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**LATE ROMAN VILLA NEAR THE VILLAGE
OF MOURSSALEVO, KOCHERINOVO MUNICIPALITY,
THE VALLEY OF THE STRUMA RIVER**

In the spring of 2014 Iliya Koulov, an archaeologist from the Regional Museum of History in Blagoevgrad, found a new archaeological site that had not been registered during the initial field studies, along the route of the Struma Motorway which is currently under construction. In the modern road network of the Republic of Bulgaria, this is Motorway A3 running from Vidin in the north to Kulata in the south.

After the mandatory procedures and field study committee meetings of the Ministry of Culture, the site was designated as a significant heritage site of Bulgaria and was registered for rescue excavations. As early as the field study trip preserved stone walls were noticed, rising even above the contemporary surface in some sections. Big piles of carved stone material and construction ceramics from the Late Antiquity period were registered. The Committee believes that most probably this is either a settlement or *villa rustica* from the Late Antiquity (*Fig. 1*).

Thus, because of the prescribed rescue excavations in this section of the Struma Motorway route, the construction works were discontinued temporarily and the rescue excavations started. In the autumn of 2014 the site was assigned № 12A. It is localized from km 343+740 to 343+840 in LOT 2 which falls in the section from Dupnitsa to Blagoevgrad.

The examined section of the route of Struma Motorway is 1.5 km away from the confluence of the Struma River and the German River. This is the southernmost part of Dupnitsa pan, the place where the Struma River changes directions for the last time in its course. Exactly from this point the river turns straight to the south and runs southwards till it reaches the Aegean Sea. After the narrow path through the so called Skrin Gorge (the fifth gorge of the Struma between the village of Nevestino and the town of Bovoshevo) the river enters a wide valley of a sharply different climate. Actually this is the first sub-region in the present day south-western Bulgarian lands which enjoys directly and tangibly the influence of the Aegean climate. There are two reasons for this – the flat relief of the river valley and its location. Though formally part of the up-

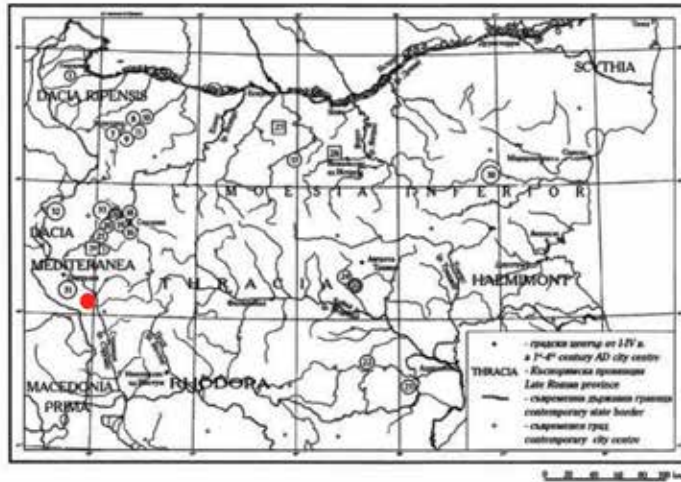


Fig. 1. Map of the modern Bulgaria with the villa complexes from Late Roman epoch and addition of the new discovered villa near Mourssalevo village.

Сл. 1. Карта савремене Бугарске са позицијама комплекса вила из касноримског периода и придодатом новооткривеном вилом крај села Мурсалева, долина реке Струме.

per Struma region, the zone where Boboshevo and Mourssalevo are situated is indeed separated from the Aegean not by mountain ranges but by five narrow gorges of the Struma River – the Kocherinovo Gorge, the Oranovo Gorge, the Kresna Gorge, the Marikostino Gorge and the Rupel Gorge. The climate in the high mountainous fields in the immediate vicinity, namely around Dupnitsa, Kyustendil, Pernik and Sofia, is substantially different.

The surface is entirely flat, although the river valley between the Rila and the Ossogovo mountains is only 5-6 km wide. Site № 12A itself is located on the first non-alluvial terrace of the Struma River, at about 700-800 m away from the river. The archaeological structures are concentrated on a flat area, which however, is above the bank of a small ravine flowing into the Struma from the east. Thus the complexes were properly secured against eventual river floods, which is a problem nowadays as well.

The entire sub-region represents agricultural fields. The archaeological site falls within the territory of the village of Mourssalevo, but is in fact equally distanced from Mourssalevo and Boboshevo.

After the sondage excavations, carried out in November and December 2014, we found out that the site falls entirely in the Late Roman period – the 4th c. AD¹. The architectural remains in the field were significant, in good concentration and could be seen all over the site. Stone walls, constructed in the *opus mixtum* technique, were found rising even above the contemporary surface. These facts aside, what meets the eye is the fairly solid structure of these walls – they are 1.35-1.40 m wide in some sections. Both the 20 sondages and the geo-physical survey of the entire area of the site indicated that this is an ar-

¹ З. Димитров, М. Райчева, Н. Русев, *Спасително археологическо проучване на късноантичен обект по трасето на АМ „Струма“ ЛОТ 2, км. 343+740 – 343+840, с. Мурсалево, община Кочериново*, В: Археологически открития и разкопки през 2014 г. София 2015, 499-502.



