

THE FIRST TWO CENTURIES OF ROMAN OCCUPATION IN THE DANUBE BEND

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Investigations over the last two decades, particularly those by Sándor Soproni, have made the dense border system – consisting of watchtowers, fortified ports and other fortifications completed by the 4th century – relatively well-known. However, less information is available on the Roman occupation and the subsequent period, the artefacts and archaeological sites connected to the era. The Transdanubian parts of modern Hungary were accessed by the military troops of conquering Rome in the 1st century AD. Although in the western zone of the region there were Roman sites and camps apparently even earlier, the final establishment and organization was accomplished only during the reign of Emperor Claudius (AD 41–54), and his successors, Vespasian (AD 69–79) and Titus (AD 79–81).² The border of the province became the Danube (Danuvius) regarded as one of the greatest rivers of Antiquity. The border defence system, the Limes, was set up along the Danube. The Roman army erected its forts along the river at given distances from each other. During the organization of the province these fort sites were consolidated. At the beginning they were protected by a wooden palisade and an earth rampart which were later strengthened with stone.

The complex defence system of the Danube Bend had developed between Esztergom (*Solva*) and Szentendre (*Ulcisia*) by the 2nd century AD. In that border zone there were forts (*castella*) holding 500 to 1000 men. Certain sections of the river were controlled by minor watchtowers located at a distance of sight from one another. The civilian population related to the soldiers lived in settlements that developed in the vicinity of forts. However, the largest part of the rural population consisted of the surviving Pannonian–Illyrian and Celtic natives. In addition to the long-extant trade relations, the involvement of the *Azali* and *Eravisci* in Roman public administration and the army were instrumental in their Romanization that is the adoption of Latin language and other customs. In the first two centuries the elements of both Celtic and Roman presence can be demonstrated in the archaeological material of the territory. This duality is not only reflected by artefacts, but also by funerary rites. A good example to illustrate that is a tombstone from Szentendre made in the first half of the second century. It was erected by Marcus Attilius Rufus, a veteran soldier of *legio II Adiutrix*, to his wife called Mira. On it, the woman was represented wearing Celtic garments, while her husband and child were already shown with Roman costume and hairstyle, which means that it was more important to emphasise their imperial ties than their origins.

Although the development was relatively undisturbed, there were several minor or greater conflicts with neighbouring barbarians (Quadi, Marcomanni and Sarmatians). These struggles remained generally isolated, but after the fights afflicting Pannonia in 92, major fortifications and re-organizations started. The situation changed fundamentally due to the outbreak of the Marcomannic wars under the reign of Emperor Marcus Aurelius (AD 161–180). The conflict lasting more than a decade claimed enormous sacrifices, and represented a major dividing line in the life of the province that developed in peace until then. Most of the settlements and military camps were destroyed or suffered great damages, and the fights basically decimated the local indigenous population. The defence system had to be re-organized completely. For that

¹ The author is grateful to István Kovács for his help in the preparation of the article.

² Gabler, Dénes: A dunai limes I-II. századi történetének néhány kérdése (Some questions related to the first and second century history of the Danubian limes). *Archaeologiai Értesítő* 104 (1977/1), 145–175; Fitz, Jenő: Historical outline of the Roman period. In: *Hungarian archaeology at the Turn of the Millennium*, ed. Visy, Zsolt (Budapest: Teleki László Alapítvány, 2003), 205–208.



