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GEOPHYSICAL SURVEY AT LATE ROMAN *MEDIANA*

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Abstract. – This article discusses the results of geophysical surveys conducted at Mediana, near the town Nis (Serbia) in April 2010. The research was realized in cooperation with the Romano-Germanic Commission of the German Archaeological Institute, the Archaeological Institute and the University of Belgrade. Mediana geomagnetic prospecting sites, as a form of non-destructive methods of investigation, provided many new details about the architectural and archaeological remains, particularly in the eastern part of the site.

Key words. – Mediana, geophysical surveys, geomagnetic prospection.

Two years before the 1700th anniversary of the edict of Milan, the Romano-Germanic Commission of the German Archaeological Institute, together with colleagues from Belgrade University, returned to the roots of one of the most extraordinary sites from the late Roman Empire which is of great significance for the history of Christianity in Serbia.¹ The 4th–5th century imperial *villa urbana* at *Mediana* near Niš – the ancient *municipium Naissus* – is generally ascribed to Constantine the Great, who was born between AD 272 and 285 in *Naissus*. Over a period of more than 100 years *Mediana* often served as an imperial residence, and briefly accommodated Constantine the Great himself, his sons Constantius II and Constans, as well as the emperors Julian and Valentinian I.² Due to its historically attested role as an important imperial abode – if only as a temporary station on journeys – the villa complex early on attracted the attention of archaeologists and historians. Excavations were started

in the 1933s³, and in the meantime a considerable part of the area has been archaeologically investigated, with the main interest being focussed on the central parts of the *villa* and some clearly recognisable features nearby.⁴

Recent excavations by the Institute of Archaeology of Belgrade confirmed three main phases of occupation: 1. A series of architectural installations built directly on a prehistoric subsoil possibly date to about AD 317,

¹ We would like to thank especially G. Milošević, M. Jevtić and A. Aleksić for a warm welcome in *Mediana* and Niš, their excellent cooperation, advice and support on and in *Mediana* and beyond. Further thanks go to D. Wigg-Wolf who proofread the text and provided valuable correction, and to Ch. Rummel for his help.

² Petrović 1993, 59 et seqq.; 73; Petrović 1994, 71–78.

³ Oršić Slavetić 1933/34, 303–310; Bratanić 1938, 199–204.

⁴ Vasić 2007, 96 et seqq.; cf. Petrović 1993, 29–33.

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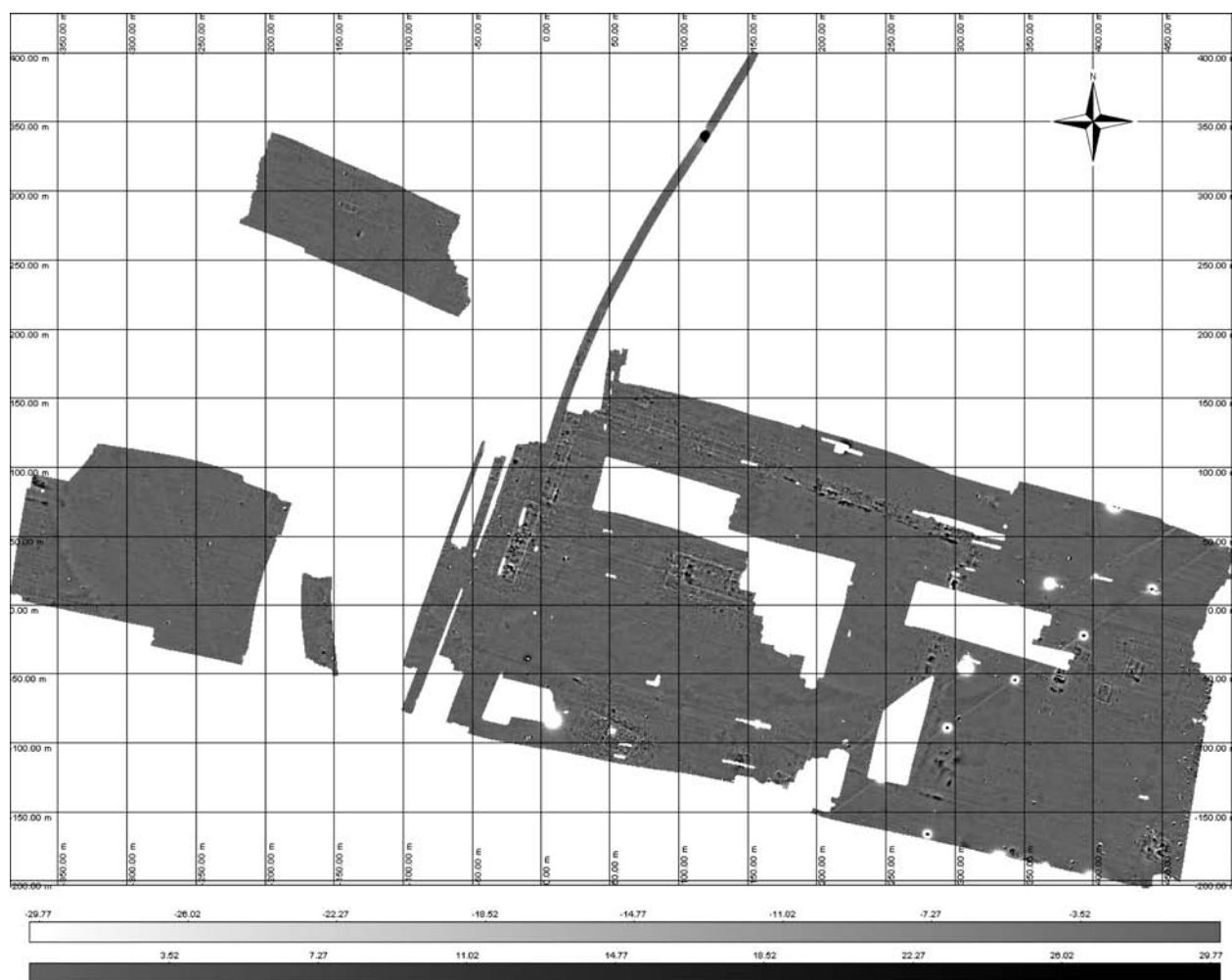


