

# A FORTRESS AT THE GATE OF THE BYZANTINE EMPIRE. THE SMALL PRECINCT FROM HÂRȘOVA

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**Cuvinte-cheie:** fortificație, cultură materială, sfârșitul secolului al X-lea – veacul al XI-lea, frontieră, Imperiul bizantin, Dunăre, Dobrogea.

**Abstract:** In this study, the authors focus on a fortress built near one of the important crossing points over the Danube in the southeastern part of present-day Romania. It was constructed on the site of an earlier Roman fortress (called Carsium), of which only the highest and most naturally fortified area overlapped with the new structure. Its construction took place in the context of the return of the Byzantine administration to the territory bordered by the Danube and the Black Sea, known as Dobruja, after the events of 971, our work bringing archaeological evidence in this regard. The small Byzantine fortress, also known as the "small enclosure", had the role of overseeing the territories across the Danube to prevent the danger of potential attackers, controlling navigation and trade on the river, as well as serving as the "gateway" into Dobruja, represented by the nearby crossing point. Its existence was dictated and marked by its inclusion in the chain of fortifications that protected the Byzantine frontier along the Danube, going through periods of peace interspersed with conflicts. The fortress benefited from craft development and was included in the river and lands trade routes, all at the intensity of life characteristic of a fortress on the edge of an empire.

**Rezumat:** În această lucrare, autorii își îndreaptă atenția asupra unei cetăți edificate în apropierea unuia dintre locurile importante de trecere a Dunării, din sud-estul României de astăzi. Aceasta a fost construită pe locul unei foste cetăți romane (numită Carsium), din a cărei suprafață suprapunea doar zona cea mai înaltă și bine fortificată natural. Ridicarea ei s-a făcut în contextul revenirii administrației bizantine în teritoriul delimitat pe trei părți de apele Dunării și Mării Negre, cunoscut cu numele de Dobrogea, după evenimentele din 971, lucrarea noastră aducând dovezi arheologice în acest sens. Mica fortificație bizantină, numită și „incinta mică”, avea rolul de a supraveghea teritoriile de peste Dunăre pentru a preîntâmpina pericolul potențialilor atacatori, precum și navigația și comerțul pe fluviu, constituind totodată, prin vadul din apropiere, „poarta” de intrare în Dobrogea. Existența

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*ei a fost dictată și marcată de „încartiruirea” în lanțul fortificațiilor care protejau frontiera bizantină de la Dunăre, cunoscând perioade de liniște care alternau cu cele de conflicte, beneficiind de dezvoltare meșteșugărească și includere pe rutele comerciale fluviale și terestre, toate la intensitatea caracteristică vieții unei cetăți de la marginea unui imperiu.*

## Introduction

In the second half of the 6<sup>th</sup> century, at the eastern end of the Lower Danube, daily life in the fortresses, cities, and settlements of the Istro-Pontic territory, located on the edge of the Byzantine Empire, was severely affected by repeated large-scale attacks from Avar-Slavic populations and the raids of the Kutrigurs. Their actions targeted both the fortifications on the right bank of the Danube, from where the Byzantine Danubian frontier was monitored and which they were supposed to protect the settlements within the province of Scythia. Almost all investigated fortifications along the Danube have revealed destruction layers, often accompanied by traces of fire, which are considered the effects of these incursions<sup>1</sup>.

Among the targets of these populations, who had only recently reached the imperial frontier, was the fortress of *Carsium*, at Hârșova (Constanța County), built largely in a dominant position, difficult to access from the river side. Within the alignment of the Danubian *limes*, the fortress represented a strategic point, serving to monitor movements in the territories beyond the river and the navigation of ships along the Danube, as well as to guard the most important crossing point of the river<sup>2</sup> from Muntenia toward central Dobruja, at the present-day Giurgeni – Vadul Oii crossing, which at any moment could become a “gateway” for the enemy to enter the province’s territory<sup>3</sup>.

On the rocky promontory, which today preserves the ruins of a complex of fortifications, was built during the reign of Emperor Vespasianus (69–79)<sup>4</sup> or by order of Trajan (98–117)<sup>5</sup>, a *castrum*<sup>6</sup>, probably by the *Ala (Gallorum) Flaviania*<sup>7</sup>, whose presence

<sup>1</sup> PARASCHIV-TALMAȚCHI 2020, p. 250–252.

<sup>2</sup> Expressively described by V. Pârvan as “the point where the Danube, after wandering through the marshes and channels of Ialomița and before dispersing into the marshes and channels of Brăila, gathers all its waters together for a moment at the mouth of the Ialomița”, see PÂRVAN 1913, p. 478.

<sup>3</sup> ARICESCU 1971, p. 351–355; TALMAȚCHI 1997, p. 113–124; TALMAȚCHI, PARASCHIV-TALMAȚCHI 1999, p. 31.

<sup>4</sup> ZAHARIADE, MUȘEȚEANU, CHIRIAC 1981, p. 259; NICOLAE 1995–1996, p. 137–138; CHIRIAC, NICOLAE, TALMAȚCHI 1998, p. 148; COVACEF, NICOLAE 2007, p. 178.

<sup>5</sup> PÂRVAN 1913, p. 480–489; PÂRVAN 1933, p. 162; ARICESCU 1971, p. 354; ARICESCU 1977, p. 55, 87, fig. 21.

<sup>6</sup> *Carsium*, the toponym of the *castrum* and later the fortress from the Roman period, is either of Thracian or Celtic origin. Under this name or in various forms, it is mentioned by *Ptolemaeus* in *Geographia*, in the *Tabula Peutingeriana*, the *Itinerarium Antonini*, by *Procopius of Caesarea*, and other sources. At different times, the presence of military units is recorded here, such as: *Ala II Hispanorum et Ar(a)uacorum* (attested by a milestone from the year 200 AD, indicating that it was repairing the nearby road), *Legio I Italica* at *Carsium* (its presence inferred from a stamped brick), and *Milites Scythici Carso* (soldiers recruited from provincial populations, attested in the *Notitia Dignitatum*), see ARICESCU 1977, p. 55–56, 80, 98, 117, 135, 174–175; BARNEA 1994, p. 258.

<sup>7</sup> CHIRIAC, NICOLAE, TALMAȚCHI 1998, p. 140, 145–149.

here is suggested by the discovery of several stamped *tegulae*<sup>8</sup>. Later, during the reign of Constantine the Great (306–337), a fortress with a much-expanded surface was erected, which was affected by the attacks of the Huns and likely came under their control in 434<sup>9</sup>. In the 6<sup>th</sup> century, during the reign of Emperor Justinian (527–565), the fortress underwent substantial reconstruction<sup>10</sup>, and in the same period (in 536), it was placed among the 14 episcopal residences subordinated to the Metropolitan of Tomis<sup>11</sup>.

Nearly two decades after the death of Emperor Justinian, daily life in the fortress of *Carsium* would enter a new stage, shaped by the political situation of the region at the turn of the centuries, during which, for about two to four decades, it experienced successive periods of rise and decline. The sporadic monetary discoveries seem to indicate that the fortress was affected by the Avar-Slavic attacks of 593–594; however, it later found the necessary resources for recovery<sup>12</sup>, probably also as a consequence of the peace treaty concluded in 598, by which the Avars recognized the Danube as the boundary between them and the empire<sup>13</sup>. The discovery of two *hemifolles* from Phocas suggests a revival of the fortress and a certain continuity of economic life following the attacks at the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> century, likely lasting until the period of 609–619. Somehow overcoming all this disorder at the frontier, in the early decades of the 7<sup>th</sup> century<sup>14</sup>, habitation at *Carsium* appears to have survived until the late 620s, as evidenced by the finding of a 1/2 *folles* from the year 629–630, while also maintaining contact with the Byzantine Empire<sup>15</sup>.

