and pieces of broken stone. The site and the surrounding fields abound in fragmented Roman and medieval pottery. In 1934, a limestone milestone was discovered in its vicinity. It was dedicated to the emperors Trebonianus Gallus and Afnius Veldumnianus, and dated between 251 and 253 AD.²⁸ The milestone was found *in situ*, on the *Naissus–Timacum Maius* section of the Roman *Naissus–Ratiaria* road, and as such provides precise evidence for the route of the Roman road.

* * *

As noted above, in the past 150 years many scholarly studies have addressed the questions of the location of *Timacum Maius* and *Timacum Minus* and the original route of the Roman *Naissus–Ratiaria* road, but neither question has been given a definitive answer. One of the most obvious obstacles, in P. Petrović's view, is the total distance of about 55 km (37 Roman miles) between *Naissus* and *Timacum Minus* recorded in the *Tabula Peutingeriana*, which is less than the actual distance between Ravna (*Timacum Minus* ?) and *Naissus*.²⁹ It seems that Kanitz misled subsequent researchers. Namely, he identified Niševac as *Timacum Maius* and the village of Baranica as *Timacum Minus* and believed that the Roman road between the two ran via the late-antique and Byzantine fortress at Miljkovac and then continued

²⁶ Petrović P. 1992, 129–130; Petrović P. 1995, 100.

²⁷ Kanic 1986, 350.

²⁸ Petrović P. 1979, 127; Petrović P. 1992, 130–131.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 123.

across Tresibaba Mountain and the village of Crvenja.³⁰ This route to Ravna (Timacum Minus ?) via present-day Baranica, Trgovište and Knjaževac is more than 10 kilometres longer than the distance recorded in the *Tabula Peutingeriana* and, besides, the village of Miljkovac is almost impossible to reach from the Svrlijig Fort via the villages of Varoš and Palilula given the almost vertical right bank of the Timok. Even a quick glance at a military map of 1894 (J.7. Knjaževac) shows that there was no road in this area at the time Kanitz visited it, suggesting that his reconstruction was conjectural rather than based on hard evidence. On the other hand, Mirković's hypothesis that the road ran via the villages of Miljkovac and Rgošte to Knjaževac and Ravna³¹ implies a distance more than five kilometres greater than the one cited in the *Tabula Peutingeriana*. This thesis has been supported by Jovanović,³² based on fourth-century finds. He has proposed present-day Knjaževac as the site of ancient Roman *Timacum Maius*, but offered an erroneous distance of 14 kilometres between Knjaževac and Ravna so as to fit the two locations to the *Tabula Peutingeriana*. There is no more than eight kilometres between the confluence of the Svrliški Timok and the Trgoviški Timok (in modern-day Knjaževac) and the Roman *castrum* at Ravna. To add to controversy, S. Petrović has recently rejected the identification of the ancient fortress and settlement at Ravna as *Timacum Minus* sticking strictly to the distances indicated in the *Tabula Peutingeriana*.³³

From the research done so far it seems obvious that at least the section to Niševac has been retraced correctly:³⁴ the road from Naissus ran through the villages Malča and Vrelo to the Gramada Pass, and then descended to modern-day Svrlijig and thence continued to Niševac and the Svrlijig Fort. As can be seen below, it appears that the thus suggested route also slightly deviates from the original one, given above all the milestone discovered at Plužina,³⁵ which is two kilometres away from this route.

At this point yet another fact should be noted, because it has greatly added to the controversy. Since the earliest work on this problem, all Roman and even exclusively Byzantine sites, mainly forts, have been approached indiscriminately. As a result, *Timacum Maius* has been located at modern-day

³⁰ Kanitz 1892, 102. It is worth noting that the fortress at Miljkovac has not yielded any archaeological finds. Kanitz's data have been used by many later scholars without being verified independently.

³¹ Mirković 1968, 90.

³² Jovanović 1997, 47.

³³ Petrović S. 2006, 25.

³⁴ Petrović P. 1976, 43; Jovanović 1997, 42.

³⁵ Petrović P. 1976; Petrović P. 1992.