Fig. 2. The Roman villa near Mourssalevo, final results: three buildings in the way of the Struma-highway. Main building (Nr. 1) and two storages to the north and south (Nr. 2 and Nr. 3).

Сл. 2. Римска вила крај Мурсалева, крајњи резултат: три зграде, откривене у целости при трасирању будуће аутомагистрале “Струма”. Основна стамбена зграда (№ 1) и две складишне зграде (№ 2 и № 3).

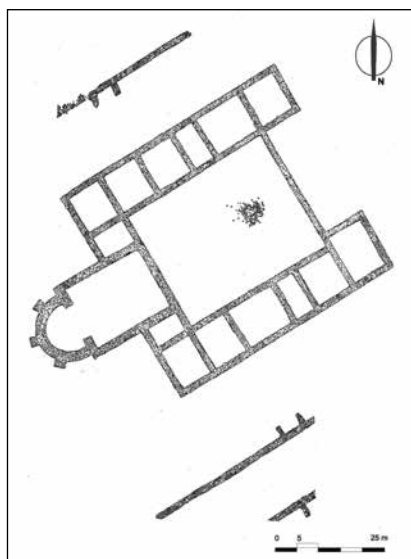


Fig. 3. General plan of all complexes studied by the rescue excavations in Mourssalevo (2014-2015).

Сл. 3. Ситуациони план целог комплекса, истраживан при спасилачким ископавањима поред Мурсалева (2014-2015).

chitectural complex, which is very large in terms of area and very solid in terms of construction, dating to the Late Roman period. At the point of the preliminary examination there were two working hypothesis: *villa rustica* or part of a *vicus*.

During the following year, 2015, we proceeded with the rescue archaeological excavations of the entire area of the site. The excavations were led by the following team: Assoc. Prof. Zdravko Dimitrov, team leader; Chief Assist. Prof. Milena Raycheva and Nikolay Roussev, deputy team leader (all from the Department of Classic Archaeology at NAIM-BAS). The excavations were carried out from 24 March to 22 May 2015 with 65 workers from the towns of Blagoevgrad, Boboshevo, Kocherinovo and the villages of Porominovo and Slatino, a team of 11 archaeologists, restoration experts, geo-physicist and surveyors. The whole area of the site of 6 dca was thoroughly examined.

Well preserved structures of three buildings were localized in the field – **one residential and two storage premises (Fig. 2)**. They represented one architectural complex which is perfectly designed. The buildings are synchronic, of the same type and are rather precisely oriented in the northeast – southwest direction.

On the basis of the field data, the layout specifics, the exact analogies and the numerous finds unearthed during the excavations, our team reached a conclusion that these were remains of an **architectural complex of the villa rustica type** with an impressive residential section and several storage premises nearby (*Fig. 3*).

Site № 12A presents a rather rare chance to come across a large residential building of a quite interesting architectural plan, which at that is localized entirely along the route of the new motorway. This provided an opening for us to explore completely the whole archaeological site, as well as a good deal of the storage premises on the site.

Architectural units in the complex
The representative residential building

A large building was uncovered in the centre of site № 12A, consisting of separate wings flanking a patio. This design is similar to the design of the typical peristyle buildings, whereas there are no premises along only one of the sides of the patio. The overall layout, the parameters and the construction of this architectural complex provided grounds to identify it as a representative residential building.

However, from another point of view no luxury elements have been noticed in the interior of the building. No traces of mosaic floors, architectural facing or similar ornamentation have been unearthed. There are no vestiges or remains of any hypocaust system either.

The layout solution of the large building is a perfect example of the typical Roman residential architecture. The overall design follows the standard layout of a peristyle house, so characteristic of the Roman imperial period. The architectural design is almost absolutely symmetrical. This is a U-shaped building flanking a large patio. It is oriented in the northeast – southwest direction. The central space, through which the symmetry axis runs, is in the most southwestern section. There are two wings along the other two sides (also oriented in the northeast – southwest direction) each of which consists of 6 premises (rooms) arranged in a chain-like fashion.

Only one fence with facing on both walls closes the building from the northeast. The major focus of the complex is situated in the south-western section – a central hall of about 200 sq.m. and two small premises flanking it on both sides actually connecting the north and south wings. The large hall has an apse-like semi-circular wall to the southwest. (*Fig. 2-4*). There are three buttresses on the external wall of the apse (*see: Fig. 4*). This large space functioned as the so called *triclinia*, a.k.a. reception halls in the Roman residential architecture. It is situated along the symmetry axis not only of the big building, but also of the entire architectural complex in site № 12A.

Storage facilities

While examining site № 12 A two storage premises were uncovered (*see general plan – Fig. 3*). They are situated at equal distance to the north and to the south of the residential building. They follow completely the orientation of the building. The two storage facilities are rectangular in shape. They are rather longish structures having buttresses supporting the long walls (*Fig. 5*). These must have been granaries – a.k.a. *horrea*.