The strong and repeated attacks by the aforementioned populations, the division of the Byzantine army across multiple fronts, and the general economic decline that affected the empire's peripheral provinces in the last decades of the 6<sup>th</sup> century were among the factors that led the administration in Constantinople to abandon the Danubian frontier and relinquish the Istro-Pontic territory in favour of the Avar-Slavs<sup>16</sup>.

For the period between the 8<sup>th</sup> century and the third quarter of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, there is no evidence of habitation within the investigated areas of the ancient fortress or in its immediate vicinity. An open settlement, inhabited for approximately

<sup>8</sup> ZAHARIADE, MUȘEȚEANU, CHIRIAC 1981, p. 255, 259–260 and fig. 2; NICOLAE 1995–1996, p. 142, note 66, pl. I/6; CHIRIAC, NICOLAE, TALMAȚCHI 1998, p. 140, 147, note 14, pl. I/1–4 and pl. II/1.

<sup>9</sup> BARNEA 1968, p. 407; ARICESCU 1977, p. 169; BARNEA 1994, p. 258; BARNEA 2010a, p. 525.

<sup>10</sup> ARICESCU 1971, p. 352–354; BARNEA 1994, p. 258; STĂNICĂ, NICOLAE, CIOBANU 2021, p. 11; ȘOVA 2021, p. 58.

<sup>11</sup> HOLUBEANU 2020, p. 39–40.

<sup>12</sup> CUSTUREA 2019, p. 29.

<sup>13</sup> MADGEARU 2006, p. 154.

<sup>14</sup> In the frontier area, during the first decades of the 7<sup>th</sup> century, new conflicts arose between the Byzantine Empire and the Avaro-Slavic populations. In the first decade, the empire lost the segment of the *limes* between Novae and Iatrus but managed to retain large portions of the region of Scythia and Moesia Secunda, east of Iatrus. A new Byzantine-Avar treaty was concluded in 604. See MADGEARU 1997, p. 142; PARASCHIV-TALMAȚCHI 2020, p. 253–254.

<sup>15</sup> MADGEARU 2006, p. 157; CUSTUREA 2019, p. 29; STĂNICĂ, NICOLAE, CIOBANU 2021, p. 10.

<sup>16</sup> PARASCHIV-TALMAȚCHI 2020, p. 258.

two centuries, from the late 8<sup>th</sup> century until the 10<sup>th</sup> century, existed at the south-western edge of the present-day town of Hârșova, in the area known as "Abator"<sup>17</sup>. Here, about 1.2 km downstream from the fortress of *Carsium* and nearly 200 m from the Danube, during a preventive archaeological excavation conducted between September 2013 and May 2014, researchers investigated 52 dwellings, a probable workshop for processing bone material, 11 household ovens located between the dwellings (some with access pits), storage pits, household pits, and a single inhumation grave oriented west-east, which overlapped one of the dwellings<sup>18</sup>. Although they were aware of the area of the ancient fortress, as evidenced by the Roman paving slabs used in the construction of some fire installations, the founders of the open settlement preferred to establish it in a new location for reasons unknown<sup>19</sup>.

### The context of the restoration of the fortress of Hârșova

The reactivation of the strategic point at Hârșova and the construction of new walls on the rocky promontory were a consequence of a first stage of the belligerent events that unfolded in the Balkan Peninsula, over the course of over four decades, at the turn of the millenniums.

In the second half of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, during the final years of the reign of Tsar Peter of Bulgaria (927–969), relations between the Byzantines and the Bulgarians deteriorated. A long series of military conflicts began between the two Balkan powers, involving various allies, and culminating in 1018 with the end of the First Bulgarian State and the restoration of the Balkan region under the authority of Constantinople<sup>20</sup>.

The final confrontations of this initial phase, which began in 967 and concluded

<sup>17</sup> PARASCHIV-TALMAȚCHI, TALMAȚCHI, BODOLICĂ 2015, p. 397–423.

<sup>18</sup> In the inventory of the dwellings, ceramic material is the most numerous. The vessels were shaped using both slow and fast wheel techniques, made from common and, more rarely, kaolinitic clay, fired in an oxidizing or reducing atmosphere, and decorated with either a polished finish or incision technique. Typologically, we mention the pot without handles and the bowl made from common clay; the pot without handles and the amphoroidal jug crafted from kaolinitic clay; the pot with and without handles, the jug with a trilobed mouth, the bucket, the bowl, and the storage vessel shaped from fine common clay. Alongside ceramics, other finds include bone objects (piercers, skates), stone tools (a chisel for bone processing, sharpening sandstones), clay artefacts (spindle whorls, sharpeners made from brick, and fishing net weights), as well as iron objects (arrowheads, knives, and nails), etc. See PARASCHIV-TALMAȚCHI, TALMAȚCHI, BODOLICĂ 2015.

<sup>19</sup> The open settlement was established in the lower half of a valley, in an area sheltered from cold winds, not far from the river's waters and under the protection of forests that covered the landscape to the west and northwest. In the upper part of the valley, towards the north, there were vast plains and pastures traversed by the Roman road that connected the fortifications along the Danube. The land on which the inhabitants built their dwellings—mostly sunken structures—was clean, free of ancient construction debris (as would have been the case at the site of the *Carsium* fortress), ensuring stable walls and allowing people to build wherever they wished. The Roman fortress, which likely still served as an occasional point of interest during raids, represented only a source of raw materials for the inhabitants of the open settlement. They probably retrieved paving slabs (tiles) from it, which were used for open hearths or for vaulted ovens, with similar slabs being found in the port area and near certain buildings. See PARASCHIV-TALMAȚCHI 2016, p. 123–130.

<sup>20</sup> OBOLENSKY 2002, p. 232; ZBUGHEA 2010, p. 330; PARASCHIV-TALMAȚCHI 2021, p. 23–25.

in 971, took place in the southwestern part of Dobruja and targeted the fortress of *Dorostolon* (modern-day Silistra), located on the right bank of the Danube. This stronghold became the refuge of the Rus' armies of former ally Sviatoslav (945–972), the knez of Kievan Rus', and was subjected to a gruelling siege lasting more than three months, both by land and from the river<sup>21</sup>. Six naval and land battles took place, along with bloody clashes between the besieged and the Byzantines, as the defenders attempted to break the encirclement<sup>22</sup>: „...and the emperor, after a siege of 65 full days, in which he fought daily and without a moment of respite, decided that he must wear down the city both by siege and by starvation”<sup>23</sup>.

Knyaz Sviatoslav arrived at the Lower Danube as an ally of the Byzantine Empire, following the request made by Emperor Nikephoros II Phokas (963–969), through the mediation of the *strategos* of Cherson, Kalokyros, and in exchange for substantial gifts (significant amounts of gold)<sup>24</sup>. Deploying his armies in the territory between the Danube and the Haemus Mountains, alongside his Pecheneg<sup>25</sup> and Hungarian<sup>26</sup> allies, he conquered several fortresses<sup>27</sup> in eastern Bulgaria, including the capital of the Bulgarian State, Preslav.

However, several factors led to changes in the plan devised by the Byzantine emperor, as Nikephoros II Phokas soon realized that his strategy of bringing the Kievan Rus' south of the Danube would not be favorable to the empire. In this regard, Sviatoslav received his first incentive during his discussions with Kalokyros, who, aiming for the imperial throne and seeking the support of the Rus' to obtain it, apparently suggested to the knyaz that he should keep the Bulgarian territories<sup>28</sup>. The ease with which the fortresses were conquered, the defection of certain Bulgarian aristocrats to the Rus' side, and the intensity of commercial traffic in the region, reflected by rich and diverse goods<sup>29</sup>, were likely additional factors that convinced Sviatoslav to refuse to return the conquered territories to the Byzantine Empire, as per their prior agreement<sup>30</sup>. Moreover, at that time, the Kievan Rus' was in a process of consolidation, in which territorial expansionism played a significant role<sup>31</sup>.

At this stage, the advance of the Rus' armies and the consolidation of their

<sup>21</sup> RĂDULESCU 1998, p. 174; ZBUGHEA 2010, p. 321–322.