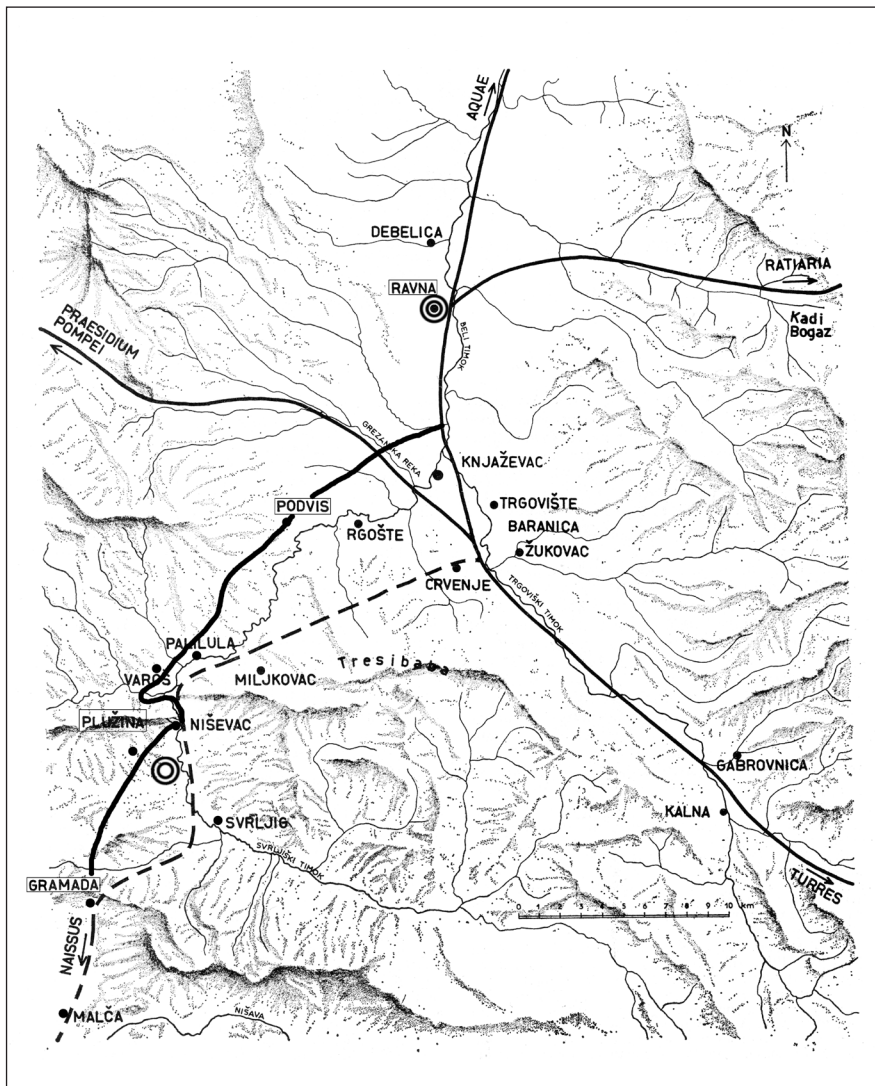
Fig. 3 Remains of the road viewed from the Svrlijig Fort, and below it, the modern railway built in the 1920s

Knjaževac or at Baranica, although neither predates the fourth century.³⁶ On the basis of the research done so far and the identification of Roman stations in the central Balkans according to the *Tabula Peutingeriana*, it is clear that most of these settlements can be dated to the end of the first century AD, and to a lesser extent to the beginning of the second century. This goes not only for *Timacum Minus*, but also for neighbouring settlements on other itinerary roads developed in similar geographical and historical circumstances, such as *Remesiana*, *Hammeum*, *Ad Fines* or *Vindenae*. It is well-known that the Romans marked out roads in Moesia shortly after the conquest of these territories, primarily for military purposes.³⁷ The road network was built most probably under Augustus at the beginning of the first century, in Hadrian's reign at the latest. This timeframe finds support in Ptolemy. According to him, in the reign of Trajan there was at least one *Timacum*.³⁸ It is also clear that all the abovementioned settlements were founded in river valleys, and not on elevated positions, and that some of them were not fortified until much later. It is obvious that it was the vicinity of rivers and the availability of arable land, rather than the safety of elevations, that played a key role in the development of the new settlements. If we take this idea as our starting point and use the known facts in analyzing the section of the road between Naissus and Ravna (*Timacum Minus* ?), it becomes clear that according to both parameters – lowland settlement, and sites dating from the first and second centuries AD – all the sites hitherto discussed in archaeological literature can be eliminated from further consideration. This leaves us with the settlement at Niševac (with the Svrlijig Fort), a legacy of the previous population, and the big settlement (and *castrum*) at Ravna, both in the Timok valley and both dated to the first century AD. Furthermore, it would have contradicted common sense to furnish the flat Beli Timok valley with two stations at an interval of less than 10 kilometres, while leaving a section of about 45 kilometres over a difficult and inhospitable terrain without a single station, which is a distance that could not be covered during daylight. The Svrliški Timok river valley is the only area between Naissus and the wide and flat Beli Timok river valley offering all possibilities for developing a larger settlement. The position of Niševac, the discovered traces of the Roman road and the Svrlijig Fort provide some clues to the further course of the Roman road. On the other hand, had the road run along the slopes of Mt Tupižnica, the Roman settlement would have been built on the strategic site of modern-day Svrlijig, allowing easy

³⁶ Jovanović 1997, 44, 48.

³⁷ Petrović V. 2007a, 20–23.

³⁸ Petrović P. 1997, 118.



Proposed route of the section of the road between Gramada and Ravna (*Timacum Minus*) via *Timacum Maius*
Dashed lines indicate the route proposed by earlier researchers

access to the mountain. However, so far there is no indication whatsoever of any earlier settlement on the site of modern-day Svrlijig.

