ON THE ALLEGED ”ROMAN ROAD FROM LOWER MOLDAVIA”*

Abstract: We shall analyse herein a few elements that do not support the existence of a road on the Barboși – Poiana - Brețcu route, as Pârvan assumed over one century ago. We shall discuss a few aspects referring to the site at Barboși, some finds in the fort at Brețcu and make a few notes on the diffusion of import goods on Siret river course.

Keywords: Road, frontiers, Danube, Siret, Moesia Inferior, Dacia

We shall analyse herein a hypothesis expressed over a century ago by Vasile Pârvan, which has thus become a true historical paradigm regarding the Roman road crossing southern Moldova on the Barboși – Poiana - Brețcu route (Pl. I.1).1 Above author mapped a road joining the province of Moesia Inferior to Dacia, starting with the crossing point by a supposed ford of the Danube in the Galați - Barboși area (making junction with a road coming from Dinogetia), following the Siret river course up to Poiana (Piroboridava?) and further through the pass of Oituz, to Brețcu (Dacia Inferior). On this occasion, finds in three important sites located along this access route, namely Poiana, Șendreni and Barboși, were analysed. Arguments in favour of an existent road there consisted in the identification of many civil settlements scattered along it2. The road would have been the most important communication way by land of the Roman period ensuring the connection between the intra-Carpathian area and the Black Sea. In many studies, this route was suggested as representing the northern border of the area entered under the control of the province of Moesia Inferior between Trajan’s Dacian campaigns and early Hadrian’s reign.

Our aim herein is to detail a few elements that do not support the existence of a road on the route imagined by Pârvan. We shall discuss a few aspects regarding the site at Barboși, some finds in the fort at Brețcu and make a few notes on the diffusion of imported products along the Siret River course.

1. We shall start by discussing Barboși, a site lying by the confluence of the Siret and Danube. Its early recording in the specialized literature, the substance of its historiographical significance as a “bridgehead” of Romanity in southern Moldova or a Roman territorium left of the Danube, were elements which drew the attention of the researchers to study these issues on many occasions3. The Traian-Tulucești vallum was deemed the limit of a

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1 PÂRVAN 1913, 118, Fig. 13. The vallum between Siret and Prut rivers and the places at Ploscuteni and Stoicani, known in the specialty literature as Valea lui Athanaric (the vallum of Athanaric).
The location of the fort at Barboşi during the Principate is still open to debate. The place where the Roman garrison, comprising vexillations of various military units, was situated is still unclear, although theories on its positioning vary around the promontory of Tirighina4 (Pl. I.2). A functional Roman fortification at such location would be possible only starting with the edge of the plateau, yet northwards, near the road. The map published by Pârvan marks ancient valli in the north of the promontory of Tirighina (Pl. 2.3). They might have belonged to either a military or civil fortification, while subsequent to their removal, might have been overlapped by the necropolis stretching along the road. We supported the theory of the extension of the necropolis in certain areas of the site in another paper5.

The role of this area was remarkably interpreted by Pârvan as emporium. Thus accordingly, a very important port and an equally important entrepreneurial area functioned there, merchandise being river-borne, was distributed from there to the entire area of Siret River basin. This explains the development of the important dava / emporia at Poiana, Brad or Râcătău.

We took a closer look at the site at Barboşi starting with the archaeological research carried out in 2004 in its eastern extremity, an area named after the Galaţi quarter “Dunărea”. There were uncovered many graves and barrows part of the “largest Roman necropolis from Moldova”6. Following the would have been erected in order to reinforce this road (PÂRVAN 1913, 120).


6 ISM V 296: (Hercul[i]) / Victor | L. lul(aus) lul(a) / nus qui et / Rundaeio | q(uin)q(uennalis) / ex vota po / (s(us) l(ocus) d(atus) ex de(creto) or(dinis).

6 No traces of significant Roman buildings were identified, but only scattered pottery fragments – GOSTAR 1962, 505.

7 PÂRV AN 1913, 111, Fig. 9.

8 ŢENTEA 2007, 22-221.