<sup>22</sup> ZBUGHEA 2010, p. 323.

<sup>23</sup> Georgios Kedrenos, in FHDR III, p. 143 and also p. 137–143 for the fights from Dorostolon.

<sup>24</sup> Georgios Kedrenos, in FHDR III, p. 137; Ioannes Zonaras, in FHDR III, p. 213; MADGEARU 2013, p. 29–30; DAMIAN 2015, p. 215.

<sup>25</sup> About the Pechenegs, the Byzantine Emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus recorded between the years 948–952 that they controlled the territories stretching between the opposite bank of Dorostolon and the fortress of Sarkel (Belaja Vezha, on the Don), with the Danube separating them from the territories of the First Bulgarian State, which were only half a day's journey away. The presence of the Pechenegs near the Danube in the mid–10<sup>th</sup> century is also attested by other narrative sources, such as: the anonymous Hebrew work Josippon; the notes of Liudprand of Cremona; the notes of the Jew Abraham Jakobsen (Ibrahim ben Yakub), etc., see SPINEI 2022, p. 170–171.

<sup>26</sup> SPINEI 2010, p. 278.

<sup>27</sup> “... Sviatoslav defeated the Bulgarians and seized 80 fortresses along the Danube”, see *Chronica Nestoris*, in FHDR VII, p. 71.

<sup>28</sup> MADGEARU 2013, p. 29.

<sup>29</sup> See *Chronica Nestoris*, in FHDR VII, p. 73.

<sup>30</sup> MADGEARU 2013, p. 29; SPINEI 2022, p. 176.

<sup>31</sup> ZBUGHEA 2010, p. 321.

conquests were halted by the Pecheneg attack on the capital of the Rus' state. Taking advantage of Sviatoslav's absence, the Pechenegs attacked Kiev, an action likely inspired by Byzantine or Bulgarian diplomacy, forcing the knyaz to return home<sup>32</sup>.

Seizing the opportunity created by Sviatoslav's withdrawal from the theater of operations, and realizing the strength of the Rus' armies as well as Sviatoslav's territorial ambitions, the Byzantine emperor Nikephoros II Phokas sought an alliance with Tsar Peter of Bulgaria and, in the first month of 969, prepared a military campaign for the Rus' return. However, the unexpected death of the tsar once again altered Byzantine plans. The new ruler of the Bulgarian state was proclaimed Boris II (969–971), the eldest son of Tsar Peter, who had previously been held hostage in Constantinople along with his brother<sup>33</sup>.

After defeating the Pechenegs, Sviatoslav returned to the Lower Danube, but with his own strategy and a different vision for the Balkan region. In his absence, the Byzantine Empire had failed to assert its authority over the territories occupied prior to his return to Kiev. Even the massacre of a large portion of the allied Pecheneg cavalry, in a trap set by the Byzantines in 969, did not contribute significantly to changing the situation<sup>34</sup>. Upon his return to the Lower Danube, Sviatoslav captured the Bulgarian Tsar Boris II and, supported by those Bulgarians who had accepted his rule, launched fierce confrontations against the Byzantines<sup>35</sup>. These conflicts would culminate two years later, in 971, with the Byzantine victory at Dorostolon, the signing of a peace agreement with Emperor John I Tzimiskes (969–976), and the withdrawal of the Kievan forces from the Balkans<sup>36</sup>.

The evolution of the Danubian-Pontic territory was largely influenced by the Russo—Bulgarian—Byzantine conflicts<sup>37</sup> and their aftermath, with Dobruja being among the territories over which the Byzantine Empire extended its authority in 971. For a period, the frontier, which had been abandoned in segments at the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> century and in the early decades of the 7<sup>th</sup> century, was restored along the Danube.

While still at Dorostolon, Emperor John I Tzimiskes initiated the military and administrative reorganization of the newly acquired territories located on the empire's frontier. Guards were dispatched to protect the fortresses near the city and along the Danube<sup>38</sup>, commanders were appointed, and the territories were structured

<sup>32</sup> MADGEARU 2013, p. 30; SPINEI 2022, p. 176.

<sup>33</sup> BREZEANU 2004, p. 180.

<sup>34</sup> SPINEI 2010, p. 278.

<sup>35</sup> In the summer of 970, he reached the vicinity of Constantinople, but was defeated by the Byzantines at Arkadiopolis (modern Lule Burgas), see MADGEARU 2013, p. 30–31.

<sup>36</sup> BARNEA, ȘTEFĂNESCU 1971, p. 72–73; SPINEI 2009, p. 99; SPINEI 2010, p. 278.

<sup>37</sup> We mention the envoys coming from fortresses located north of the Danube and from Constantia (probably modern Constanța, on the coastal shore of Dobruja) to seek forgiveness from Emperor John I Tzimiskes for their wrongdoings and to surrender those fortresses. It is likely that they had provided assistance to Sviatoslav. See Georgios Kedrenos, in FHDR III, p. 141; Ioannes Zonaras, in FHDR III, p. 217; BARNEA, ȘTEFĂNESCU 1971, p. 73; ZBUGHEA 2010, p. 323–324; MADGEARU 2013, p. 31–34; DAMIAN 2015, p. 215–217.

<sup>38</sup> Georgios Kedrenos, in FHDR III, p. 140–143, and in the chronicle of Yahya-ibn-Said of Antioch, it is mentioned that Dorostolon and the surrounding fortresses, previously conquered by the Rus', came under Byzantine possession, and that the emperor appointed rulers for them at the

into administrative-military units, which would later undergo multiple modifications<sup>39</sup>. The organization of these new frontier possessions into small themes, governed by *strategoï* with broad military and civil prerogatives – responsible for defending the province, recruiting soldiers, maintaining fortifications, constructing new ones, building roads, preserving local order, managing administration, overseeing certain fiscal services, and handling religious disputes – was a commonly employed practice of the Byzantine Empire during the reigns of John I Tzimiskes and Basil II (976–1025)<sup>40</sup>.

It is estimated that the administrative and military organization of Dobruja, following its reintegration into the empire's borders, was in alignment with the short-lived Theme Ioannoupolis and Dorostolon<sup>41</sup>. Later, the northern part of the Danubian-Pontic province became part of the Theme of Western Mesopotamia, while the southern part was included in the Theme of Dorostolon, with the likely boundary between the two being the Carasu Valley<sup>42</sup>. This administrative structure at the Danubian frontier of the empire underwent disruptions and changes in 986, when the Byzantine army was defeated by the forces of the Bulgarian *comitopuloï* Samuel (proclaimed tsar in 997). The territories that had been lost by the Bulgarians to the Byzantines in 971, including northeastern Bulgaria and southern Dobruja, were largely reconquered by the Bulgarians and remained under their control until 1001, when the Byzantine frontier on the Danube was re-established<sup>43</sup>. According to some interpretations, it is believed that the Danubian province into which the territory of Dobruja was integrated bore the name, at the beginning of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, of Theme Dorostolon (Dristra), the name Paradounavon (Paristrion) becoming more later part of the official titulature<sup>44</sup>.

To secure and consolidate its rule over the newly conquered territories along and near the new frontier, as well as to provide protection for its provinces, the

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end of the confrontations in this first phase, see BARNEA, ȘTEFĂNESCU 1971, p. 74; MADGEARU 2013, p. 34.

<sup>39</sup> MADGEARU 2013, p. 37–44, fig. 2, p. 52, fig. 3; DAMIAN 2015, p. 220–221.

<sup>40</sup> DAMIAN 2015, p. 221 and note 68.

<sup>41</sup> It is presumed that this lasted at most until Emperor John I Tzimiskes arrived in Constantinople, see DAMIAN 2015, p. 226.