The walls are relatively thin, reaching a width of 0.70-0.80 m, which differs significantly from the width of the walls of the residential building. The length of the granaries themselves is over 60 meters. They extend beyond the easement of the motorway and beyond the confines of the excavated area.



Fig. 4. Beginning of the apse with the position of a anta-pier at the end of the wall construction.

Сл. 4. Почетак закривљености апсидалног зида са контрафорама у пријемној сали са позицијом стуба (скраћена анта) при крају грађевинске конструкције.

Construction techniques, materials and structures of the Roman villa near Mourssalevo

The construction materials used to build the villa are typical for the Roman Imperial period: carved stone, ceramics – bricks and roof-tiles and binding matter – lime-sand mixture (mortar).

During the digs we mainly came across the structure of the foundation, however, at places there are preserved sections of the superstructure of the walls. In both cases smoothly carved stones were used to form flat surfaces. Yet crushed stones of irregular shapes were predominantly used in the foundation, i.e. the stones from the primary extraction of stone material, where only boulders are split off the rock in the local quarries. The stone details with well shaped sides, which were used in the foundation, were laid on the last row of the foundation. Their surface runs partially above the ground (or above the floor inside the building) and thus a plinth row is shaped – although we hardly ever registered the recess so typical for this part of the structure.

The foundations of the Roman villa near Mourssalevo were built in the same fashion in all the premises and zones of the complex. At first a trench was dug and filled with boulders as the above mentioned. These are boulders having no front side. Smaller stones and even crumbled stone from the quarry were also

thrown inside as fillers. Lime-sand mixture was poured over the entire foundation structure, 0.40-0.50 m deep on the average (however, deeper in some places where the terrain was strongly displaced).

An interesting and important point is that the binding mixture was of high quality – the mortar is white, containing big grains and a lot of lime. This makes an exceptionally robust and solid mixture, which accounts for the secure binding of the elements in the foundation and the walls. After pouring the mixture, the structure of the foundation was reinforced – on the one hand the mortar layer was quite thick, and on the other hand the mortar penetrated between the boulders of irregular shape that were piled in the trench. Certain sections of the foundation structure unmistakably show that the crushed stones were not thrown at random in the trench, but were arranged quite carefully.

Thus for instance at the foundations of the walls in premises № 3 one can see that the crushed stones were arranged obliquely at an angle to one another in the trench, i.e. their pointed end was stuck into the sterile layer under the building and this contributes additionally to the stability of the construction.

Apart from reinforcing the stability of the construction, the white mortar layer, covering the foundation, functions as a levelling bed. The blocks, with which the foundation actually finishes, start from this point upwards, and it is precisely this top row that was made from stone blocks with shaped front surfaces marking the beginning of the plinth construction.

The walls of the individual rooms in the building were erected on top. The parts of the superstructures that have survived and could be examined on the spot were made of perfectly arranged smooth surface stone blocks. They form walls of width from 0.90 to 1.40m. All the walls have two surfaces; between the two surfaces there are crushed stones and gravel with a great deal of white mortar poured over them. This is an improvised but solid *emplekton* (**Fig. 6**).

Bricks were also used in the construction of the walls. The Roman bricks and the stone blocks were bound with the same white thick high quality mortar, which was used in the foundations of the building.

Bricks are typical for the Late Antiquity. They are perfectly fired, at high temperature and are known to be very solid. They, however, are not always of the same size. Various forms can be seen – whole bricks, half bricks, as well as various widths: 3; 3,5 and even 4 cm.

In conclusion it could be stated that mainly two construction techniques were used in this Roman villa: the technique in the construction of the foundation – crushed stone blocks bound with white mortar and the technique in the construction of the walls – carved stone blocks of smooth surfaces and construction ceramics of the Roman bricks type – a.k.a. *opus mixtum*.

The thresholds to the rooms have also survived in two or three places in the residential building. And here again two construction techniques can be noticed: whole stone blocks carved and aligned horizontally (room № 13) or stonework where the stone blocks have smooth front and upper surfaces.

Description of the buildings and the rooms inside (Fig. 7)

The central premise of the large residential building is situated along the symmetry axis of the whole complex. It is located in the inner part of the spacious patio around which the entire architectural ensemble was constructed.

This is a rectangular premise with huge apse in the end (dimensions are 18,80 x 10,40 m). Its orientation is completely similar to the orientation of the whole building – from the southwest to the northeast. No entrance could be localized, because only the foundations of the walls were unearthed. Nonetheless, judging by the plan of the architectural construction, one should expect that the entrance to the central premise was in the wall facing the patio.

Opposite it there is an apse-like semi-circular wall, which is the focus in the entire architectural design of the building. The external facade of the apse was supported by three rather strong and solid buttresses. They are dug deep into the ground, as the purpose is not only to lend variety to the facade and the design of the building in terms of decoration, but to increase the strength and solidity of the structure. They are trapezoid in shape, not rectangular as will be seen below in other similar villa complexes.