9 The location of the fortifications on the Danube should not be judged only by their military strategy value, but also by port development conditions, as the river was firstly a supply route. The significance of the Roman fortification examination of the mentioned archaeological research, we believe that the archaeological finds in Barboşi and “Dunărea quarter” area belong to the same site, as the distance between the barrows in the necropolis at Barboşi and those in “Dunărea”10 quarter is of approximately 700 meters. The comparison with the extension of similar necropoles in the neighbouring area (Noviodunum, Carsium or Histria) pleads for taking into account of a single necropolis11.

The overview of the partial distribution of certain buildings and some infrastructure elements, respectively of the necropolis at Barboşi, was better outlined by corroborating our own archaeological research with those obtained from the aerial photographs taken during WWII12. Later, we undertook large scale field walks, whose results were corroborated with the survey of all funerary finds in the area delimited by the Traian-Tuluceşti vallum and its adjacent area. Thus, we attempted to delimit the alignment of the necropolis / necropoles operational in the Roman period13. Therefore, the Roman necropolis was rather large, since the area investigated in the northern part of the fort at Barboşi as well as the graves mapped within the current territory of the city of Galaţi, belonged to the same necropolis. The distribution area of the barrows surveyed in the area is considerable, having different orientation than the approximately east-west oriented Roman road. It is noteworthy that most barrows belong to different chronological periods14.

In what the Roman necropolis is concerned, a marble sarcophagus mentioning the name Alphemus Modestus, discovered near the promontory at Tirighina15 is noteworthy. works should, thus, be argued based on understanding the communication system (ŢENTEA 2013, 148). Epigraphic records document the early presence of classis flavia moesica (MATEI-POPESCU 2010, 29, 245–246) and significantly later of the land units, which at the beginning were designed to ensure the safety of transports on the Danube. The tile stamps recorded on the Danube sector corresponding to the province of Moesia Inferior evidence transport and control activities carried out mainly by classis Flavia Moesica (the action range was likely as early as its set up the Dobroudja sector of the Danube: Troesmis, Barboşi, Dinogeţa, Noviodunum, Cartal–Orlova (Alobrixi – 241, 263 – 541) and the fleet of I Italia (SARNOWSKI/TRYNkowski 1986, 536-541). This legions involvement in port and Danube patrol activities was so structured that even after the departure of legion V Macedonica from Troesmis, part of its activities were assumed by strengths of I Italia and not XI Claudia, as one would be tempted to believe (the action of legion XI Claudia seems to have been rather oriented to Tomis and as a result, to the Black Sea area, from where also likely the title of Pontica, used as cognomen of the legion - MATEI-POPESCU 2010, 136. After the legion stationed at Troesmis was moved to Dacia, the command of the vexillations displaced to the north of the Black Sea was assigned to the angustiaviti tribes in legion I Italia - MATEI-POPESCU 2010, 278-279). The diffusion of the pottery building material bearing the stamp of legion I Italia in many sites along the lower course of the Danube is explained by the fact this legion was deployed with its own naval squadrons (navalia legions), which facilitated movement between the fort at Novae and the ports under its control. This would explain the many stamps where the legion name is figured in a ship-shaped cartridge (SARNOWSKI/TRYNkowski 1986, 536, 540).


9 PÂRVAN 1913, 19, Fig. 9.

10 BRUDIU 1998, 210, Fig. 1; ŢENTEA/CLEŞIU 2006, Fig. 19.1.


12 MATEI-POPESCU 2010, Pl. 3, 4; OLTEAN 2013, 160, Fig. 9.5.

13 ŢENTEA/RAŢIU 2015.

14 BRUDIU 2003, 59-62 (no. 258), 171, Fig. 16, 175, Fig. 20, 176, Fig. 21; ŢENTEA/OLTEAN 2009, 1515–1524.
At an appreciable distance eastwards, in Dunărea quarter, a tomb datable to the 4th century AD was found. The so-called “mithraic” sarcophagus was discovered by chance in 1867 also within the territory of Galați city, on Lozoveni Street, on the northward road. These Roman funerary finds could not lie aligned anywhere else but along a main access road or just nearby such a road.