<sup>42</sup> The administrative integration of the territories annexed after the conclusion of the Ruso-Bulgar-Byzantine conflicts is primarily based on *the Taktikon Scorialensis*, dated by Nikolas Oikonomides to the period 971–975, and the information provided by seals discovered at Preslav. See BARNEA, ȘTEFĂNESCU 1971, p. 74–76; SPINEI 2009, p. 101; MADGEARU 2013, p. 37–43 and note 163; DAMIAN 2015, p. 221–226, where multiple interpretations are presented, and note 73 with the bibliography on the subject.

<sup>43</sup> ZBUGHEA 2010, p. 330; MADGEARU 2013, p. 47–49; STĂNICĂ 2015, p. 70.

<sup>44</sup> MADGEARU 2013, p. 64, where it is mentioned that the name Dristra remained in use until the mid-11<sup>th</sup> century, and on p. 68, where it is assumed that Theme Dristra was replaced by Theme Paradounavon (“no doubt covering much of the same area”) by Emperor Isaac I Komnenos (1057–1059) in 1059. It is also noted that, although some literary sources used the name Paristrion for the empire's Danubian province, the seals only bear the name Paradounavon (meaning “near the Danube”), leading to the conclusion that the official name of the province was Theme Paradounavon. Regarding the establishment of the theme and the use of the name Paradounavon, see also BARNEA, ȘTEFĂNESCU 1971, p. 76; ZBUGHEA 2010, p. 330; DAMIAN 2015, p. 228; STĂNICĂ 2015, p. 70; DAMIAN 2020, p. 285 and note 77; DAMIAN 2021, p. 106, etc.

Byzantine Empire focused its attention from the very beginning on the old fortifications along the right bank of the Danube. Recalling the successive repairs and constructions that had been initiated during the Dominate period and continued until the early 7<sup>th</sup> century, involving more than 40 fortifications<sup>45</sup>, in the last quarter of the 10<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, some Roman fortifications were cleaned and repaired, while others were built *a fundamentis*, creating strategic points of intervention and control. In this regard, extensive archaeological evidence has documented large-scale operations in several fortresses located between Dorostolon and the mouths of the Danube (Fig 1).

During this period, a fortress was built approximately 20 km downstream from Dorostolon, likely with a trapezoidal or rectangular shape, covering an area of approximately 4–5 hectares, located today at the northeastern end of the Danubian island Păcuilui lui Soare<sup>46</sup>. Based on the presence of a port facility (landing dock), it has been considered that the fortress primarily served as a naval base for the Byzantine fleet and played a crucial role in controlling access along the Danube towards the capital of the Byzantine province at the edge of the empire. Additionally, its location at one of the crossing points over the river assigned it the function of a border fortress, acting as a checkpoint and defence post for the area<sup>47</sup>.

Based on numismatic evidence, it is assumed that a rectangular stone fortification, surrounded by an earth rampart and ditch, was also constructed at this time on a high ground along the right bank of the Danube (Derwent Hill), situated opposite the island of Păcuilui lui Soare<sup>48</sup>.

Downstream from Păcuilui lui Soare and south of the modern city of Cernavodă, at Cochirleni (Rasova), lies the stone fortress of Cetatea Pătulului (not yet archaeologically investigated), with an approximately pentagonal shape. It is generally attributed to the Macedonian dynasty era and is presumed to have been built over an ancient *castrum*<sup>49</sup>.

The same period is also attributed to the smaller enclosure at Cernavodă-Hinog, located not far north of Cetatea Pătulului. The polygonal-shaped fortress, with walls 2 m thick, built from irregularly hewn rough stone, was constructed south of the ancient city of *Axiopolis*, on a naturally protected plateau<sup>50</sup>.

In the Byzantine defence system of the new frontier, Capidava was also integrated. Archaeological research has revealed terrain levelling activities, the construction of an enclosure made of stones bonded with earth, which largely followed

<sup>45</sup> BARNEA 2010b, p. 538.

<sup>46</sup> VÎLCEANU 1963; DIACONU, VÎLCEANU 1972, p. 47; BARASCHI 1991a, p. 138; DAMIAN 2020, p. 271–272; DAMIAN 2021, p. 111–115, fig. 3–11, p. 121–122, fig. 25–29. The radiocarbon dating supports the construction of the fortress in the last quarter of the 10<sup>th</sup> century. See, in this volume, DAMIAN *et alii*, *Again about the founding date of the fortress at Păcuilui lui Soare*.

<sup>47</sup> DIACONU, VÎLCEANU 1972, p. 23.

<sup>48</sup> MĂNUCU-ADAMEȘTEANU 2001, p. 37–39; MĂNUCU-ADAMEȘTEANU 2017a, p. 89; MĂNUCU-ADAMEȘTEANU 2018, second part, p. 103, 658, 744.

<sup>49</sup> SCHUCHHARDT 1918, p. 60; DIACONU 1973–1975, p. 203; FLORESCU 1986, p. 173; MADGEARU 2013, p. 35; DAMIAN 2015, p. 55.

<sup>50</sup> BARNEA 1960, p. 76; BARNEA, ȘTEFĂNESCU 1971, p. 80; MĂNUCU-ADAMEȘTEANU 2001, p. 40–42; ȘOVA 2023, p. 163.

the ancient walls' layout, and the presence inside the fortress of building foundations with a distinct military character<sup>51</sup>.

Under the new Byzantine administration, actions were undertaken at *Dinogetia*-Garvăn, including clearing and repairing the ancient walls and towers, removing rubble, levelling the ground for future constructions, recovering building materials for reuse, rebuilding and reinforcing the main gate of the fortress – located on the southern side – with a tower, and constructing barracks for the garrisons<sup>52</sup>.

Some repairs for reuse are also presumed to have been carried out at the ancient fortresses of *Arrubium*-Măcin, *Troesmis*-Turcoaia (western enclosure), and *Beroe*-Piatra Frecăței. However, this assessment is based on the discovery of material specific to the 10<sup>th</sup>–11<sup>th</sup> centuries inside and near the Roman-Byzantine enclosures, rather than on direct observable evidence<sup>53</sup>.

Near the most important Danube crossing in northern Dobruja, it has been observed that the walls of the ancient fortress of *Noviodunum*-Isaccea were repaired for the purpose of reusing the enclosure and installing Byzantine military forces before 979. Archaeological investigations have revealed that the inner wall, built from stone bonded with mortar and brick, was constructed on a level containing early medieval ceramic material, being attributed to the era of John I Tzimiskes<sup>54</sup>.

During the Macedonian dynasty, another fortification equipped with a port was built *a fundamentis* at *Proslavița*-Nufăru, near the mouth of the Danube, approximately 12 km downstream from the modern city of Tulcea, on the right bank of the southern branch of the Danube Delta, Sf. Gheorghe. In the last quarter of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, a polygonal irregularly shaped enclosure with towers was erected here, covering an area of approximately 6 hectares, with walls measuring 2.60–2.70 m thick and preserved up to 3 m in height, along with a port facility<sup>55</sup>. Recent investigations in the *extra muros* area have revealed the presence of a lime kiln, indicating a zone designated for the preparation of materials for the construction of the walls, located about 50 m east of the enclosure<sup>56</sup>.

Based on the discovery of a silver *miliaresion* coin, issued by Emperor Basil II, it is estimated that a Byzantine garrison was present, and that the ancient fortress of Mahmudia (former Salsovia) was reused<sup>57</sup>, located downstream from Nufăru, also on the Sf. Gheorghe branch.

The placement of the new fortifications equipped with port facilities on the

<sup>51</sup> FLORESCU 1965, p. 22; FLORESCU, COVACEF 1988–1989, p. 240–244; CURSARU-HERLEA 2016, p. 48; OPRİȘ, DUCĂ 2016, p. 142–144.

<sup>52</sup> ȘTEFAN *et alii* 1967, p. 20, 30–31; MADGEARU 2013, p. 105–106; DAMIAN 2015, p. 229, 230; STĂNICĂ 2015, p. 71; ȘOVA 2023, p. 162.

<sup>53</sup> BARNEA, ȘTEFĂNESCU 1971, p. 80; DAMIAN 2015, p. 229; STĂNICĂ 2015, p. 71.