Fig. 1. *Mediana*. General plan of geomagnetic prospection in April 2010

Сл. 1. Медиана. Општи план геоманетне пројекције, април 2010

and were destroyed during the 330s AD. 2. The main period, comprising the mass of monumental buildings described below, which is assumed to have been destroyed during the Gothic raids on the Balkans in AD 378. 3. A small rural settlement, installed within the earlier buildings, including a small apsidal church and a cemetery.⁵

The central peristyle is the outstanding feature of the site.⁶ Together with its impressive apsidal extension that might have served as a *triclinium*, several annex buildings (*thermae*, *stibadium*) and administrative rooms (*officium*), it is the lavishly decorated mosaics floors and wall paintings, most of which have been preserved *in situ*, that attract most attention. Various considerations suggest an administrative function for the building (e.g. a chancellery), rather than its being a purely resi-

dential complex.⁷ The foundations of a large *horraeum* have been excavated northwest of the central complex. This granary is of considerable size and is divided into an elongated storage space supported on pillars or columns, a southern porch, and a system of administrative rooms to the west.⁸ The massive building is centrally located in an open space surrounded by a rectangular complex of narrow elongated buildings. These are interpreted as barracks for local servants, guards and subordinate

⁵ Vasić 2005, 168 et seq.

⁶ For an extensive description of the archaeological features in *Mediana* see Petrović 1994; Vasić 2007, 98 et seqq.

⁷ Vasić 2005, 168; 173.

⁸ Petrović 1994, 91–96.

