

RESCUE EXCAVATIONS AT THE SO-CALLED *PRAETORIUM* IN RATIARIA IN 2013–2017 (PRELIMINARY REPORT)

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The present paper deals with the preliminary results of the archaeological campaigns in the area of the so-called Praetorium in Ratiaria in the period 2013–2017. In the course of the excavations, some of the theses put forward in the existing bibliography on the development of the complex in the 'metropolitan period' of Ratiaria have been confirmed, while others have been corrected or made more specific. In some other cases, a different picture is revealed, connected with the features of the different construction periods of the complex and the area around.

Key words: *Ratiaria, praetorium, Dacia Ripensis, metropolitan period, archaeology*

One of the major tasks of the revival of the archaeological excavations in Ratiaria which happened in 2013, was the study of the so-called *Praetorium*, i. e. the late antique residential complex of the provincial *dux*, which had been partly studied in 1982–1989 as a part of the Bulgarian – Italian joint project for archaeological research of Ratiaria (Fig. 1).¹ The new excavations cover an area that presumably should not have suffered as much as the other areas from treasure-hunters' intervention, as no huge trenches similar to those in surrounding areas were visible on site. The full uncovering of the complex was required in order to see to what extent the remains are preserved and suitable for study, and to

localize the treasure-hunters' trenches. The intention was to uncover the whole area of the complex that had been partly discovered, and make some stratigraphic sections in depth where possible in order to follow and document the stratigraphic sequences beneath the late antique complex as no such trenches have been done so far. Initially, it was made in selected areas around the complex (Topalilov 2015–2016), but where possible it was also carried out within it.

In the course of the campaigns between 2013 and 2017 the whole area of 1575 sq. m (35 x 45 m, orientated N-S/E-W) that had been previously uncov-

¹ The results are published in Kuzmanov 2000: 27–43.

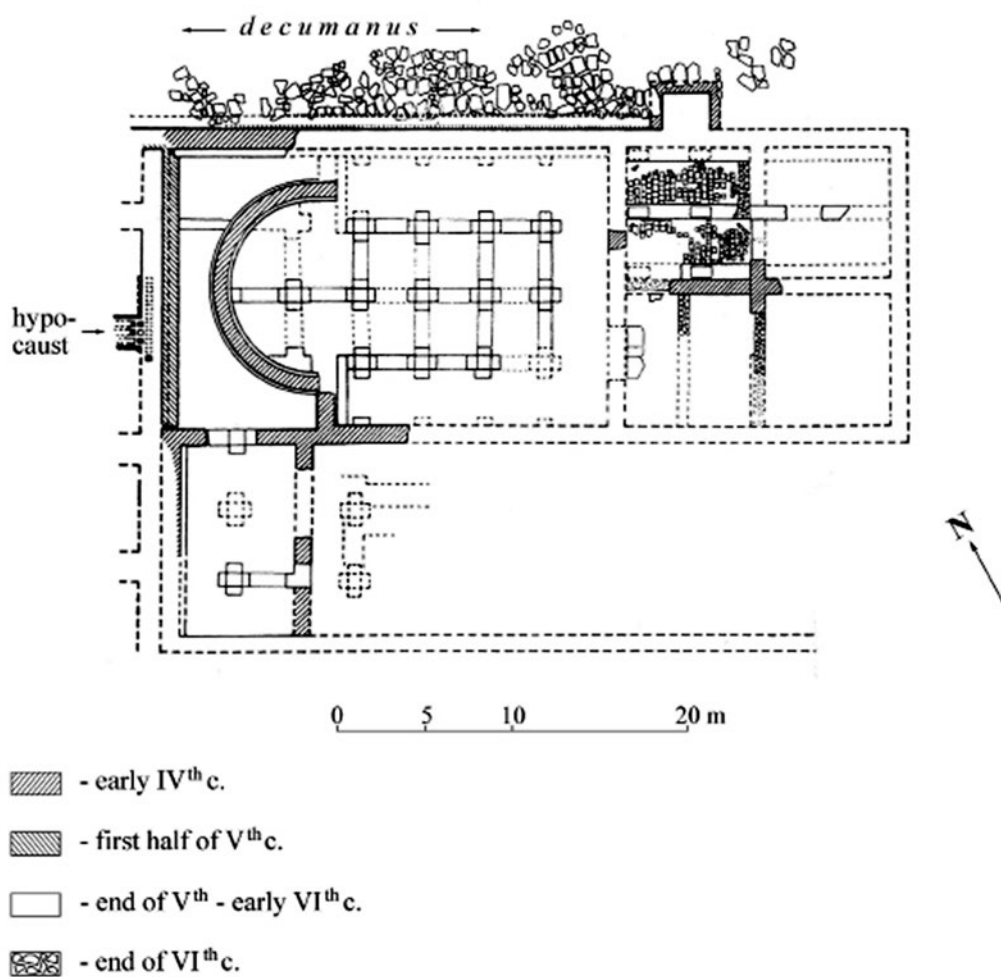


Figure 1. The plan of the so-called Praetorium according to the excavations in 1982–1989 (after Dinchev 2015: 187, fig. 9).