<sup>54</sup> BARNEA, ȘTEFĂNESCU 1971, p. 76; MĂNUCU-ADAMEȘTEANU 2001, p. 56–57; MADGEARU 2013, p. 104–105; STĂNICĂ 2015, p. 71.

<sup>55</sup> BARASCHI 1991b, p. 403; MĂNUCU-ADAMEȘTEANU 2001, p. 60–61; DAMIAN *et alii* 2007–2008, p. 107–112; DAMIAN *et alii* 2012, p. 177–184; MADGEARU 2013, p. 102–103; STĂNICĂ 2015, p. 164; DAMIAN 2021, p. 115–120, fig. 12–24, p. 122–123, fig. 30–32.

<sup>56</sup> DAMIAN *et alii* 2023, p. 602–605.

<sup>57</sup> MADGEARU 2013 p. 101–102, where it is also stated that the presence of silver coins of the *miliaresion* type, issued by Emperor John I Tzimiskes, is considered evidence of the presence of Byzantine garrisons, as these coins were distributed as military pay.

most navigable branch of the delta at that time (*Proslavița*-Nufăru fortress), as well as near Dorostolon (Păcuiul lui Soare fortress), highlights the important role assigned to them in the structure of the Lower Danube frontier. Furthermore, the strengthening of the frontier, through both the repair of Roman fortifications and the construction of new ones, demonstrates the attention paid by the Byzantine Empire to the reconquered territory<sup>58</sup>.

### The small enclosure from Hârșova

As previously mentioned, the beginnings of the medieval phase of the fortress at Hârșova were influenced by the political context described above. After the reconquest of Dobruja, the Byzantines quickly recognized the danger posed by the nearby ford (Fig. 2/1), as well as the strategic importance of the rocky promontory. Although it may have been a complex of lesser importance compared to those where the port fortresses guarding the northern and southern entrances to Dobruja were built (Nufăru and Păcuiul lui Soare), judging by the size of the enclosures constructed *a fundamentis* during this period, it was still significant enough to include a port installation and, probably, to be responsible for the central part of the frontier segment between Dorostolon (Siliistra) and *Proslavița* (Nufăru).

Situated in the Dobrujan territory north of the Carasu Valley<sup>59</sup>, the fortress at Hârșova was initially incorporated into the large Theme Ioannoupolis and Dorostolon, and later, after reorganization, into the Theme Western Mesopotamia. It is likely that it was not among the territories reconquered by the Bulgarians in 986, remaining continuously under Byzantine administration. Like the entire Danubian-Pontic region, at the beginning of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, the fortress at Hârșova was integrated into the Theme of Dorostolon (Dristra) or the Theme Paradounavon.

The Byzantine enclosure at Hârșova (Fig. 2/2), also known as the "small enclosure" due to its significantly smaller surface area compared to the Roman and late medieval enclosures, or the "upper fortress" because of its dominant position in contrast to the walls in the lower port area, referred to as the "lower fortress", has a quadrilateral layout with sides measuring approximately 76 m on the east, 86 m on the west, and 80 m on the north<sup>60</sup>. Since the *intra muros* perimeter on the Danube-facing side was naturally protected by a very high and steep rock (Fig. 3/1)<sup>61</sup>, the southern part of the small enclosure, about 90 m in length, appears to have remained open, on the rocky plateau as no traces of a wall have been recorded so far<sup>62</sup>. The enclosure features massive towers at the corners and along the sides, with the best-preserved section of the wall located on the northern side, where its thickness varies between 3.70 m and 4.40 m, and its preserved height reaches approximately 7 m (Fig. 3/2 and

<sup>58</sup> PARASCHIV-TALMAȚCHI 2021, p. 25.

<sup>59</sup> The present Danube – Black Sea Canal.

<sup>60</sup> CIOBANU 1970, p. 25; PANAIT *et alii* 1995–1996, p. 124; DAMIAN 2015, p. 229; PARASCHIV-TALMAȚCHI 2016, p. 131; ȘOVA 2023, p. 165.

<sup>61</sup> We would also like to take this opportunity to thank Mr. Gheorghe Stănescu for permission to publish the two postcards in Fig. 3, from his personal collection.

<sup>62</sup> On this side, access appeared to be blocked in the lower area, from the port, by a thick wall of approximately 3 m, preserved in a poor state and observed between the western peak and the Romano-Byzantine wall, cf. NICOLAE *et alii* 2022, p. 156; NICOLAE *et alii* 2023, p. 139, pl. I.

4–6). The outer surface of the walls was built using large, shaped parallelepiped blocks, separated by rows of bricks, while the *emplecton* consists of rocks of varying sizes mixed with hard mortar, combined with charcoal and fragments of broken brick. The walls and towers were reinforced with wooden ties placed both longitudinally and transversely, whose imprints are still visible in elevation (Fig. 6/2). Near the northwestern corner of the enclosure, in the northern wall, the traces of a secondary gate, 1.5 m wide, are still preserved<sup>63</sup>.

In the context of a restoration, conservation, and cultural-touristic development project for the “Carsium-Hârșova Fortress” site, a preventive archaeological investigation was conducted between June and November 2020 on the promontory on the right bank of the Danube<sup>64</sup>, located at the southeastern edge of the town. One of the works proposed within the ongoing project consists of the restoration of the tower located on the northern side of the small enclosure, known as the “Commander’s Tower”. This led to some of the archaeological research objectives focusing on: stratigraphically identifying the construction phase of the tower and the small enclosure to ensure historically accurate restoration; and highlighting their structure and foundations to assess the conservation state of the elements that were not previously visible.

The 2020 investigations (Fig. 7/1) revealed that the enclosure built upon the return of the Byzantine administration to Dobruja, known as the “small enclosure”, has its northern wall and tower constructed on the bedrock, on the southern side, facing the Danube. The bedrock was encountered at a depth of 3.98 m near the tower<sup>65</sup> (Fig. 7/2), while on the northern side the archaeological excavation was halted at a higher level, without revealing its presence. To construct the enclosure and the tower, the terrain was prepared through levelling, observed in some excavation units up to approximately 2 m above the rock, which also incorporated and covered the walls of a Roman building (Fig. 8/1). This levelling was also documented on the northern side of the tower, between it and the enclosure located to its north, which is preserved in a poor state. The levelling consists of well-compacted yellow-brown soil containing numerous Roman ceramic fragments (dating to the 4<sup>th</sup>–6<sup>th</sup> centuries), as well as a smaller quantity of early medieval ceramics, which are datable to the second half of the 10<sup>th</sup> century<sup>66</sup>.

According to the stratigraphy of the investigated *intra muros* area, the construction of the northern wall and tower dates to the early medieval period, specifically the last decades of the 10<sup>th</sup> century. This aligns with the moment of Dobruja’s reintegration into the borders of the Byzantine Empire. The data regarding the construction of the small enclosure, obtained during the preventive archaeological research,

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<sup>63</sup> CIOBANU 1970, p. 25; BARNEA, ȘTEFĂNESCU 1971, p. 80; PANAIT *et alii* 1995–1996, p. 124; TALMAȚCHI 1998, p. 169; MĂNUCU-ADAMEȘTEANU 2017b, p. 528–529, 599, pl. III; ȘOVA 2023, p. 165.

<sup>64</sup> TALMAȚCHI *et alii* 2021, p. 416–422.

<sup>65</sup> The depth is specified from the current walking level near the tower. Relative to the upper part of the plinth, the rock is located at –2.70 m, and relative to the upper part of the foundation at –2.40 m. As a precaution, we provide these data as well since we do not know if the project will affect the existing situation on the ground at the time the recordings are made.