The structures are impressive. They are exceptionally strong. The walls of the representative reception room are over 1.35 m wide in some sections! The depth of the foundation is almost 1.00 m, and a great deal of mortar was used to bind the structures. All of these data confirm that this *triclinium* had extraordinarily strong walls. The foundations of the apse-like part and its buttresses are dug deep under the ground not only in view of providing a more reliable support, but also because this is the lowest point in the surface of the terrain under the whole complex of the large residential building.

Apart from the solid walls, reinforced additionally by the very deep and mighty buttresses (dimensions: 1.80 x 1.10 m), the spaciousness of the reception room is remarkable – total floor space of almost 200 sq.m.!

Altogether I would like to note that the designed apse in the central premise of the large residential building with the buttresses outside points directly to a specific type of architectural complexes typical for a particular zone in Thrace. Chronologically these spacious premises containing architectural elements of this type are also promptly and easily identifiable.

In this case on the basis of the numerous studies we could state that the spacious central premise in the Roman architectural complex in Mourssalevo is



Fig. 5. Storage building Nr. 2 (to the north side of the complex), probably horreum – one of the buttresses in situ.

Сл. 5. Складишни објект № 2 (северни део комплекса), вероватно хорреум – један од контрафора *in situ*.



Fig. 6. General view of the premise Nr. 1 – constructions of the walls and the “floor level” inside.

Сл.6. Општи план зграде № 1 – конструкција зидова и основа пода унутрашњости.

the core architectural element for the function, nature and use of the entire complex. This part of the residential building can safely be identified as the reception hall – a.k.a. *triclinium*. An element that is an integral and core part of the representative Roman villas from the early 4th c., especially in the lands of Western Thrace.

There are six premises in the northern wing of the large residential building. They were numbered as № 1, 2, 5, 10, 11 and 12 according to the time they were unearthed.

Identical techniques were used in the construction of these premises. However, parts of the superstructure are preserved in some of them.

This is particularly evident in the most north-eastern premises – № 1, 2 and 5, as the ground surface there is rather high and we found preserved walls of the Roman building even slightly above the contemporary ground surface. Yet, it's difficult to make out what the functions of the premises were. Apart from the fact that for the most part only the foundations were preserved, the point is that only a few finds were unearthed inside. Along the same line there is no hypocaust system whatsoever, no flooring or any other interior elements. Where we registered any foot level, i.e. we can be sure that this is the first row of the superstructure (premises 1, 2 and 5 for instance), we actually found a layer of stamped earth.

No doubt all the premises were residential considering the overall design and architectural solution of the building. Anyway, presently we could only surmise the exact function of each of the premises.

Premise № 1 is the smallest of all the premises in the northern wing. It is rectangular and is sort of squeezed between premises № 2 and № 5. Judging by the size and location of this premise we might suggest that it was a small connecting passage. Otherwise the stamped earth and the first plinth row are preserved here.

On the other hand the adjoining premises № 2 and № 5 are the largest in the northern wing and it stands to reason that these premises must have had serious functions in the residential building. These might as well be sleeping premises, however, here again there is no data about the floor. We uncovered the level of the antique surface in premises № 2 and examined the foundations. Then again in premise № 5 we reached the stamped earth “floor” with some remains of mortar, which in fact was the foot level. It is exactly the data from

this part of the building that are reliable in terms of the layers and floors because here we uncovered one of the “constructed thresholds”. This was the entrance to the next premise № 10 and it verifies perfectly the “floor” level of the premise.

The next premises, № 10 and № 11, are almost identical as design and dimensions. They are similar to premises № 2 and № 5. Perhaps these four largest rooms, each representing almost a square, were residential quarters. The last premise, № 12, which indeed marks a “turn” to the west of the northern wing, provides solely the connection to the spacious central hall. Its function can be logically presumed to be similar to the function of the passage premise № 1.



Fig. 7. The Roman villa near Mourssalevo – general plan with the numbering of the premises of the complex.

Сл. 7. Касноримска вила поред Мурсалева – општи план са ознакама просторија у комплексу

We observed the same situation in the southern wing, where we unearthed premises № 4, 6, 7, 8, 9 and 13. The symmetry of the complex can be detected even in the interior partitioning of the space in each wing. True, indeed, the dimensions and the partitioning walls in the northern and in the southern wings exhibit certain differences, but these are insignificant. Here, in the southern wing, the large premises of unmistakable residential functions are № 4, 6, 8, 13, while № 7 and № 9 are passage ways connecting the complexes.

The floor level of premise № 6 is also preserved. This is seen both in the field and in the perfect control stratigraphic profile that was taken. Thus the “floor” of stamped earth mixed with remains of mortar is easy to notice. The line of this foot level is clearly distinguishable in the profile.

Furthermore the preserved first rows of Roman bricks, marking the start of the *opus mixtum* construction, are also best seen in premise № 6.

The walls of the stone construction are best preserved in passage premise № 7. The emplekton of these walls is also well preserved. Entire rows of bricks in the superstructure can be seen.

The whole threshold, uncovered on the spot in premises № 13, is among the most significant data from the southern wing of the large residential building. This is one of the large premises and its entrance was uncovered in the wall facing the patio as a structure of finely carved stone blocks and mortar coating on top. This whole structure is perfectly levelled with the floor of the passage and has two edges where the sides of the entrance were erected.