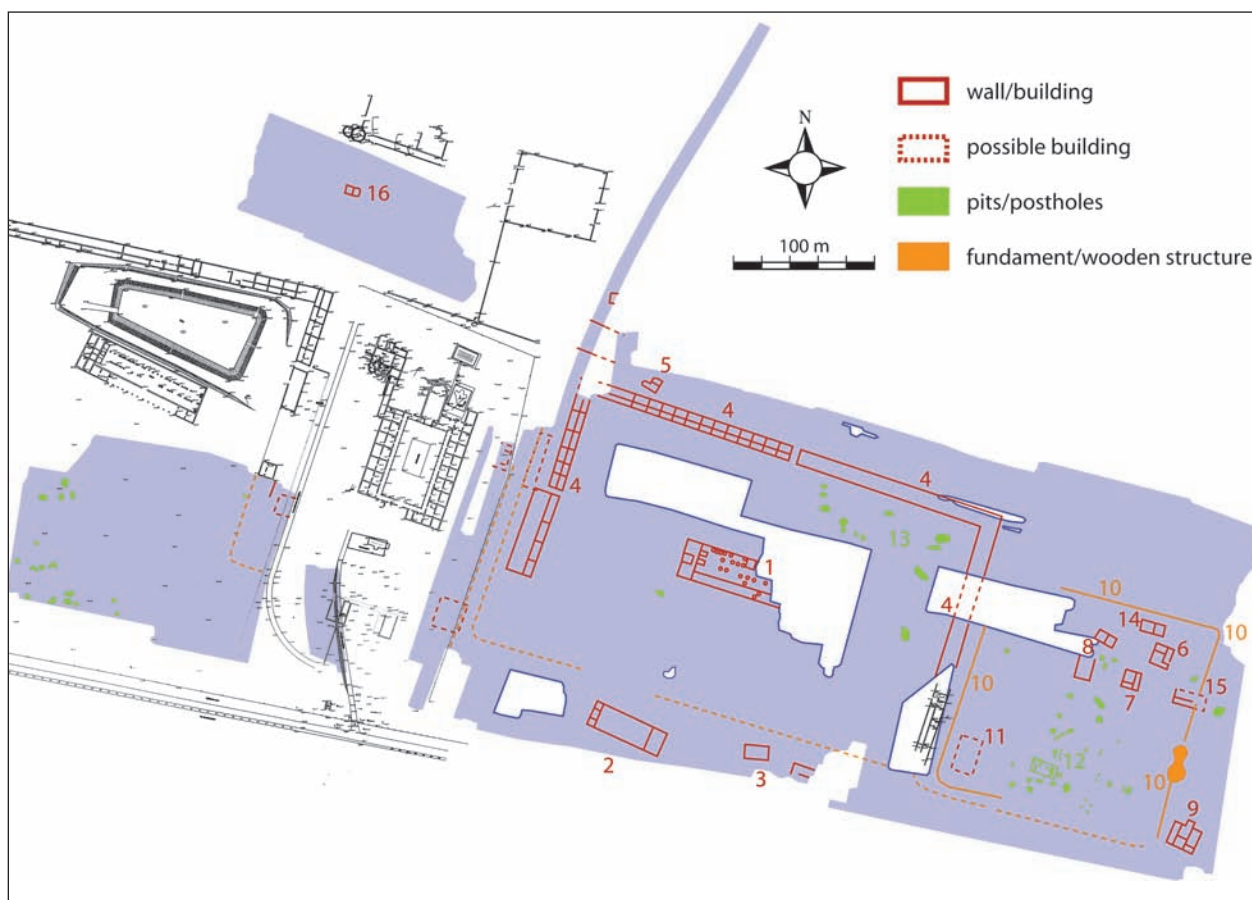


Fig. 2. *Mediana*. Structures 1–16 detected by geomagnetic prospection

Сл. 2. Медуана. Структуре 1–16 структуре идентификоване геоманетним простијецијом

members of the imperial court, or else as offices and service rooms connected with the granary.⁹ North of the impressive centre a rectangular complex with little internal structuring is open to interpretation. Next to it the remains of a fairly intricate architectural ensemble have been excavated. Several apsidal and octagonal rooms may indicate that this was the main part of an imperial ensemble comprising private and representative rooms for the inner court circle.¹⁰ The modern road and railway line to Pirot delimits the southern part of the villa. Here several other large-scale structures have recently been discovered, including a *villa* with semicircular conches and one with a surrounding wall.¹¹ About 500 m to the west another small *villa* and a *vicus* with simple houses were located.¹² On the slopes of the hills opposite, a *castellum aquae* regulating the water supply for the spa at *Mediana*¹³ and a late Roman fort have been identified.¹⁴ The site is adjacent to the river

Nišava, which runs about 500 m north of the central *peristyle*.

Today the site is part of a water protection area and the open space, much of which has been deforested, offers good conditions for non-destructive geophysical survey. For this reason the Romano-Germanic Commission Frankfurt/M. (RGK), at the invitation of Serbian colleagues, carried out an intensive campaign of geomagnetic prospection in April 2010 covering more

⁹ Vasić 2007, 101–102; Petrović 1996, 298–300.

¹⁰ Jeremić G. 2006, 153.

¹¹ Petrović 1994, 100 et seq.

¹² Petrović 1996, 295–296.

¹³ Jeremić 1988, 61–84; Petrović 1994, 34.

¹⁴ Petrović 1993, 74 et seq.