<sup>66</sup> TALMAȚCHI *et alii* 2021, p. 416; ȘOVA 2023, p. 166.

confirmed the assertions of researchers Andrei Aricescu and Mihai Bucovață, who, following an archaeological excavation conducted in the 1960s, stated that "from excavations as well as from surface research, the existence of three enclosure walls can be observed, of which the tallest preserved one, enclosing the smallest area, has its foundation in a level containing 10<sup>th</sup>-century material". They concluded that this structure was built "during the reign of Emperor John I Tzimiskes"<sup>67</sup>. From the information provided by them, it is not clear whether the levelling observed and recorded by us was noticed by them or if and where they arrived at it. What is significant, however, is that this levelling includes ceramic material from the 10<sup>th</sup> century, more precisely from its second half, indicating the chronological moment when the terrain was prepared for constructing the small enclosure, that is, after the return of the Byzantine administration to Dobruja, post-971<sup>68</sup>.

Regarding the construction technique of the walls, the 2020 research recorded the presence of holes at the lower part of the foundation, indicating the placement of wooden elements (square-section beams arranged longitudinally and transversally, measuring 0.15 × 0.15 m), similar to those observed in elevation, which served to reinforce the structure. In some of the remaining beam holes, evidence of additional strengthening measures was preserved (**Fig 8/2a-c**), consisting of iron reinforcements (bars and nails) that penetrated the wooden beam while also being anchored at one end into the masonry<sup>69</sup>. Both the northern tower and the wall exhibit the same construction technique (**Fig. 6/2**) and were built during the same period. Additionally, it was observed that the "Commander's Tower" preserves, on the Danube side (south), several steps made of large stone slabs and below the current walking level (**Fig. 4**).

For the construction of the Byzantine enclosure, materials were sourced relatively nearby. Likely, as in the Roman period, by the late 10<sup>th</sup> century, quarries in the areas of "Celea Mică" (located 4 km southeast of Hârșova), "Celea Mare" (situated 1.5 km south of the "Celea Mică" quarry, where early medieval ceramic fragments have been discovered<sup>70</sup>, and "Celea Lac", known for its high-quality limestone<sup>71</sup>, were exploited. Reused materials from ancient constructions were also incorporated into the wall facing, including two pieces of an architrave, a column shaft fragment, and other architectural elements<sup>72</sup>. As mentioned earlier, the construction of the new enclosure required prior site preparation, likely leading to the destruction of some ancient habitation evidence.

Another proposed work within the project focuses on the port area, located on the southern side at the base of the promontory, between two rocky outcrops (**Fig. 3/1** and **9/1**). For this location, the objectives of the archaeological research aimed at highlighting the substructure of the medieval wall and identifying its course in the section where it is no longer preserved in elevation; as well as uncovering the possible port installation of the fortress.

In the eastern half of the area flanked by rocky outcrops, systematic

<sup>67</sup> ARICESCU 1971, p. 351, 356.

<sup>68</sup> PARASCHIV-TALMAȚCHI 2024, p. 242.

<sup>69</sup> TALMAȚCHI *et alii* 2021, p. 416; ȘOVA 2023, p. 167, fig. 3/2-4.

<sup>70</sup> MORINTZ, ȘERBĂNESCU 1974, p. 47.

<sup>71</sup> TALMAȚCHI 1998, p. 166-170.

<sup>72</sup> PANAIT *et alii* 1995-1996, p. 124.

archaeological investigations in 2012 revealed the imprints of 18 postholes, with diameters ranging "from 8–10 cm to 15–20 cm", considered possible evidence of the port installation "used at the end of antiquity and the beginning of the Middle Ages"<sup>73</sup>. At that time, the possibility that the postholes originated from a potential pier, operational in the 11<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup> centuries, was not ruled out, nor was the likelihood that over time, the existence of a mooring platform would be archaeologically documented, as expected for a fortification located at a key frontier point. Additionally, some artefacts found within the enclosure, which arrived through trade from distant areas of the Byzantine Empire and the northern Black Sea, supported this hypothesis<sup>74</sup>.

This possibility was confirmed during the preventive archaeological investigations in 2020 when, following our recommendations and insistence, the investigated perimeter in the port area was extended westward, where a mooring platform was identified<sup>75</sup>. Its construction method is reminiscent of the port installations of the fortresses at Păcuilui lui Soare and Nufăru<sup>76</sup>.

The port installation was uncovered at –1.70 m from the current walking level. Rectangular limestone blocks (of varying dimensions, ranging from 0.40 × 0.40 × 0.10 m to 0.60 × 0.60 × 0.10 m), carefully worked on all visible faces and bonded with mortar, form the appearance of a platform, descending southward, towards the Danube, in multiple steps (**Fig. 9/2**). The steps facing the river are clearly distinguishable and match the width of the stone blocks. Two subsequent systematic archaeological campaigns facilitated the uncovering of the mooring platform, revealing a width of 5–6 m and a length of 16–17 m (noting that, on the eastern side, it was partially dismantled in the modern era to reuse the stones for constructions). The construction method, stratigraphy, and materials found here indicate that the structure was arranged in the 10<sup>th</sup> century<sup>77</sup>, probably at the same time as or shortly after the erection of the Byzantine enclosure.

The Byzantine-period habitation at Hârșova initially developed under the protection of the small enclosure, in the central part of the plateau. Its development determined the expansion of the settlement around the walls, to the west, north and east. Over time, the small fortress on the Danubian frontier established connections with similar outposts and distant centres, emerging as a local hub of interest, with merchants and craftsmen. These progressive transformations gave the settlement a semi-urban character, of course with the specific features of a settlement located on the edge of an empire, a level of development reached by more fortifications located on the right bank of the river.

Before focusing on the habitation from the 10<sup>th</sup>–11<sup>th</sup> centuries, it is important to mention that in the area we investigated within the Byzantine fortification (section

<sup>73</sup> NICOLAE *et alii* 2013, p. 65–66.

<sup>74</sup> PARASCHIV-TALMAȚCHI 2011, p. 102–115; PARASCHIV-TALMAȚCHI, TALMAȚCHI 2013, p. 334, 338–339; PARASCHIV-TALMAȚCHI 2024, p. 253.

<sup>75</sup> TALMAȚCHI *et alii* 2021, p. 418.

<sup>76</sup> DIACONU, VÎLCEANU 1972, p. 38–40; DAMIAN *et alii* 2007–2008, p. 110; DAMIAN 2021, p. 121–123.

<sup>77</sup> TALMAȚCHI *et alii* 2021, p. 418; NICOLAE *et alii* 2022, p. 156; NICOLAE *et alii* 2023, p. 139.

SIA<sup>78</sup> and slightly on the eastern part of section SI), beneath the 18<sup>th</sup>-century occupation level, there is a habitation level dating from the first half of the 11<sup>th</sup> century. The absence of intermediate layers, characteristic of the chronological interval starting somewhere around the mid-11<sup>th</sup> century and extending until the 17<sup>th</sup> century<sup>79</sup>, can be explained by possible land clearing actions carried out in preparation for new constructions, which followed unfavourable periods or were initiated by new administrations. A similar situation was previously presented in the context of the construction of the Byzantine enclosure.

Overall, within the small enclosure, both surface-built dwellings and deepened dwellings were recorded<sup>80</sup> (Fig. 10). The first type had stone foundations bound with earth, supporting a wooden upper structure that held the woven wattle walls, coated with yellow clay plaster, and a reed roof. The use of wood was evidenced by the presence of postholes (placed in the middle of the sides or at the corners) or by traces of burned beams. The surface dwellings investigated so far were single-room structures, with floors made of compacted yellow clay. In one of them, the entrance was marked on the western side by a worn stone slab. The hearth was positioned in the northeastern corner of the room or in the central-southern area, slightly toward the southwestern corner. For example, in Complex 1/2008, the hearth consisted of a structure made of reused Roman paving slabs, covered with a layer of fired clay, along with a remaining wall section built of stones and clay. In Complex 1/2010, the oven had an oval shape, with walls built of stone and fragmented bricks, over which a layer of yellow clay was applied. The oven mouth and the upper part of the walls, which sloped inward and had a rounded edge, were made of clay. The oven, measuring approximately 0.30 m in height and with an interior surface of 1.04 × 1.20 m, displayed two phases of use. In the secondary phase, it underwent a repair and an extension at the entrance. In the earlier phase, the hearth was built over a layer of small and medium-sized gravel, broken brick, and ceramic fragments, the latter sometimes arranged in two rows in height. In the later phase, the hearth was built over a layer of ceramics, small gravel, and yellow earth. Altogether, the hearth reached a thickness of 12.5 cm.