Door-keeper's premises in the building (entrances)

It is worth noting that the general design of the large representative residential building from the Late Roman villa complex near the present day village of Mourssalevo shows that two of the premises in the northern and in the southern wings extend outside the overall contours of the building and the fencing wall closing the patio.

These are again rectangular premises, № 3 and № 14, in the graphic documentation of the site. They were used as "door-keeper's premises" at the entrances of the villa. Similar complexes were found at the villa of Bruckneudorf, Burgenland, Austria². We shall dwell on this exceptionally representative complex of the same period later on in this paper. I must mention here only that on the basis of similarities with finds in the Central European land precisely these two parts of the building near Mourssalevo are absolutely reliably identifiable.

The patio of the residential building

It is flanked by the two wings of the building and by a central reception premise in the south-western section. To the northeast the patio is partitioned only by a thin wall, no premises at all.

The patio is of considerable space, as its dimensions are 30 x 20 meters, i.e. its surface equals the impressive 600 sq. m. The terrain in this internal part of the building is slightly levelled by fills of loose brown-black soil. This material was brought here during the Roman period and was used to fill the inside of the courtyard. After levelling the surface, the patio was covered with large stone slabs. They are roughly carved. They are actually large stone blocks with smoothed upper surface, while the bottom uneven surface was fixed into the filled loose black-brownish soil.

During the excavations we succeeded in uncovering two preserved zones of the patio complex where some of the slabs, though turned upside down by the diggers when cultivating the earth, had remained on the spot. After documenting them we could make a stratigraphic section of the thus preserved structure of the patio. This is exactly how we established that black loose earth, levelling the terrain, was filled under the slabs.

Ceramic fragments of the Early Bronze period we found in the small sondage that uncovered as a result of the drilling; they were not related to any facility. These materials set in the soft loose earth at the time the earth was brought from neighbouring areas. The earth for the fill inside the patio of the Roman villa was most probably taken from the explored site № 12, which is very close, only at a distance of 200 m along the route of the same motorway³.

² H. Zabeňlický, *Die Römische Palastanlage von Bruckneudorf*. Bruckneudorf, Wien 2008. The author of this work took part, as trainee, in the excavations of the Roman Imperial villa near Bruckneudorf in the Province of Pannonia Prima in 2000 and 2001, when these premises, extending outside the main facade, were excavated. The authors in Austria identified them as door-keeper's premises and entrances, situated symmetrically to the individual wings in the residential villa, see – H. Zabeňlický, *op. cit.*, S. 20-22, Abb. 22.

³ А. Божкова, Я. Мутафчиева, *Спасители археологически разкопки на обект №*

The archaeologists there registered and explored archaeological complexes from that period containing the same materials and having the same characteristics of the layer.

Stratigraphy of the site

Site № 12 A is a **single layer** site of the Late Roman period. The cultural layer was taken away to a great extent during the primary clearing of the terrain at the time when the construction of the motorway began. During our investigations we could register a small part of the other levels of the cultural layer corresponding to the above mentioned buildings of the Late Roman period. We were lucky to document the preserved levels, which are homogenous in terms of soil structure and colour, and they also contain synchronic archaeological materials – ceramic fragments, coins and household objects.

Most of the archaeological complex was uncovered in substructure. Several thresholds, parts of the superstructure of the walls of the individual premises and foot levels were “detected” only in the central premise.

Thus for instance during the investigation of No 6 we preserved the control stratigraphic profile in the premise which shows perfectly the difference between the sterile soil of the Struma valley and the foot level of the Late Roman period. The same data was collected from premise № 13.

The cultural layer of the Late Roman villa near Mourssalevo basically consists of stamped earth of brown-blackish colour and it is rich in archaeological materials. Thick levels of debris were unearthed on large areas of the terrain of the villa. These were mainly stone fragments of the walls randomly fallen, immense quantities of decomposed mortar and fragments of construction ceramics (roof tiles and bricks from the walls) in high concentration.

Where there were no debris from the destroyed walls of the residential building and the storage premises, a layer with the same characteristics was found, containing, however, less stone material, mortar and construction ceramics. It must be noted that the household ceramics from the Roman villa is comparatively scarce. This fact indicates that quite likely the kitchen and the other types of buildings and premises for the Late Roman household needs were somewhat away from the large representative building. As will be shown later on the survey suggests that such premises existed to the southwest of the residential building.

The most valuable stratigraphic data were obtained from the whole profile cutting through the site from the south to the north across its entire territory. It shows very well the levels inside the representative building. These are the floors of stamped earth and mortar already mentioned in the foregoing paragraphs. Above them there are debris from destroyed roofs and walls of the building, which were found in 2014. Nonetheless in all of the zones where the central profile runs through site № 12 A, only one cultural layer can be noticed – it dates unarguably to the Late Roman period.

12, ЛОТ 2, АМ „Струма”, кт 343+400 – 343+500, В: Археологически открития и разкопки през 2014. София 2015, 186, фиг. 2.

The zones between the buildings contain either no materials or just a few fragments of construction materials. This is the situation in sector M 8, where two layers of mortar mixture were registered, which have nothing to do with the context of the buildings in the architectural complex.