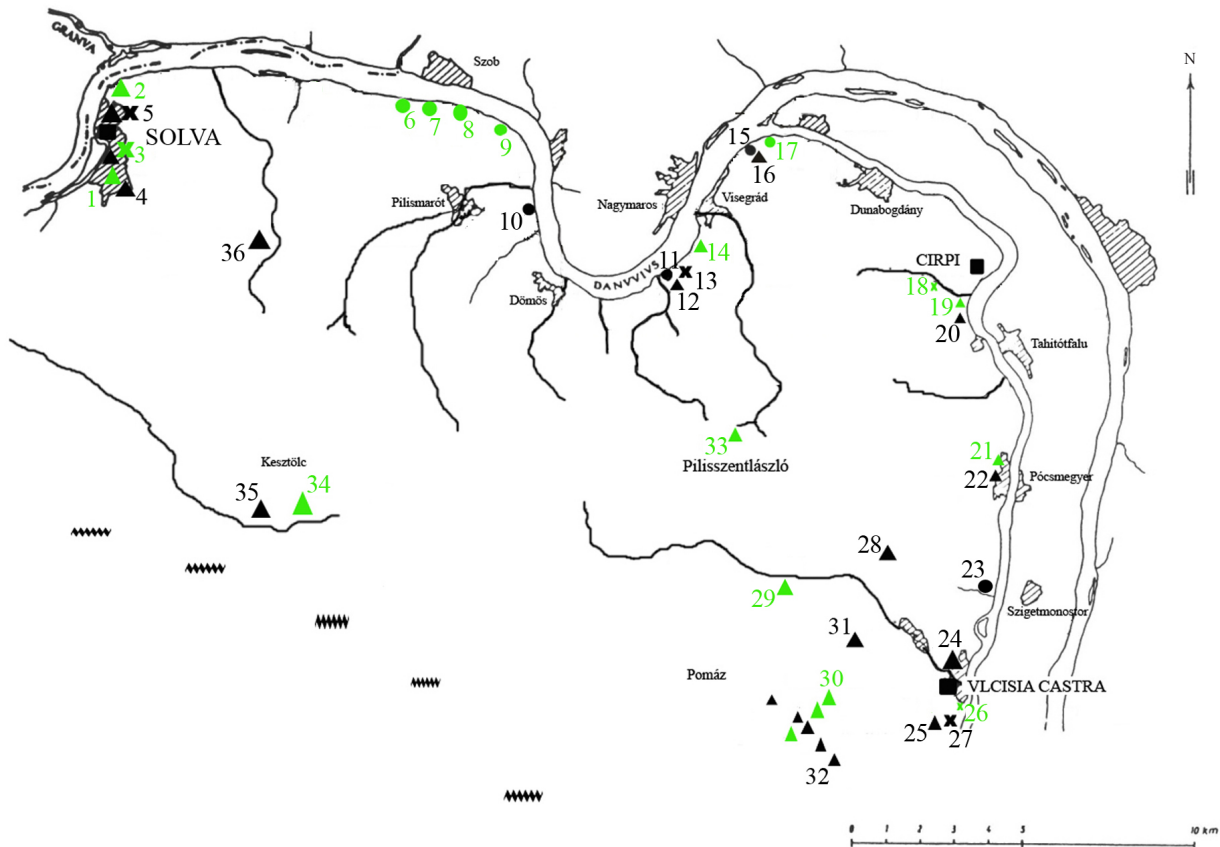
Fig. 1: Pannonia in the 2nd–3rd centuries
 After Visy, Zsolt ed., *Hungarian Archaeology at the Turn of the Millennium*
 (Budapest: Teleki László Alapítvány, 2003), 204.

reason, new military units – and along with them new ethnic groups – arrived from different parts of the Empire and melted into the local population.

The region of the Danube Bend was protected by the cavalry units of three *castella*: *Solva*, *Cirpi* and *Ulcisia*. According to the testimony of soldiers’ epitaphs, the *cohors I Ulpia Pannoniorum milliaria equitata*, which arrived in *Solva* (Esztergom) in AD 118–119, was garrisoned in the *castellum* until the decay of the first stone fort in 270. The unurned cremation burials and tombstones of soldiers were discovered east of the fort, at Bánom Hill.³

East of Esztergom, watchtowers belonging to the period are known to have been built at the Szob crossing place, at Lepence in the meander of the Danube, and at Visegrád–Várkert at the top of the Szentendre Island. These watchtowers were constructed at places where the river could be crossed. Between *Solva* and *Cirpi* no major military constructions are known apart from the watchtowers. That is why the discovery

³ H. Kelemen, Márta: *Solva. Esztergom későrómai temetői* (Solva. Late Roman cemeteries in Esztergom). *Libelli Archaeologici* Ser. Nov. No. III. (Budapest: Magyar Nemzeti Múzeum, 2008), 149–152.