Conclusion

From all the evidence cited above, it seems that the settlement at Niševac was Roman *Timacum Maius*, and the one at Ravna, *Timacum Minus*, even though this does not fit the route of the Roman road and its mileages as indicated by the *Tabula Peutingeriana*. Therefore, at this point, we need to return to the attempt to retrace the route of the Roman road, but this time looking carefully at the topography and two forgotten pieces of information about the ancient roads in the Svrlijig Valley. As has been established earlier, the first section of the Roman road ran from Naissus to the Gramada Pass via the modern-day villages of Malča and Vrelo. But from Gramada the road did not follow the Pravačka river, as suggested earlier, but instead ran to the northwest, sidestepped Lipnica, reached a plateau and continued in the direction of Plužina, the village where the abovementioned milestone of the Trebonianus Gallus and Afinius Veldumnianus³⁹ has been discovered. The road ran from Plužina to present-day Niševac, where there had to be a crossing over the Timok taking the road to the gorge, and where traces of an ancient Roman road have been found. The toponym “Kaldrma” (cobblestone road) between Plužina and Niševac seems indicative. The road crossed the Timok beneath the Svrlijig Fort in a place where now only the remains of stone piers of an old (probably Ottoman) bridge are observable. Then it climbed to the plateau leading up to the Svrlijig Fort. The section between *Naissus* and *Timacum Maius* on a thus reconstructed route would be about 24 to 26 kilometres long.

One forgotten piece of information found both in D. Jovanović⁴⁰ and in Mišković,⁴¹ indicates that there was beneath the Svrlijig Fort a crossroads where several ancient cobblestone roads met. According to D. Jovanović, “still observable [in 1889] between Svrlijig and the ruins of a small fort in the village of Podvis are vestiges of an old road once connecting Knjaževac and Niš via Gramada and Niševac”. This road ran from Svrlijig to the village of Palilula, where its traces have been found,⁴² and continued across an elevated plateau on the left bank of the Svrlijski Timok to Podvis, as

³⁹ Petrović P. 1979, 127; Petrović P. 1992, 130–131.

⁴⁰ Jovanović 1889, 1–53.

⁴¹ Mišković 1889, 45–49.

⁴² Filipović 2007.

indicated by D. Jovanović.⁴³ It should be noted that Kanitz retraced this route travelling from Knjaževac, that is, from Podvis to the Svrlijig Fort. The distance between these two points is about 10 kilometres. From Podvis to Ravna (*Timacum Minus* ?) it was possible to use the road west of the confluence of the Svrlijski Timok and the Trgoviški Timok, a distance of about 15 kilometres. When all the distances between Niš and Ravna are added up, including some five kilometres between Niševac and the Svrlijig Fort, the total distance is about 55 kilometres (± 2 km), which is approximately the figure the *Tabula Peutingeriana* gives for the distance between *Naissus* and *Timacum Minus*.

Based on everything noted here about inter-station distances in the *Tabula Peutingeriana*, it should be said that although the route of the Roman road as we have proposed it corresponds to the total mileage found in the *Tabula*, the proposed solution should by no means be taken as definitive. On the other hand, it should be borne in mind that the *Tabula* carries mistakes, both in mileages and in place-names, and therefore must be used very cautiously as a source in reconstructing the Roman road system. Our proposition for the locations of *Timacum Maius* and *Timacum Minus* would require that some corrections be made to the distances between *Naissus* and *Timacum Maius* as well as between *Timacum Maius* and *Timacum Minus*, as already suggested by Dragašević and accepted with reservations by Petrović. The correction amounts to changing the place of a tenner: from the section *Naissus–Timacum Maius* to the section *Timacum Maius–Timacum Minus*. The revision to the *Tabula Peutingeriana* would be as follows: *Naisso XVII Timaco Maiori XX Timaco Minori XXVII Combustica XXVII Ratiaria*. In this way the *Tabula* would be consistent with the situation on the ground, *Timacum Maius* would be at a distance of 17 Roman miles (25 km) from *Naissus*, and the distance between *Timacum Maius* and *Timacum Minus* would be 20 Roman miles (30 km). Accordingly, the station *Timacum Maius* would be in the area of Niševac and Svrlijig Fort, while the large and thoroughly explored Roman settlement and fort at Ravna would in fact be *Timacum Minus*. It appears interesting and noteworthy to take a look at a thesis proposed by S. Petrović, which we find acceptable: that the name *Timacum Maius* may be interpreted as Upper instead of Big Timok (based on its elevated position) and that, similarly, *Timacum Minus* may be interpreted as Lower rather than Little Timok. This may lead to revising another toponymy-based interpretation, the one claiming that *Timacum Maius* must have been a larger settlement than *Timacum Minus*. Also, if the adjectives *maius* and *minus* are interpreted more loosely, *Timacum Maius* may be thought to have been older than *Timacum Minus*.

⁴³ Jovanović 1889, 1–53.

It is to be hoped that future archaeological research in this area would provide a clearer picture and stronger evidence for the hypotheses proposed in this paper.

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Abbreviations

ANRW *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*, Berlin–New York.
TIR, K-34, Naissus *Tabula Imperii Romani, Naissus–Dyrrachion–Scupi–Serdica–Thessalonice*, Ljubljana 1968.

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