The same simplified stratigraphic situation was registered at the cross-point of the layers in the two storage premises. As they were poorly preserved we studied only the substructures of the premises. These layers cannot be even considered an actual cultural layer.

The data from the **geophysical survey**, conducted by K. Velkovski and Hr. Tsankov (the University of Mining and Geology), covered the areas around the route of the motorway and showed clearly that there were at least three more premises of the complex, situated to the west and southwest of the apse of the reception hall (the *triclinium*) in the large residential building. Most probably these are the other storage facilities, new residential complexes (perhaps for the workers and servants in the villa complex) and, certainly, the baths of the whole complex.

As was mentioned earlier, it's very likely that the storage and kitchen premises of the complex were situated here, because during the excavations very little household ceramics was unearthed in the large residential building.

With these probable additional buildings of the villa complex, situated to the southwest, the total area of the whole complex is almost 8-10 dca. This ranks the newly found villa complex near Mourssalevo among the largest Late Roman complexes localized on the territory of Thrace.

The most significant **finds** in site № 12 A are 55 bronze coins, all of them dating to the 4th c. (mainly Emperor Constantine and his sons), several bronze *fibulae*, iron knives, loom weights and a number of household objects.

Of value in terms of eventual display of the finds is the small bronze cross unearthed as early as the probing drills in 2014.

The numismatic complex is preserved in good condition. The coins have no traces of heavy corrosion and they have been, after intervening restoration, examined and identified in terms of chronology, issue origin and denomination.

The earliest coin dates to 312 AD. This is an issue of Emperor Maximinus II (308-313) under inv. No 60, unearthed in sector B2, in the northern part of the complex, near the north wall of the storage premise in this zone of the site. Coins of Emperor Constantine the Great (307-337) were found most often - there are 6 such coins found. The earliest coin out of these 6 coins was found in the central building and was minted in the period 317-320 AD. The latest coin is of Emperor Valentinianus II (375-392), which was minted after 383 AD. The whole numismatic complex shows quite clearly that the villa near Mourssalevo was used during the 4th c. AD.

The comparison with the ceramic material indicates the same period. The villa was obviously constructed in the first half of the 4th c. and its most prosperous period was towards the end of the reign of Emperor Constantine and his heirs - i.e. the second and the third quarter of the 4th c.

Neither during the stratigraphic studies, nor during our excavation of the entire surface of site № 12, could we establish any traces whatsoever of fires or other specific data concerning the destruction of the complexes.

On the basis of these direct archaeological data from the field studies we can safely state that the Late Roman villa, erected during the reign of Constantine the Great and used for several decades afterwards, was abandoned in the late 4th c. AD. The lack of traces of any destruction in the 70's of the 4th c. and the localized coins dated to a later period – last denomination from 383 AD – indicate another noteworthy historic fact, namely, that there were no total or widespread destruction of Late Roman residential complexes outside the cities during the Gothic Wars of 375-378 that turned out to be catastrophic for the Roman Empire. Apparently there were no military actions in this region of present day Bulgaria, bordering on the provinces of Thrace and Macedonia. Surely the Gothic invasion completely bypassed the region of the Struma Valley.

Complexes analogous to the villa near Mourssalevo

Several villa complexes have been studied in the West Thracian lands – the present day western Bulgaria and eastern Serbia – having similar chronology, design features and functions, to those of the villa near Mourssalevo.

There are four examples demonstrating complete or partial coincidence with the newly found villa, namely, the large residence near the town of Nish, Serbia – a.k.a villa Mediana⁴; the residence near Kostinbrod, district of Sofia⁵; villa № 1 and № 2 near the town of Montana in the north-western Bulgaria⁶. All these complexes are very close to some roman town centre – Naissus, Serdica, Montana. In our situation newly found Roman villa in Mourssalevo is in the territory of Pautalia (see again *fig. Nr. 1*).

If we dwell on the general design and the layout of the premises in the residential building the closest analogy to the villa near Mourssalevo is precisely the large villa near the present day Serbian town of Nish (*Fig. 8*). It might have been erected for Constantine himself, who was born in Naissus (Nish). The residence is located in the eastern suburbs of the town along the road to the village of Nishka Banya. The complex was studied a long time ago, published, and nowadays it is displayed splendidly along the main road. The big representative premise in the villa near Nish has a completely similar architectural design to the *triclinium* near Mourssalevo⁷.

It has an apse-like back wall which was reinforced and decorated externally with buttresses (there are four buttresses in Nish). Especially striking is the coincidence noted in the structure of the bottom of the apse-like curve – it also protrudes slightly into the common space of the hall. This is also beginning of the connection between the reception hall and the side premises. The structure of premises № 9 and 12 in Mourssalevo is absolutely identical, which

⁴ П.Петровић, МЕДИЈАНА. Резиденција римских царева, Београд 1994.

⁵ В. Динчев, Римските вили в днешната българска територия, София 1997, 83-94, обр. 81-82; Идет, Късноримската резиденция SECRETISCA и ранновизантийското селище КРАТИСКАРА, Разкопки и проучвания XXX, София 2003.