1st-2nd-century archaeological sites

● Watchtowers

- 6 - Pilismarót, Basaharc
- 7 - Pilismarót, szobi rév
- 8 - Pilismarót, Basaharc
- 9 - Pilismarót, Dunamelléke-dűlő
- 17 - Visegrád, Kisvillám

▲ Settlement/ Villa

- 1 - Esztergom
- 2 - Esztergom, Szentgyörgymező
- 14 - Visegrád, Kőbánya
- 19 - Tahitótfalu
- 21 - Leányfalu
- 34 - Kesztyölc
- 33 - Pilisszentlászló
- 29 - Szentendre
- 30 - Pomáz

✕ Grave/ Tombstone/ Burying

- 3 - Esztergom
- 18 - Tahitótfalu
- 26 - Szentendre

■ Fortress in the 1st-3rd century

▄▄▄▄ Aquincum-Crumerum road

2nd-3rd-century archaeological sites

● Watchtowers

- 10 - Dömös, Tófenék-dűlő
- 11 - Visegrád, Lepence I. sz. őrtorony
- 15 - Visegrád, Várkert
- 23 - Szentendre, Hunka domb

▲ Settlement/ Villa

- 4 - Esztergom
- 12 - Visegrád, Lepence
- 16 - Visegrád, Várkert
- 20 - Tahitótfalu
- 22 - Leányfalu
- 24 - Szentendre
- 25 - Szentendre
- 28 - Szentendre
- 35 - Kesztyölc
- 36 - Esztergom, Hármaskút
- 31 - Szentendre, Püspökmajor
- 32 - Pomáz

✕ Grave/ Tombstone/ Burying

- 5 - Esztergom
- 13 - Visegrád, Lepence
- 27 - Szentendre

Fig. 2: Archaeological sites in the Danube Bend dating from the 2nd-3rd centuries



Fig. 3: *The Danube Bend near Visegrád*



Fig. 4: *Reconstruction of an auxiliary fort (Pazirik Kft.)*
 After Boruzs, Katalin – Kováts, István:
A római kor kezdete a Dunakanyarban.
Kiállításvezető (Visegrád: Magyar Nemzeti Múzeum Mátyás Király Múzeuma, 2011), 8.



Fig. 5: *Cavalryman wearing helmet*
 After Fields, Nic – Hook, Adam:
Roman Auxiliary Cavalryman: AD 14-193 (Warrior 101) (Oxford: Osprey Publishing Ltd, 2006), Illustration E