Taking into account this criterion and the way the Roman necropolis spread, the course of the Roman road significantly deviates from the north-east direction, reaching south Brateș Lake. Under such circumstances, the hypothesis according to which this road would have made possible the crossing of the Danube via a ford nearby the confluence of the Siret and Danube rivers is no longer true. It is hard to believe that a ford existed in this area of the Danube.

The relevant detail for the discussion herein is the representation in the ancient and modern cartography of the lower course of the Danube. It appears like an approximately linear projection, slightly oblique to the river mouth, while depiction differences between Tabula Peutingeriana and some maps made even during the 18th century are not significant from this detail point of view. This depiction manner, rather far-off the geographical field realities, lasted until the first half of the 19th century, around the Crimean War and even the Russo-Turkish Wars. At that time, the north of the Black Sea and the Danube mouths start being accurately mapped, which leads to proper corrections in the corresponding rendering on maps of the Danube curvature in the Galați area.

Among the cartographic data provided by a military map, pinpointing the location of the Russian and Turkish troops around 22nd June 1877, there may be noted the route of a road passing left of the Danube, by the south of Brateș lake then running to the east (Pl. 3.5). The same detail may be noted on an Austrian map made in 1910 (Pl. 3.6). Above lake was linked to the Danube by a narrow channel, fed by only the western branch of Prut River. During the modern period, on the land side situated south the lake a road ran on a west-east direction to the current place of Reni.

Regardless of whether or not an alleged road to Tyras existed, a hypothesis supported by Tocilescu, yet which Pârvan doubted, it is very likely that in antiquity a functional road reached north Noviodunum, where the river could have been crossed by a ford.

2. At the other end of the hypothetical road discussed herein lies the fort at Brețcu. The discovery of a large number of amphorae during the archaeological research conducted there was related by N. Gudea to its location on the trading road Barboși – Poiana – pass Angustiu – Brețcu, thus, also indicating their geographical origin in the Black Sea area.

The idea was welcomed by M. Brudiu when discussing the Roman building structures identified at the confluence of the rivers Siret and Danube rivers. Until the completion of the detailed analysis of these finds and the establishment of their origin, we call for caution, like Alexandru Popa, in interpreting the relevance of the amphorae discovered at Brețcu, since army supply was influenced by many other factors besides the location of the respective fort in the vicinity of a hypothetical commercial route.

3. At the time when the Romans controlled the trading activities in the east of the sub-Carpathian area, one should take into account the fact that commercial transports were mainly carried on the navigable routes of rivers due to low costs. The commercial transport commonly took place on Siret River, as noted from the study of imports in the three settlements on Siret River bank, specifically Răcătău, Brad and Poiana. In the current state of research, one may argue that after these centres ceased to operate, during the 2nd - 3rd centuries AD the distribution of the Roman imports is more pronounced near Prut river basin, to refer only to the area in the proximity of Dacia. Interestingly enough, imports diffusion areas were mainly recorded in sites lying north of Poiana. Thus, the distribution of such goods should be connected with river transport rather than the land diffusion imagined more than one century ago by Vasile Pârvan.

If in the case of the site at Barboși, we may broadly agree that phrases like “bridgehead” or the single territorium left of the Danube are not peculiar, as precisely nearby, there are other sufficiently clear analogies, the same may be applied with the interpretation of the alleged Roman road crossing south of Moldova. Such supposition should no longer be granted a historiographical value greater, we believe, than the reality itself.

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was established based on the inscriptions on the milestones - Panaite 2015 589, notes 8-9.
24 GUDEA 1980, 301-306.
26 POPA 2015a, 832, note 4.
27 POPA 2015, 183, note 1594.
28 POPESCU 2013, 94, Map 12.
29 POPA 2011, 214, Fig 10, 218, Fig. 13; POPA 2015, Taf. 11-18.
Roman Roads in Moesia inferior – processed detail (after PANAITE 2015, Fig. 3).

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