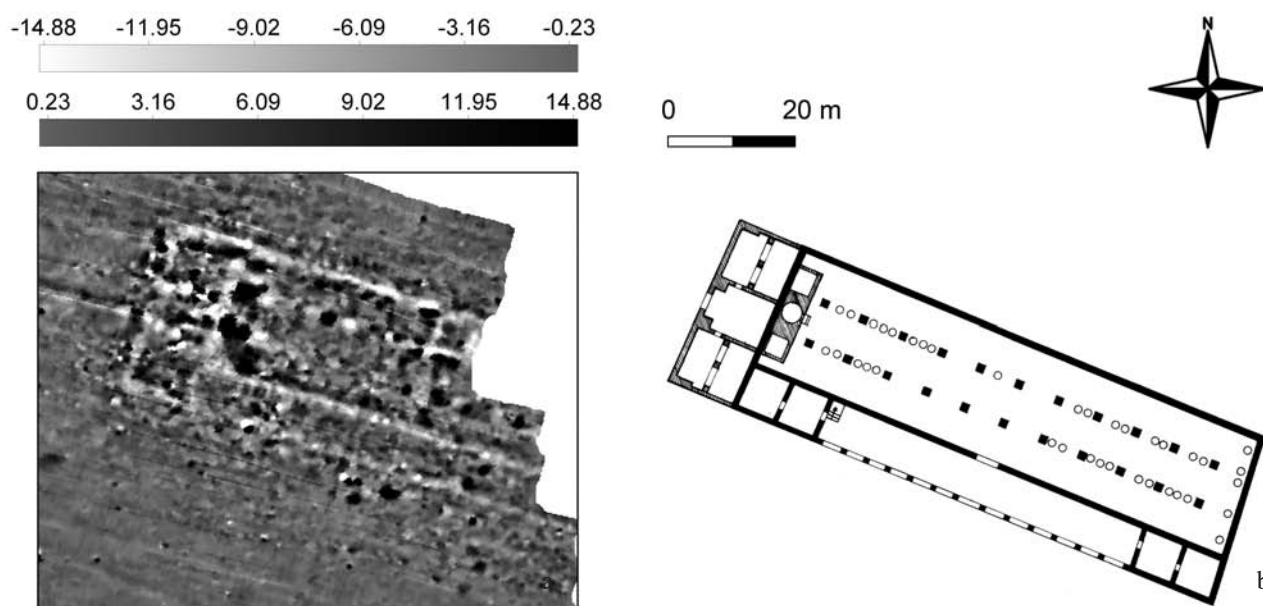


Fig. 3. *Mediana*. a) Structure 1; b) Large horraeum, northwest of the central complex, excavated 1980–1982

Сл. 3. Медуана. а) Структура 1; б) Велики хореум, северозајадно од централној дела комплекса, истражен 1980–1982

than 16 ha, mainly in the sector east of the *villa* (Fig. 1). A preliminary analysis of the data collected offers a first view of a variety of subterranean features, most of which were unknown before and help to complete the plan of the *villa* complex.

The western *horreum* has a counterpart approximately 180 m east of the peristyle. Previously a subterranean structure could only be deduced from aerial photography and a slight elevation consisting of building debris.¹⁵ Geophysics now offer a detailed plan of the building (Fig. 2.1; Fig. 3). The internal structure matches exactly the outline of the western granary, and consists of a rectangular courtyard divided longitudinally into three aisles by two rows of columns or pillars. Negative features along the northern and southern wall seem to represent the position of large ceramic storage containers, *dolia* or *pithoi*. At the western end of the storage hall some strong magnetic amplitudes suggest the existence of reservoirs for liquids (oil or wine) with massive foundations such as were excavated in the western *horraeum*.¹⁶ Along the central southern front there seems to be a porch with small pillars supporting the roof. To the west a series of square rooms adjoin the porch, the corner rooms of which are divided internally by pillars that are even visible in the geomagnetic plan. The entrance in the middle of the western front, which is c. 27 m wide, opens onto a rectangular hall in

the centre of the administrative part of the granary. Its western end is slightly narrowed by two pilaster bases on either side of the entrance which are quite clearly defined as geomagnetic anomalies and might have held dedicatory inscriptions or altars.¹⁷

60 m south of the *horreum* a smaller building of slightly different orientation, some 16 m wide and 45 m long, was detected (Fig. 2.2; Fig. 4). Its western part is only superficially visible as a geomagnetic anomaly. This might indicate a substructure not made of stone but rather a wooden foundation made out of horizontal beams. On the other hand, the foundation trenches might have been robbed of an original stone footing, with the empty trenches giving only a feeble magnetic signal. Along the western front several small rectangular and square rooms can be identified. Behind this front row follows a square room of some 15 m length into which a smaller central square (5–6 m) is integrated. Beyond another transverse row of small chambers or rooms is an open backyard c. 20 m long. The eastern part is mostly concealed by a scatter of building debris, suggesting

¹⁵ Vasić 2005, 167.