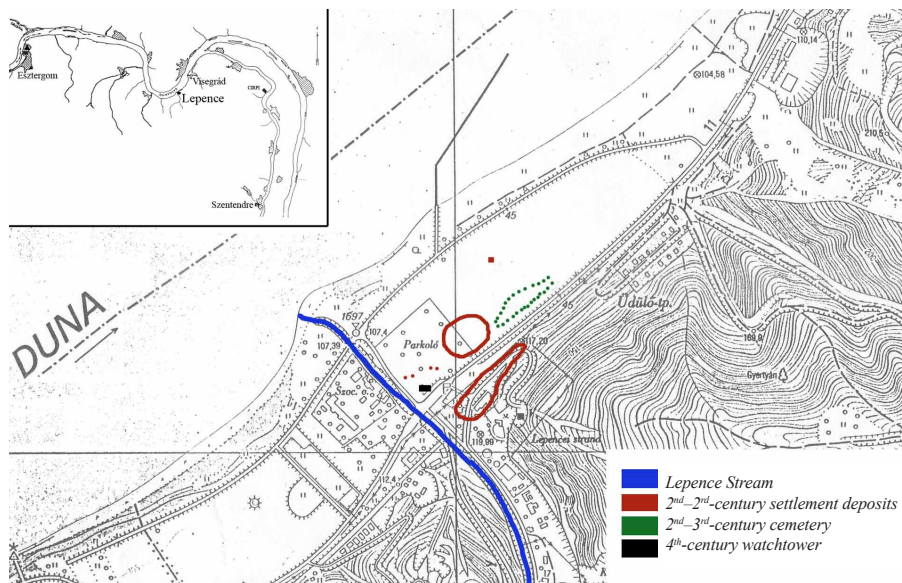


Fig. 6: Location of the Roman sites at Visegrád-Lepence



Fig. 7: Visegrád-Lepence. Aerial photograph of the excavation in 2008 (Civertan Bt.)



Fig. 8: Pottery kiln from the settlement at Visegrád-Lepence



Fig. 9: Dogs buried into an oven at Visegrád-Lepence



Fig. 10: Griddle covered with fragmented ceramics found at Visegrád

of the military brickyard in the centre of Dömös in the 1980s was rather unexpected.⁴ The two large kilns measuring 4×6 metres suggest large-scale constructions. On the basis of brick stamps, these can be connected to the *legio I Adiutrix* garrisoned in Brigetio.

At *Cirpi* (Dunabogdány) the first timber-and-stone-structured fort was erected in the AD 80s, and was surrounded by a triple ditch. The regular rectangular *castellum* measured 124×147 metres and had 1.2-metre-wide walls. The *cohors II Alpinorum equitata* was garrisoned there.⁵ It was presumably also one of the garrisons of the Pannonian fleet, as it is demonstrated by bricks bearing CFH (*classis Flavia Histrica*) stamps. The earliest, earth and timber period of the *castellum* at Ulcisisa, Szentendre, can be dated to the reigns of Emperors Domitian and Trajan. The stone fort measuring 205×134 metres was constructed in the second half of the AD 2nd century. The *cohors I milliaria nova Surorum* recruited in Syria arrived there at that time, and was still stationed there in the third century.⁶ Characteristic signs of their presence are stone stiffening plaques of bows.

The narrow strip of area between the Danube and the mountains was not suitable to be colonized by large masses of people, because no land was available there for farming and animal husbandry. That is why, except for sloping territories around Szentendre, one cannot find the system of scattered villa estates in the Danube Bend, which was the dominant form of settlement in rural parts of Pannonia. The 52-roomed and 5200 m² large *villa rustica* – that is the central unit of buildings belonging to a rural estate – discovered by Öregvíz, could have been the property of a veteran soldier who began the construction in the 220s–230s.⁷



Fig. 11: Undecorated dish from Rheinzabern with the name of its owner, Lucilla



Fig. 12: Terra sigillata vessel from Visegrád-Lepence

⁴ H. Kelemen, Márta: A Legio I Adiutrix téglavetője Dömösön (The brickyard of the legio I Adiutrix at Dömös). *Archaeologiai Értesítő* 121–122 (1994–1995), 97–112.

⁵ Visy, Zsolt: *The Ripa Pannonica in Hungary* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 2003), 146.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁷ Topál, Judit: Die römische Villa von Szentendre. *Balácai Közlemények* 3 (1994), 321–335.