Figure 2. The uncovered area of the Praetorium in 2014–2017 (view from the air; author: Emil Mihov).

ered was studied. The dismantling of the pavement of the *decumanus* that bounds the complex to the north, by the treasure-hunters, allowed an extension of the research area under the road bed and to the north (Fig. 2).² In the course of these excavations, some of the theses advanced by G. Kuzmanov on the development of the complex in the so-called ‘metropolitan period’ of Ratiaria have been confirmed, while others have been corrected or refined. In some other cases, however, the new data reveal a different picture from what had been previously accepted in the bibliography. These results are the goal of this study.

Before starting it should be noted that the excavations reveal that illegal activities throughout recent decades had affected almost the entire area of the *Praetorium* and *decumanus*, and went deep in the ground. In most cases, the whole cultural layer down to the virgin soil was entirely disturbed and removed. In such an archaeological context, the small finds discovered cannot help with the date of the various periods of reconstruction of the complex. Most of the coins dated to the first half of the 1st c. AD and since last quarter of the 3rd c. onward, however, may reveal the site’s periods of habitation. The case with the pottery is almost the same. What remains, however, are the stone structures – walls, drainage channels etc. from the Late antiquity.

Before presenting the main results of the excavations, however, a short introduction to the complex with its main construction periods is needed.

It has been suggested that the initial period of the complex, orientated East-West, is dated to the beginning of the 4th c. (Kuzmanov 2000: 41). This date was also suggested for the polychromatic mosaic floor that decorates the biggest room in the uncovered part of the complex, which is interpreted as a reception hall (see Valeva 2000). The uncovered area shows that this part the complex consists of two rows of rooms with the reception hall as the core of the complex which ended with an apse to the west (room 5). This room is preceded by two double antechambers. The walls are made in *opus vittatum* with faces underlain by rectangular small blocks (ca. 0.50 x 0.30 m) and *emplectum* of broken stones bounded with white mortar (Kuzmanov 2000: 29). This construction is attested quite clearly in the western façade wall which was entirely uncovered in the area of two rows of rooms (Topalilov 2015–2016: 158). The building was set on fire, but the lack of explicit evidence led the excavator to

suggest at least three possible dates for this disaster, all connected with the Huns’ raids in the Lower Danube region in 408, 424, or 441/442 (Kuzmanov 2000: 41).

It is assumed that after a new reconstruction followed with some minor changes, but the original level of the complex was preserved. This is not, however, the case with the *decumanus* which was raised up to 1.50 m over the floor level of the *aula*, constructed over a new ‘supporting wall’ made of small river stones bounded by mortar was built. A small niche was added to the north façade wall of the complex, within the roadbed (Kuzmanov 2000: 31–32). This building also suffered fire damage dated to 447/448 when Ratiaria was ravaged (Kuzmanov 2000: 41).

In the next period a fundamental change occurred in the complex which is attested in some aspects. The floor was elevated by numerous cross-shaped pillars that are to be found in the so-called ‘premises’ 5 (*aula*), 8 and 9, built in *opus mixtum* on stylobates. These premises were abandoned and remained in the basement of the new building. All of the façade walls were doubled in order to carry arcade-vaulted construction which supported the upper floor. The new constructions were in *opus mixtum*, although some *spolia* may also had been used (Kuzmanov 2000: 34–36). G. Kuzmanov believes that the main reason for this huge reconstruction, which is dated to the time of Anastasius I (491–518), should be the higher level of the *decumanus* which was tangent to the complex from the north, requiring the building to isolate the moisture (Kuzmanov 2000: 36; on the date, see Kuzmanov 2000: 42).

It seems that the complex lost its representativeness probably in the last two decades of the 6th c. (Kuzmanov 2000: 42).

Besides these results, however, the excavations carried out in 2013–2017 have further results which show a slightly different view of the development of the complex than has been generally assumed in the bibliography.