¹⁶ Vasić 2007, 101.

¹⁷ Cf. Petrović 1995, 239.

that a stone construction stood here. The overall image of the building closely resembles the normal plan of a Roman urban villa with small rooms or shops (*fauces*) in the front, an atrium and adjoining rooms (*tablinium*, *triclinium*), and a peristyle in the rear part of the house. Further to the west, below the modern road to Pirot, a similar *villa* dating to the first half of the 4th century AD has been excavated (Fig. 4). It also has an east-west orientation, semicircular *conches* and probably a peristyle courtyard of considerable size (side length c. 12 m) at its eastern end.¹⁸ Hypothetically we might identify these edifices as *domus* in which subordinate members of the imperial administration or army such as *Aurelius Ampelius*, *tribunus Batavorum* lived.¹⁹ Remains of at least two more stone foundations can be seen further to the east lying partially outside the range of the surveyed area (Fig. 2.3).

The whole area, with the *horreum* at its centre, is delimited on its northern and eastern side by narrow elongated buildings that extend over an overall distance of some 400 m (Fig. 2.4). Corresponding structures that are interpreted as barracks, storage or office facilities have been uncovered west of the central peristyle. On the basis of their internal division the geophysical anomalies on the east side can be reconstructed with rectangular rooms of c. 8 x 4.5 m. Facing the inner court there seems to be a portico-like structure, which presumably runs along all the barracks and encloses the 6 ha courtyard. In the middle of the northern range a gap of 5 m suggests there was an entrance here to the open area which on its western side is delimited by another range of elongated buildings. These were indirectly visible on aerial photographs and were reconstructed as a single structure running north-west to south-east corresponding to the buildings west of the peristyle. Geomagnetic prospection has now revealed the existence of two separated buildings which are offset by c. 6 m. The northern building exactly corresponds in form and size to the northwestern range (the north-eastern and eastern range are visible only as rather crude anomalies that do not reveal detailed internal structuring). The southern, massive feature is situated further to the west and is divided internally into several parts. Along its entire eastern façade there seem to be traces of a porch ending approximately on a level with the front of the adjacent building to the north. This suggests the possibility of a different interpretation of the geomagnetic results: given the unequal amplitude of the western solid building and the eastern “porch”, the latter might be interpreted as a first phase of a building

aligned exactly on the northern barracks. This might have subsequently been removed and replaced by a building of similar size in a slightly different position. Small linear structures, both solid and negative archaeological features, (e. g. walls, drains, small ditches, possibly water pipes) protrude from the northern end of this building.

Another small building can be identified directly adjacent to the northern range of the barracks (Fig. 2.5). In the southwest corner an apsidal structure protrudes some 5–6 m from the west façade of the square main section (8 x 8 m). This object can be cautiously interpreted as a small bath.

East of the enclosed area several other buildings were detected which had not previously been located by other methods of archaeological prospection. Next to two linear modern water pipes are a series of rectangular, almost square stone edifices of similar layout and apparently facing east. House 6 (Fig. 2.6) is c. 14 m long and has an oblong room (or porch?) on the east side that is clearly separated from a small square room in the southeastern corner of the house. There is no clear division between this room and the rear part of the building, which in turn seems to be divided transversely. Albeit of slightly smaller size, House 7 (Fig. 2.7) reveals a similar layout. Both houses correspond almost exactly in size and plan to the “villa with surrounding wall” which has a protruding entrance area leading to a variously structured main part (Fig. 5).²⁰ The internal layout of the two smaller western features (Fig. 2.8) measuring 12 x 7 m, and which might be out-house belonging to the main *villae*, are difficult to discern. Finally, another masonry structure is situated in the extreme southeastern corner of the area surveyed (Fig. 2.9). Almost square in shape (c. 17 x 15 m), there are two protruding anomalies on the northern side. Dipole-like magnetic signatures within the building mask the complicated internal layout, so that one can only guess as to its function as a bath or another *villa* in the vicinity of the road to Naissus.²¹

¹⁸ Petrović 1994, 100.

¹⁹ cf. *ibid.* 237 et seqq.; Mirković 1982. The presence of military units is indicated by find of cruciform *fibulae* in and around the barracks (Vasić 2005, 173).