The deepened dwellings, located near the enclosure wall within the compacted yellow-brown earth levelling (mentioned above), had simple walls or were lined with stone and wood. Their upper structure was built in a manner relatively similar to the surface dwellings, as evidenced by the presence of postholes. These dwellings

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<sup>78</sup> Section SIA, measuring 14 × 5 m, extends westward from the main section SI (oriented north-south, initiated by A. Aricescu and later continued by P. I. Panait and C. Nicolae). It is bordered to the north by the small enclosure and to the south by a medieval-period wall built after the 11<sup>th</sup> century. SIA holds particular importance in the research of the fortress at Hârșova, as it is located within the small enclosure in an area where the archaeological deposit reaches a height of 3.98 m. By comparison, in the southern part of the main section SI, towards the Danube, the rock appears at a depth of 0.40 m below the current walking level. See PANAIT *et alii* 1995–1996, p. 127.

<sup>79</sup> The continuity of habitation, in more or less developed forms, is evidenced by artefacts found within the fill of Ottoman-period pits or discovered in *extra muros* areas alongside waste evacuated from the fortress, but most importantly, by written sources.

<sup>80</sup> PANAIT *et alii* 1994, p. 31; PANAIT *et alii* 1995, p. 42; TALMAȚCHI 2009, p. 118; TALMAȚCHI 2011, p. 46; PARASCHIV-TALMAȚCHI 2016, p. 135; PARASCHIV-TALMAȚCHI 2024, p. 245, 248–249, fig. 3/2, fig. 5/1–4.

consisted of a single room, with a floor made of compacted yellow clay. Inside, they contained heating installations, consisting of ovens and open hearths. The ovens were built entirely of medium and large irregular stones, sometimes bound with earth, and were positioned in the southwestern or southeastern corner. In one particular case, in Complex 9/2020, the eastern and southern walls of the oven were formed by the intersection of two walls from a Roman building, which were then completed with a northern wall and an upper section. This oven was set deeper than the floor level of the dwelling, and access to it was provided by a sloping passage located on the southern side of the room (**Fig. 11/1**), descending alongside the Roman wall. Another stone-built oven, from Complex 2/2020, showed repairs to the hearth, with three successive layers visible in cross-section, and a slight shift towards the west. The middle hearth layer (second phase) was constructed from small stones, brick fragments, a few early medieval ceramic fragments with incised decoration, and three Roman ceramic fragments, over which a layer of yellow earth, now fired, was applied.

The open hearths, positioned in the western part of the room, either centrally or towards the southwestern corner, but at a certain distance from the walls, had a roughly circular shape and were delimited by stones (**Fig. 11/2**). In a single case, in Complex 3/2020, the open hearth had a rectangular shape and was elevated above the floor level. It was constructed as a feature made of small stones, brick fragments, and rare ceramic shards (mostly early medieval), over which a layer of clay was applied. The edges were made of stones bound with yellow earth. Both the interior part and the edges were raised above the floor level, by 0.12–0.14 m in the inner area, while the total height reached 0.22 m, giving it the appearance of a tray.

Among the dwellings we researched in SIA, we will highlight three in particular, each of which can serve as a chronological landmark in the stratigraphic analysis of the investigated perimeter and contribute to the reconstruction of habitation from the Early Middle Ages.

In section SIA, which we began investigating in 2007<sup>81</sup>, the first dwelling from the analysed period that emerged beneath the Ottoman layer was Complex 1/2008<sup>82</sup>. This structure was built at the medieval occupation level and became visible at a depth of 1.60 m<sup>83</sup>, which is 0.20 m below the Ottoman layer. It was partially excavated, as its eastern section extended into section SI, which had been explored approximately 15 years earlier by Panait I. Panait and Aristide Ștefănescu. The preserved surface of the dwelling, delimited by a row of stones and postholes, measured 3.50 × 2.70 m. On the northern side, near the row of stones, and on the western side (where we assume the entrance was marked by a worn stone slab) as well as towards the southwestern corner, traces of burned beams from the upper structure of the dwelling were found, the longest beam measuring 1.74 m in length and having a thickness of 0.10–0.12 m. The yellow clay floor was cut in the northwestern corner by a pit from the Ottoman period. On the northeastern side, the fire installation, which has already been described above, was preserved.

The inventory of the dwelling was quite rich, including numerous ceramic

<sup>81</sup> TALMAȚCHI 2008, p. 151.

<sup>82</sup> TALMAȚCHI 2009, p. 118; PARASCHIV-TALMAȚCHI 2024, p. 245–248, fig. 3/2.

<sup>83</sup> This means approximately 0.25 m above the upper level of the plinth of the small enclosure wall.

fragments, a millstone, a truncated clay weight, spindle whorls made of bone and clay, and a Byzantine coin from the reign of Emperor Romanos III Argyros (1028–1034), Class B<sup>84</sup>. Noteworthy among the ceramics are vessels with micaceous engobe (golden) and olive glaze, spheroidal and piriform amphorae with collar, and vessels decorated with impressions made by a toothed wheel on the outer surface. Based on its inventory, Complex 1/2008 can be dated to the second quarter of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, representing, as mentioned above, the first dwelling identified beneath the Ottoman level.

At the southern limit of the SIA section, Complex 1/2020 was investigated, a deepened dwelling excavated in an early medieval level, above which is the wall that marking the southern boundary of the section (**Fig. 11/2**), contributing to its temporal framing. In relation to the walking level above the wall, the dwelling was identified at a depth of 0.90 m, with its floor at 1.38 m. Between its fill layer and the lower part of the wall, a 0.16–0.18 m thick layer was observed, consisting of loose, light brown-grey, containing bones, pieces of bricks, rare early medieval ceramic fragments, and a few Roman ones, which leads us to consider that it belongs to the Early Middle Ages. The excavated surface of the dwelling measured 3 × 1.58 m, extending under the profile towards the south, beneath a medieval wall built in a rudimentary technique, likely during the Ottoman period. The floor was brown-grey, made of compacted clay, with a thickness of 2.5–3 cm. Five postholes were recorded, some reinforced with stone or brick, placed towards the edges of the room (**Fig. 10/Cpl. 1**). The open hearth had an approximately circular shape, surrounded by stones, which were coated on the interior lower part with a clay layer up to 0.10 m in height.

The inventory of the dwelling includes early medieval ceramics, a fragmentary brick weight for a fishing net, a whetstone for sharpening metal objects, a bone awl, and faunal remains, among which burnt bones were identified.

Important in the analysed context is Complex 12/2020, a deepened dwelling excavated along the foundation of the enclosure wall, immediately east of the "Commander's Tower" (**Fig. 10/Cpl. 12**). From the current walking level, this feature was identified at a depth of 2.60 m, with its floor at 3.04–3.08 m<sup>85</sup>. It was dug into the compact levelling layer, which, as previously mentioned, was observed in some excavation units up to a height of approximately 2 m above the bedrock. Beneath the floor of the dwelling, which was 3–5 cm thick and made of compacted yellow-grey clay, the levelling layer was maintained, measuring approximately 0.90 m down to the bedrock. A simple calculation shows that Complex 12/2020 was excavated approximately 1.10 m into this layer. At the time of investigation, the fill layer of the dwelling was preserved to a height slightly exceeding 0.40 m, with its upper portion completely destroyed when Complex 3/2020 was arranged.