For instance, in the area of the reception hall (*aula*) some part of the mosaic floor has been discovered, in this case a fragment of the white bordure of the mosaic iconography. What is important is that a fragment of an earlier floor in *opus signinum* has also been discovered, above which the base of the mosaic floor was laid. It shows that the construction of the mosaic floor could not give a certain terminus for the construction of the complex itself, but reveals a certain phase linked with the decoration of the re-

² The main results are published in Dimitrov *et al.* 2014: 303–305; 2015: 394–398; 2016: 423–426; 2017: 184–186.

ception hall, and the complex will thus have been built earlier (see also Topalilov 2015–2016: 157).

Some new information has been obtained in the northern antechamber where a hypocaust was discovered with at least two periods of construction (Topalilov 2015–2016: 158).

Of great importance are the results we obtained from the study of the western façade wall and the area of rooms 8 and 9. These can be summarized in two main aspects: the reconstruction of the façade wall by adding new support for the upper floor wall built in *opus mixtum*, but with clear observation of the condition of the earlier wall, and the essence of the reconstruction in *opus mixtum* itself.

The study of the new constructions in *opus mixtum* that have been assigned to the third period of the complex, dated to the time of Anastasius I, reveals that the main intention of this reconstruction was not limited to raising the level. It seems that in fact the area of the whole complex at that time was reduced drastically by a huge wall built to the south and by shaping the later rooms 8 and 9. In this way, the whole area that lies behind that wall in south direction and which remains unexploited was cut off from the late complex and obviously belonged to the initial praetorium (Fig. 3).

We do not know the character of that area before this reconstruction as no excavations had been carried out before the modern incursions, but the lack of any remains of transverse walls to the northern chain of rooms may indicate that the so-

called ‘premise 9’ was in fact a huge blank area and therefore could be interpreted as an inner courtyard (*atrium*) over which later extended the complex. Otherwise, it would be a huge storage room located in the proximity of the *aula*. Some of the cross-shaped pillars are attested only in negative outline by the partly preserved white mortar floor in room 9.

The second question is about the condition of the western façade wall before the latest reconstruction of the complex. The excavation reveals that this wall was in very poor condition and almost entirely in ruins when the reconstructions began, and it is therefore not surprising that in fact it was incorporated into the new one (Fig. 4). The damage may be a result of the Huns’ devastations, which are said to have affected the urban infrastructure, including the fortification, on a great scale (Dinchev 2015: 176, 185). There could be, however, another explanation of this overall condition – either a natural disaster such as an earthquake, or the wall is having collapsed over the course of time and not repaired in the years after the Huns’ raids.

Indeed, some earthquakes have been attested in the Balkans for the second half of the 5th–beginning of the 6th c. such as one in 460 that affected the western part of Asia Minor and Thrace, with Cos completely destroyed (Guidoboni *et al.* 1994: 300–301), in 472 following the eruption of Vesuvius when *in Asia aliquantae civitates vel oppida terrae motu conlapsa*



Figure 3. The southern wall of a later complex and the remains of an earlier western façade wall – a view from South (author: Ivo Topalilov).



Figure 4. The reconstruction of the western façade wall of the complex – a view from South (author: Ivo Topalilov).

sunt (Marcell., *Com.* 90.24; Guidoboni *et al.* 1994: 301), in 477–480 which occurred in Constantinople and the region and was later commemorated on the eighth day before the Kalends of October (24 September) (Guidoboni *et al.* 1994: 302–305) or even in 518 when Scupis was razed to the ground and 24 cities suffered in Dardania (Guidoboni *et al.* 1994: 312–313). Otherwise, we should assume that the buildings destroyed during the Huns' devastations were not reconstructed for a long time after that.

Some excavations have also taken place in the area north of the complex, within the road-bed of the *decumanus* and north of it. They were possible due to the fact that the whole street pavement had been dismantled in the course of the treasure-hunters' diggings.

The situation in the road-bed is not that clear due to massive destruction. We have attested the so-called 'supporting wall' which was added to the north façade wall of the complex, which seems to have been constructively bounded with the niche (room 6) as attested in G. Kuzmanov layout (Kuzmanov 2000: 28, fig. 3).

What we also confirmed is the existence of a drainage channel which existence has already been affirmed in the bibliography. Some comments, however, are needed. For instance, it seems that the drainage did not run under the center of the *decumanus*, but zig-zagged and in the most western point of the studied area it reused the 'supporting wall'. If the drainage channel initially was attached to the 'supporting

wall' reusing it as a side, the drainage itself would had stopped at the niche (room 6). The zigzagging drainage channel is also bound constructively with the niche. The construction of the channel as well as the niche is of dressed rectangular stones bounded with white mortar.