⁶ В. Динчев 1997, *цит. съч.*, стр. 32-37, обр. 12, 15-16.

⁷ П.Петровић, *Op. cit.*, p. 29-32, fig. 9-11.

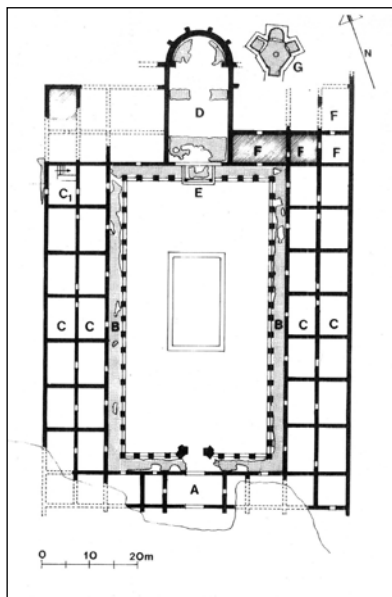


Fig. 8. The villa “Mediana”, near Naissus(Nish, Serbia) – general plan of the representative building according to П. Петровић 1994, 30, fig. 9.

Сл.8. Вила „Медиана“, поред Наиссуса (Ниш) – општи план репрезентативне зграде према П.Петровићу, 1994, 30, сл.9.

has only one purpose – to establish a connection between the reception hall in the architectural complex and the side wings where the premises are arranged in a chain-like fashion.

The premises in the side wings in Nish, also arranged in a chain-like fashion, are erected around a spacious large patio of rectangular shape. The patio is entirely focused on the central hall in the bottom. The difference, of course, is in the representativeness of the two complexes and in the degree of luxury, as the emperor’s residence in Mediana is truly luxurious. Not only the mosaic floors and the hypocaust systems are important, when examining the premises arranged in a chain-like fashion in the two side wings, it must be noted that there are double rooms on the sides in the villa near Nish. Another difference in the architectural design is the closing of the patio from all sides – i.e. see a complete picture of a peristyle house with porticos. These are both internal, on all sides of the patio, and in front of the main façade of the building.

Certainly these substantial differences can be accounted by the different degree of representativeness of the two architectural complexes – the villa near Nish is a true imperial residence, while the one near Mourssalevo is villa rustica with a building of general representative function. There is one thing for certain. The architectural design of the villa near Mourssalevo copied the design of the Roman residence

of Mediana, near Nish. The general design, the two wings, the layout of the patio and above all the positioning and design of the central reception hall follow the original and very representative example in the vicinity of the antique Naissus.

Unlike this most luxurious architectural example the large residence near Kostinbrod shows significantly fewer coincidences with the design of the villa near Mourssalevo (**Fig. 9**). The form of the patio is absolutely different as well as the rooms around it. However, an absolute similarity, which cannot and should not be bypassed, can be seen in the construction of the *triclinium*. The residence near Kostinbrod has a reception hall of the same shape, an apse-like semi-circular wall, three external buttresses and even bottoms of the apse⁸. And here again the connection with the adjoining room is constructed under the same architectural design. Even the dimensions of the two *triclinia* – near Mourssalevo and near Kostinbrod – are almost completely identical (the hall in Mourssalevo is by 10% larger).

⁸ В. Динчев 1997, *цит. съч.*, стр. 85, обр. 82; В. Динчев 2003, *цит. съч.*, стр. 136, обр. 6.

More analogies can be found with the two villas near Montana⁹. These two complexes exhibit familiar similar examples, where there is not only a large reception hall (*triclinium*) of rectangular shape and an apse-like semi-circular wall supported by buttresses outside, but also similar partitioning into individual farm buildings, storage premises, baths and production complexes.

If villa № 1 near Montana exhibits direct similarities with the Roman villa near Mourssalevo only in respect of the reception hall, villa № 2 represents a direct analogue from an architectural point of view too. In this the latter case, however, the *triclinium* is designed in the northern part of the complex, and the representative building with rows of premises around the central space has the same rectangular shape¹⁰. Here, however, similarly to the residence-villa near Nish there are four buttresses on the external wall of the apse.

Altogether we can be sure that the Roman villa near Mourssalevo was undoubtedly constructed in line with the latest architectural solutions in the western parts of Thrace during the early 4th c. AD. Certainly, in the region of Serdica, around Montana and in Naissus, there is a strong tradition to construct villa complexes with a representative building, where the *triclinia* had an apse-like semi-circular wall and external buttresses.

Similar architectural solutions can be seen in Pannonia too (**Fig. 10**). It is no surprise that the best example dates again to the early 4th c. and is again a residence of Emperor Constantine. This is the large residence of the ruler at the military fortress near Carnuntum – “the palace-villa of Bruckneudorf” as Prof. Heinrich Zabełlicky, who has studied it, refers to it¹¹.