²⁰ Petrović 1994, 101; Cf. Drča 2000, 21–36; Janković-Mihaldžić 2001, 27–38.

²¹ A destruction by fire which is proven for the nearby “villa with the surrounding wall” (*ibid.*) would account for the strong magnetic anomalies that characterise the building.

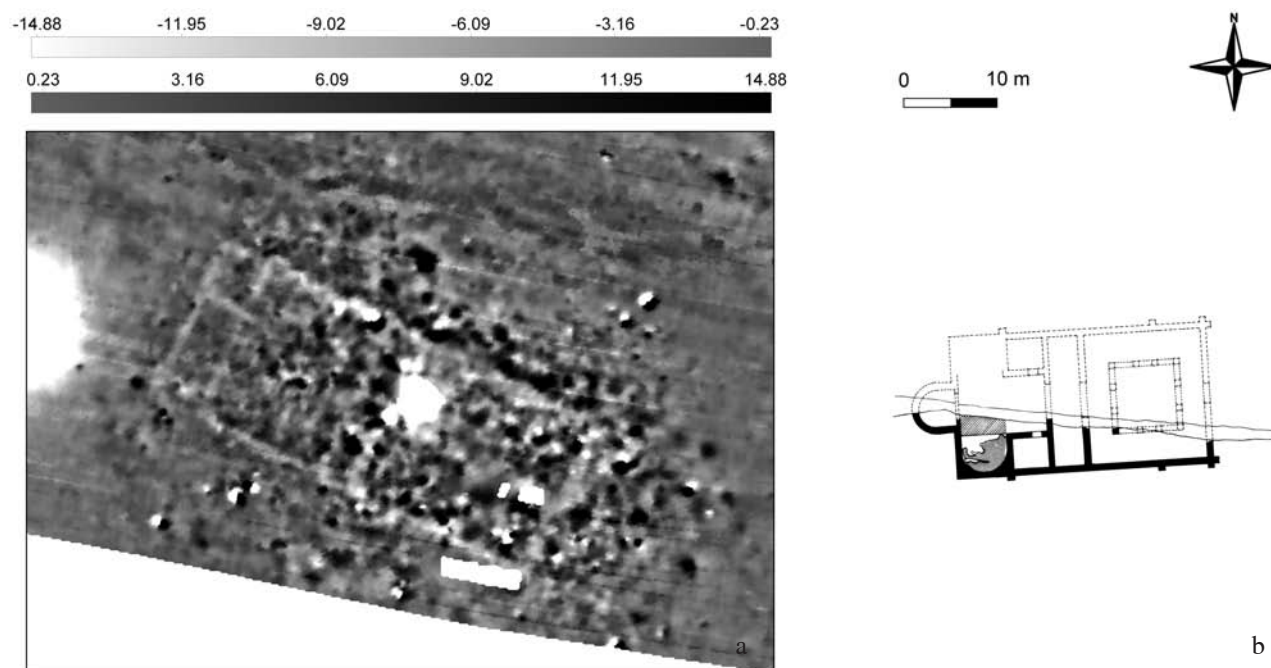


Fig. 4. *Mediana*. a) Structure 2; b) The villa with semicircular conches, southwest of the central complex, excavated 1975

Сл. 4. *Медиана*. а) Структура 2; б) Вила са конхама, југозападно од централног дела комплекса, истражена 1975

Besides the large number of newly detected stone structures, the subsoil had preserved another secret that is much harder to deduce from the geomagnetic picture. Only faintly visible, a linear, apparently ditch-like structure runs from NNE to SSW at the eastern fringe of the surveyed area (Fig. 2.10). At its northern end this “ditch” bends sharply to the west, thus following the typical form of a Roman army camp. Whilst the northwestern and southeastern corners are hardly visible, the other corners allow for the reconstruction of a square camp with side measuring about 160 m. This linear structure is probably to be interpreted as the in-filled ditch of a camp. No remains of a solid stone wall or of stone foundations could be identified. A permanent wooden fortification being quite improbable – at least assuming a date in the 3rd or 4th century AD – it is more likely that we have here a temporary or unfinished structure. Just off centre on the eastern side there are two round or oval structures apparently connected by a short rectangular middle section and which can readily be interpreted as a gate. Similar features can be recognised in the middle of the western side, the picture there is, however, severely disturbed by modern