The later construction of the drainage fits well with the later date of the *decumanus*, discovered by G. Kuzmanov. The assumed level of the street, if we accept the highest point of the preserved ruins of the drainage, is the level of the Anastasius's reconstruction of the complex. Our excavations, however, reveal that in fact this is the only certainly established drainage channel in the area; no remains of an earlier channel or of a *decumanus* have been attested in the area. It is true that most of the remains of the drainage channel, along with its stratum, have been removed by the treasure-hunters, but at least in the areas where the drainage was preserved there should be signs of an earlier one. In some of these areas, however, we notice that the drainage channel, which had reached the virgin soil, in fact cut an earlier burnt layer instead. Up to now, we have yet to find remains of a structure that could be positively identified as an earlier drainage or connected with an earlier street pavement. All of the structures, some of them not clear yet, discovered within the road bed, are bounded constructively with the later 'supporting wall'.

It is assumed that the *decumanus* was about 6 m width (Kuzmanov 2000: 32). In the eastern part of

the area which was excavated, it is located at *ca.* 3 m distance from the north façade wall of the complex (Fig. 5). Accordingly, in the excavated area north of the drainage, up to 3 m the remains of another wall were discovered, orientated east-west with the same manner of construction as the drainage and niche which enclose the street. Behind, two rows of rooms have been partly revealed in various sizes. Their structures, which are preserved only in foundations, were founded in the virgin soil, but in some parts overlapping earlier structures. They do not, however, follow the earlier wall, i. e. the later building has an entirely different plan and does not follow the plan of the earlier one. These walls belonged to the building which is situated on the northern side of the *decumanus* and should be dated to the time of Anastasius I at the earliest. Some later reconstructions also can be observed, obviously dated to the 6th c.



Figure 5. The uncovered area in the north half of the roadbed and north of it – view from East (author: Ivo Topalilov).

Of interest for our study are the earlier walls. Although partly preserved, it is clear that their construction technique is similar to that of the initial walls of the complex, albeit not that solid. In area F 5/ sq. 20 the remains of one of these walls were discovered. The wall is preserved in very poor condition, with only the lowest level of stones at the bottom of the foundation, but its location is of great significance since it is located within the possible road bed of the *decumanus*. From this, it is clear to me that the street lies on the ruins of an earlier building constructed in the manner of the initial phase of the so-called *Praetorium*.

Despite the heavily damaged archaeological context, the excavations provide some new material

which should be taken into consideration. Thus, some fragments of a burnt layer have also been found among the small finds of mostly coins and pottery dated to second half of the 3rd–5th c. It is true that some burnt spots have also been found outside of the road bed, located on the leveled surface of the virgin soil, and connected with material of the 1st c. (Dimitrov *et al.* 2016; 2017), but the difference in position and features make the assignation of the burnt layer to the remains of the late antique complex more appropriate. If so, it would provide a *terminus post quem* for the construction of the already attested *decumanus*, i. e. after 442/443 (on the date see Dinchev 2015: 176).

These preliminary results of the excavations carried out within the area of the so-called *Praetorium* and north of it, reveal that initially the complex was bigger than expected with extension in south direction.

The lack of any remains of a pavement or drainage within the possible bed of later *decumanus* and the founding of the remains of walls of the initial phase of the *Praetorium* make clear that no *decumanus* had ever existed before the later one, already attested and dated to the time of Anastasius I.

The archaeological excavations in fact added to the earlier supposition that in the time of Anastasius I the city was reconstructed. This is mostly based on the results of the excavations near the Western gate and fortification of the city where the official inscription + *Anastasiana Ratiaria semper floreat* was found (Velkov 1985: 886–889; Dinchev 2015: 177) although skepticism has been expressed (Popović 1991: 283). The inscription itself shows an

imperial initiative that was carried out in Ratiaria in the late 5th–beginning of the 6th c. Our excavations reveal that it was not only connected with the reconstruction of the curtain walls and rebuilding of the towers that flanked the western gate (Dinchev 2015: 185) and the raising the floor level of the *Praetorium*. It seems that imperial initiative affected at least the northern part of the city where the

Praetorium is located and the change was profound. It comprises a huge reduction of the initial area of the *Praetorium*, and the abandonment of the richly decorated *aula*, but also an introduction of a new street, the so-called ‘north decumanus – 2’, which changed radically the urban plan in this part of the city.

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