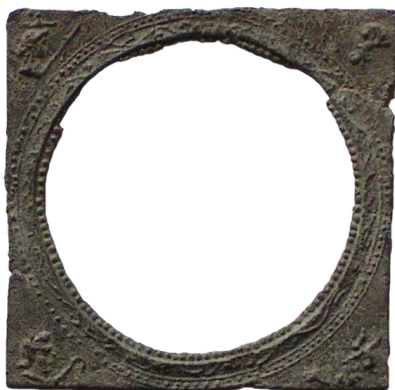


Fig. 13: Ornamented tin frame of a mirror from Visegrád-Lepence



Fig. 14: Bronze mount decorated with pelta from Visegrád-Lepence



Fig. 15: Mask of a cavalry helmet, Visegrád-Várkert



Fig. 16: Stamp of the Syrian archers' troop found at Visegrád-Várkert



Fig. 17: A signet ring portraying Mars, found at Visegrád-Lepence



Fig. 18: Horse-shaped brooch from Visegrád-Lepence

The settlements developed by crossing places or near military forts. In 2008 a part of a village-like settlement was discovered by the Danube, in the vicinity of a small watchtower at Visegrád-Lepence. Approximately fifty ovens dug into the ground were discovered there, which were created in the gently sloping hillside. The pottery furnace of the village was also found there. Along a gravelled road, there was also an edifice with stone foundation and plastered walls, the exact function of which is unknown. Dwelling buildings were not found in the investigated area. The settlement was presumably established when the border defence system was set up after the Marcomannic wars. Its depopulation can be associated with attacks launched in the 260s and 270s.⁸ On the territory of Visegrád-Várkert there must have been a settlement of the same age. The Roman settlement at Lepence yielded nearly 700 shreds of Samian ware that, according to the determination of Dénes Gabler, were transported here from five different manufactures between AD 160 and 260. Most of the imported goods arrived here in the Severan Period (AD 194–235), the economic golden age of the province, mainly from Rheinzabern (*Tres Tabernae*) located by the Rhine. In addition to the Rhenish factory, Westerndorf and Pfaffenhofen (*Pons Aeni*) by the Inn, as well as the workshop of Schwabmünchen near Augsburg (*Augusta Vindelicorum*) also transported goods here.

The partially excavated cemetery comprising 111 burials located along the road leading out of the settlement is particularly significant because no other burial site of similar age and size is known from the Danube

⁸ Boruzs, Katalin – Kováts, István: *A római kor kezdete a Dunakanyarban. Kiállításvezető* (The Early Roman Period in the Danube Bend. An exhibition guide). (Visegrád: Magyar Nemzeti Múzeum Mátyás Király Múzeuma, 2011), 8–9.

Bend.⁹ The graveyard was used by a closed rural community. Most of the graves yielded pieces of drinking and tableware: mostly units of glasses and bowls, as well as oil lamps. The bowls contained pieces of pork, cattle and poultry that were placed in them as food offerings. Jewellery, cosmetics and objects required for personal care were hidden in iron mounted wooden caskets, the remains of which were discovered in seven graves. Coins from the graveyard and the settlement were examined by István Vida. The seventy-four coins were made in the period between the reigns of Antoninus Pius (138–161) and Trebonianus Gallus (251–253). In addition to the twelve silver *denarius* and *antoninianus*, mainly bronze coins were discovered (*as* and *sestertius*), more than half of which came from a central or provincial mint. The rest were Severan forgeries: silvered bronze or bronze cast coins (*as* and *sestertius*). The latter, the so-called *limesfalsa* were not suitable for deception because of their outlook. They can be rather considered to have been used as necessity money, issued in large quantities during disruptions in the central money supply.

Barbarian invasions in the 260–270s brought about great changes in the border sections affected, such as the Danube Bend. Many fortifications were destroyed or damaged, and the rural population fled leaving behind their previous homes. In the fourth century, new thick stone-walled forts and watchtowers were built (such as the fortresses at Sibrik Hill and Gizellamajor, in Visegrád). The population related to the army settled by these fortifications, and their cemeteries developed also there.

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⁹ Boruzs, Katalin: A Visegrád-lepencei római kori hamvasztásos temető (The Roman cremation cemetery at Visegrád–Lepence). In: *Fiatal Római Koros Kutatók I. Konferenciakötete* (Conference Volume of the Young Researchers of the Roman Period. I), ed. Bíró, Szilvia (Győr: Győr-Moson-Sopron Megyei Múzeumok Igazgatósága, 2007), 219–232.