interference, e.g. water pipes and pumps. Similarly, the exact plan of the eastern gate is hard to discern. The layout of the gate flanked by towers and the ditch – or a foundation trench robbed of stone – allows some preliminary chronological considerations. Round or oval in shape, the assumed towers would have projected from the adjoining walls and suggest a date from the 3rd century AD, when towers of Severan type with a convex outer face occur at camps in *Moesia Inferior*.²² Such features are still found in military camps of the 4th and 5th centuries AD in the Danube region, for example *Karataš–Diana* or *Čezava–Novae* where circular towers also protrude from the walls.²³ Given the characteristic form of late Roman gates with U-shaped, round or polygonal flanking towers, the blurred picture of the camp entrance at *Mediana* does not allow exact dating. Comparable defences in the northern and northeastern territories of the Empire indicate a Dio-

²² Vasić/Kondić 1986, 549.

²³ *Ibid.* 553.

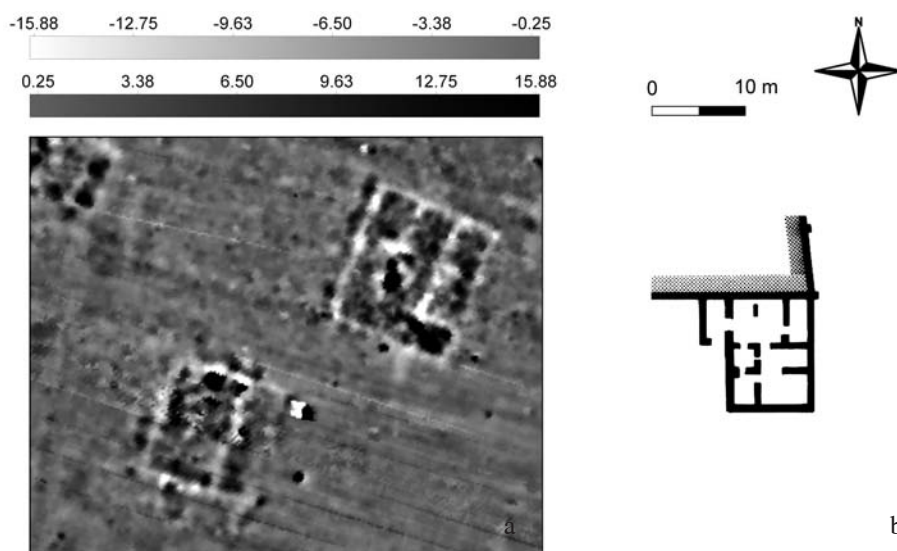


Fig. 5. *Mediana*. a) Structures 6 and 7; b) The villa with the surrounding wall, southeast of the central complex, excavated 1975

Сл. 5. Медиана. а) Структуре 6 и 7; б) Вила са оградним зидом, југоисточно од централног дела комплекса, истражена 1975

cletianic context, but there are also parallels as late as the Valentinianic period.²⁴

A possible gap between the northern end of the gate and the curtain wall – or ditch – provides an opportunity for further interpretation. Although not unusual in late Roman defensive architecture, the rather diffuse local geomagnetic pattern prevents a definite interpretation as a postern-like side entrance.²⁵ A similar situation is to be found at Neumagen–*Noviomagus* (DE), where a polygonal tower or bastion guards a simple 6 m wide passage through the curtain, while single towers flanked the southeastern access to the circular fortification at Jünkerath–*Icorigium* (DE) and the southern and eastern gates at Alzey (DE).²⁶ They date to the time of Constantine I and Valentinian I respectively.

A number of strong anomalies in the camp's south-western corner might represent burnt building structures, but could also be the remains of kilns or ovens (Fig. 2.11). At *Pontes* a number of baking ovens dating to the beginning of the 4th century AD were found along the course of the *intervallum*, or rather the circular road between the two lines of the eastern defences of the 3rd century Roman camp.²⁷ Whether the similarity of the situation at *Mediana* implies a functional or even chronological similarity is a matter for future research.

A series of round structures with a diameter of c. 2–5 m are of the same magnetic intensity as the ditch and seem to run across the camp (Fig. 2.12) – interestingly meeting Building 8 from the south. Equivalent features that might have served as storage pits that were later refilled with rubbish are to be found between the eastern and northern ranges of the barracks (Fig. 2.13). They cannot be dated, and whether they are part of the eastern camp or the western barracks complex remains unclear. A series of silo pits at *Pontes* is attributed to a civilian occupation at the beginning of the 4th century AD, whereas at *Mediana* a connection with the rural settlement of the latest phase (end of 4th–5th century AD) cannot be excluded.²⁸

Two structures next to the complex of stone buildings discussed above are of low magnetic intensity and may have been timber built, but this can only be confirmed by excavation (Fig. 2.14, 15). The sizeable

²⁴ Johnson 1983, 45 et seqq.; von Petrikovits 1971, 198 et seqq. – Cf. Kastler 2002, 609.