In summary of this brief survey of the field studies of the newly found Roman villa near the village of Mourssalevo, we can point out that the chronology of the complex has been reliably clarified. The villa falls completely in the 4th c. AD. It can be safely assumed that the complex was erected in the 20^{’s} – 30^{’s} of the 4th c. AD., and was used till the last decades of the century. This chronology is based on the single layer stratigraphy of the site, the numismatic finds and the resemblance with similar villas of the *rustica type*, containing a representative building with a separate reception hall having an apse and buttresses, which invariably date to the late Constantine period – i.e. to the 20^{’s} – 30^{’s} of the 4th c. This is the chronology of all architectural complexes of

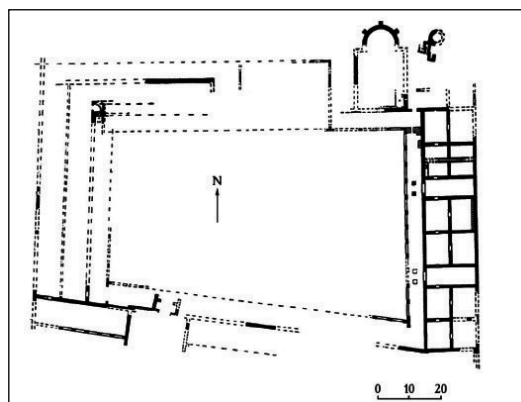


Fig. 9. The Late Roman villa near Kostinbrod (Sofia district) – general plan according to В. Динчев 2003, 136, обр. 6.

Сл. 9. Касноримска вила поред Костинброда (Софијска област) – општи план према В. Динчеву, 2003, 136, обр. 6.

⁹ В. Динчев 1997, *цит.сљч.*, стр. 32-36, обр. 12, 15, 16.

¹⁰ *Пак там*, фиг. 16.

¹¹ H. Zabełlicky 2008, *op.cit.*

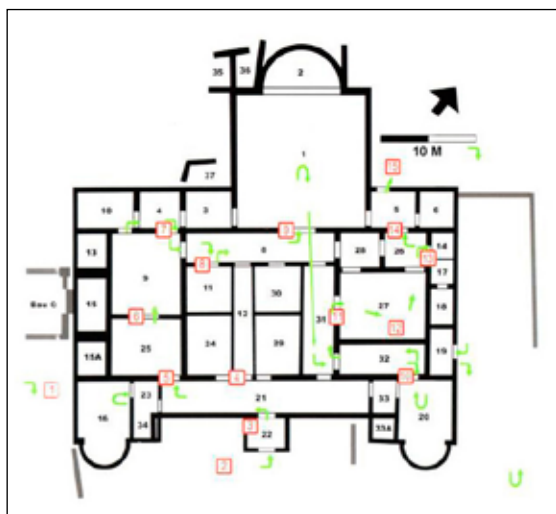


Fig. 10. Die Römische Palastanlage von Bruckneudorf – general plan according to H. Zabełhlicky 2008, back cover.

Сл. 10. Римска вила-резиденција крај Бруцкнеудорфа - општи план према проучавању Х. Зебелицког.

the “*villa rustica*” type, and above all of the “residence” type of villas in the western Bulgarian and eastern Serbian lands

Being one of the scholars studying the Late Roman villa near the present day Mourssalevo, I believe that the complex was constructed entirely by copying the architectural solutions of the richest villa estates from the reign of Constantine in West Thrace – first of all the residence of the ruler in his native town, Naissus (Nish), but also the villa near Kostinbrod and the two complexes near Montana.

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КАСНО РИМСКА ВИЛА ПОРЕД МУРСАЛЕВ-а, ОПШТИНА КОЧЕРИНОВО,
ДОЛИНА РЕКЕ СТРУМЕ

У време две археолошке кампање (2014-2015г.) била је истражена велика римска вила рустика у области Благоевграда, у долини реке Струме .

Приликом ископавања откривена су три архитектонска комплекса: велика зграда репрезентативног карактера и два складишна објекта, вероватно хореуми (horrea). Основна зграда се састоји од два крила са стамбеним просторијама, централна за пријеме (triklinium) и унутрашњим двориштем. Сала за пријеме је основе површине 200 квадратних метара. Правоугаоне је основе и завршава се апсидом. Њени спољашни зидови су изграђени са три контрафора. Друге две зграде вероватно су имале функцију складиштења жита - хореум. Оне су са издуженом основом и контрафорама на спољашним зидовима.

Конструкција зграда је направљена од великих камена, белог малтера и римске опеке. Счувано је и неколико прагова у зградама. Стратиграфија објекта је једнослојна. Цео комплекс се датира на IV век после Христа и највероватније је изграђен за време императора Константина Великог.

План и архитектура виле у Мурсалеву су одличан нови пример модерне виле резиденцијалног типа, карактеристичне за касноримску епоху на територији западне Бугарске и источне Србије. Комплекс је по плану основе, конструкцији и хронологији веома сличан комплексу: вила Медиана у близини Naissus-а (Ниш); вила Костинброд у близини Сердике (Софија); трима вилама из Монтане (северозападна Бугарска), а такође и императорској резиденцији у близини села Bruckneudorf (провинција Панонија, сада Бургенланд, источна Аустрија), која је била у непосредној близини римског војног и грађанског центра Карнунтум.