²⁵ Ibid. 201.

²⁶ Ibid. Fig. 26,1.4; 30,9.

²⁷ Vasić 1991, 309.

²⁸ Ibid.

Building 14 (13 x 7 m) next to House 6 shows an irregular plan with a number of spot-like and linear anomalies, and is aligned with the northern ditch. Even less clearly defined, a barely visible rectangular structure (14 x 10 m) seems to straddle the eastern ditch of the camp (Fig. 2.15). At present the actual chronological and functional relationship of the eastern buildings and the camp ditch remains unclear.

The terrain west of the *horreum* and barracks that have been excavated was also partially surveyed, but did not reveal any subsurface structures. Only a relatively isolated building measuring some 10 x 5 m with two rooms and with adjoining walls could be identified to the north of a modern water reservoir (Fig. 2.16). The eastern part seems to have rounded corners giving the impression of an apsidal end. A building of similar shape and dimensions was excavated in 2001 and is explicitly defined as a late 4th century church.²⁹ However, it is not possible to assume an analogous function

for Building 16 solely on the basis of geophysical prospecting and superficial similarities.

The geomagnetic survey conducted within a few days in 2010 substantially increased the information on the layout of the late Roman *villa* complex at *Mediana*. The identification of a number of buildings, as well as detailed ground plans, reveal the great potential of non-destructive methods of archaeological research. Future survey will surely uncover even more as yet undiscovered features mostly in the area towards the Nišava river and will help to complete the overall plan of the site. Concrete questions can now be directly adjusted to specific archaeological features. The identification of a preliminary settlement on the site, which might be indicated by an earlier military camp, offers an encouraging prospect for future archaeological research on the early history of *Mediana*, its function and gradual development.

Translated by Daniel Peters

²⁹ Vasić 2007, 106 et seq.

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ГЕОФИЗИЧКА ИСТРАЖИВАЊА КАСНОАНТИЧКЕ МЕДИЈАНЕ

Кључне речи. – Медијана, геофизичка истраживања, геомагнетна проспекција.

Две године пре великог јубилеја 1700 година од Миланског едикта сарадници Римско-немачке Комисије Немачког археолошког института у сарадњи са колегама са Универзитета у Београду и Археолошког института у Београду обавили су у априлу 2010. године геофизичка истраживања на локалитету Медијана код Ниша. Интензивна снимања, на површини од око 16 хектара, спроведена су углавном на делу источно од виле са перистилом (сл. 1 и сл. 2). Прелиминарни резултати проспекције пружили су значајне податке о ширем контексту налаза на локалитету.

Откривено је више физичких структура, од којих је један део био видљив и на аерофотографији из 1992. године. Потврђена је претпоставка да је на око 180 m источно од виле са перистилом могућа позиција још једног хореума, који се састоји од веће троделне просторије на истоку, са траговима питоса, и неколико мањих просторија на западу.

Северно, западно и источно од ове зграде резултати геомагнетне проспекције указали су на постојање зграда типа војничких барака, које су такође делом биле видне и на аерофотографији, а делом и археолошки испитане 1994. године.

Њихова организација је по диспозицији слична распореду и односу барака и хореума на западном истраженом делу локалитета.

Поред великог броја мањих објеката посебно се издвајају трагови једне грађевине, око 60 m јужно од хореума, чија основа има сличности са једном од вила откривених испод пута према Нишкој Бањи 1975. године.

На крајњем источном делу локалитета уочава се и једна линеарна четворугаона структура димензија 160 m, са претпостављеним „кулама“ на источној страни. Мање је вероватна претпоставка да је у питању дрвени оградни зид утврђење типа палисаде. По свој прилици су детектовани остаци темељне трасе недовршеног каменог обимног зида (сл. 2.10).

Геомагнетна проспекција локалитета Медијана, као облик неструктивне методе истраживања, пружила је велики број нових информација о архитектонским и археолошким остацима, посебно на источном делу локалитета. На основу ових истраживања може се приступити тумачењу система организације урбанистичког уређења античке Медијане, али и планирању будућих истраживања.