The excavated area of Complex 12/2020 measured 2.40 × 3.20 m, extending partially under the western profile. Near this profile, partially beneath it, there was a circular open hearth (visible over an area of 0.35 × 0.85 m), next to which, towards the south, lay two fragments of a grinding stone. In areas where the floor was not disturbed by the bottom of an Ottoman-period household pit (Pit 2/2009), the floor

<sup>84</sup> PARASCHIV-TALMAȚCHI 2011, p. 103–107.

<sup>85</sup> Relative to the upper part of the plinth of the wall, Complex 12/2020 was outlined at a depth of 1.32 m and has its floor at 1.76–1.80 m.

adhered to the foundation of the wall, rising slightly onto it. The layer of ash preserved on the floor, as well as nine parallel wooden traces<sup>86</sup>, charred and found in the western part of the room, arranged perpendicular to the foundation of the wall, indicate that the dwelling was destroyed in a fire. From the ash layer, near the hearth and grinding stones, early medieval ceramic fragments and a circular stone with polished surfaces were recovered. Among the pottery fragments, there was the shoulder of a pot with an attached tubular handle and a rim with interior grooving. In Dobruja, these characteristics are found on pots from the last decades of the 10<sup>th</sup> century and the early decades of the 11<sup>th</sup> century<sup>87</sup>, with these ceramic fragments providing a chronological indicator for dating the dwelling.

Beneath the floor of the dwelling, down to the bedrock, between the compacted levelling layer and the foundation of the wall, there was a space measuring 0.23–0.36 m in width, filled with compact brown soil. This fill contained a few Roman ceramic fragments and sporadic early medieval ones, and exhibited a slight slope toward the foundation. This space was destroyed in its upper part due to anthropic activities, but it remained well-defined and preserved beneath the floor of Complex 12/2020. The composition of the fill suggests that the space was filled simultaneously with the construction of the enclosure, for which a foundation trench was dug into the yellow-brown levelling layer, wider than the actual thickness of the future foundation. This may have been intentional, possibly to maintain full control over the outer surface of the structure and to facilitate successive elevation stages, allowing for the application of a protective plaster layer over the foundation, with yellow clay still preserved in some areas. Likely, after the plaster and clay dried, the space was filled to ensure stability, protection, and long-term durability. The later construction of the deepened dwelling did not interfere with this process, as its restricted surface area did not expose the foundation along its entire depth and was protected in its upper part.

For the chronological classification of the early medieval occupation levels preserved within the perimeter of section SIA, we have several reference points, as follows. The upper level, the first one beneath the Ottoman-period level, belongs to the first half of the 11<sup>th</sup> century. This classification is supported by the inventory of Complex 1/2008, which represents the first dwelling identified beneath the Ottoman level and can be dated to the second quarter of the 11<sup>th</sup> century. This has in its inventory a coin issued during the reign of Emperor Romanos III Argyros (1028–1034). Moreover, within the approximately 0.35 m-thick layer located between 0.25 m above the plinth (corresponding to the contour level of Complex 1/2008) and 0.10 m below its upper limit, four other coins were found, as follows: 2 anonymous *folleis* of class A2-A3 (A2 according to Ivanišević, dated to 1010/1015–1020/1025, or A3 according to Metcalf, placed between 1015/1020 and ca. 1030), issues from the reigns of Basil II and Constantine VIII; 1 anonymous *folleis* of class C, put into circulation during the reign of Emperor Michael IV (1034–1041); 1 anonymous *folleis* of class D, issued during the reign of Emperor Constantine IX (1042–1055)<sup>88</sup>.

<sup>86</sup> The area covered by these was 0.65 m in width and a maximum of 0.85 m in length. The width of the wooden elements varied between 4 cm and 5.5 cm.

<sup>87</sup> ŞTEFAN *et alii* 1967, p. 154–157, fig. 93/5, fig. 94/16.

<sup>88</sup> METCALF 1979, p. 55–60; IVANIŠEVIĆ 1989, p. 36–39; MĂNUCU-ADAMEŞTEANU 2017b, p. 521.

At approximately 0.60 m below the identification level of Complex 1/2008, Complex 1/2010 was discovered<sup>89</sup>. This complex was in use around the years 1010/1015 to ca. 1030 (or shortly after), and among its inventory is an anonymous *foliis* of class A2-A3, variant 24<sup>90</sup>, found embedded in the clay of the floor. Additionally, the finds include: a fragmentary iron knife, discovered in the fill of the oven; two 5<sup>th</sup>-century Roman coins, one of which was embedded in the clay of the oven wall; numerous ceramic fragments. From the fragments found within the layers on which the oven hearths were built, presented above, several vessels have been reconstructed. These were wheel-made at a slow speed, using common and kaolinitic clay, and were oxidation-fired. Their decorations include incised horizontal and wavy lines, as well as indentations made with a toothed wheel (Fig. 12/1–2).

According to the vertical stratigraphic analysis, this surface dwelling was identified approximately 0.15 m below the upper level of the foundation of the enclosure wall.

Unlike the previous two dwellings, Complex 12/2020 belongs to the early phase of habitation within the enclosure, with a key reference point being the ceramic material found in the ash layer on the floor. Although the quantity of ceramics was lower compared to Complex 1/2010, notable differences can still be observed between them, both in terms of composition (paste, decoration) and specific characteristics (tubular handle), which indicate an earlier phase. The stratigraphic position, including its overlap by Complex 3/2020, its excavation into the stable levelling layer, despite its proximity to the enclosure and the use of the foundation as the northern limit of the room, as well as the ceramic inventory, suggest that it functioned before Complex 1/2010, meaning before the years 1010–1015, thus beginning in the last decades of the 10<sup>th</sup> century. Its placement near the enclosure wall, but still far enough not to obstruct access to the tower, may have been due to its perception as a defensive feature in case of an attack or to the horizontal distribution of dwellings within the protected area.

A retrospective of the presented findings indicates that the early medieval habitation levels preserved within the *intra muros* area under investigation span from the last decades of the 10<sup>th</sup> to the mid–11<sup>th</sup> century. However, the discovery of sporadic monetary pieces<sup>91</sup> in the *extra muros* area, in other sections, or across the territory of the modern city, and a burned dwelling that preserved on its floor a hand-made pot without handles, presumed to belong to the final habitation level, suggests that habitation within and around the fortress persisted until the late 11<sup>th</sup> century. The latest coin found during archaeological research was an anonymous *foliis* from Class I, issued during the reign of Emperor Nikephoros III (1078–1081)<sup>92</sup>.

Based on the monetary discoveries, numerically reduced, the idea of a decline in habitation and a reduction in the importance of the centre on the Danubian limes

<sup>89</sup> PARASCHIV-TALMAȚCHI 2024, p. 248–249, fig. 5–6.

<sup>90</sup> METCALF 1979, p. 55–60; IVANIŠEVIĆ 1989, p. 36–39; MĂNUCU-ADAMEȘTEANU 2017b, p. 554–555.

<sup>91</sup> MĂNUCU-ADAMEȘTEANU 2017b, p. 539–540.

<sup>92</sup> PAPASIMA *et alii* 1997, p. 25; PAPASIMA, NICOLAE, TALMAȚCHI 1998, p. 27–28; MĂNUCU-ADAMEȘTEANU 2017b, p. 532.

during the second half of the 11<sup>th</sup> century<sup>93</sup> has been proposed. However, considering the situation recorded in SIA, where beneath the 18<sup>th</sup>-century level, a habitation level from the first half of the 11<sup>th</sup> century was identified (despite evidence of continuous habitation indicated by sporadic artefacts and monetary pieces, but especially supported by written sources<sup>94</sup>), we tend to believe that this “decline” was less influenced by historical factors and appears more pronounced due to the destruction of habitation levels from the second half of the century through land-clearing actions, up to a little above the base of the wall (approximately 0.30–0.50 m). In this case, the two dwellings found in the upper part of the early medieval habitation levels (Complex 1/2008 and Complex 1/2010) provide a chronological marker for the preservation of layers, not a real one regarding the end of early medieval habitation. Otherwise, this evolving break, spanning several centuries, stratigraphically recorded in the area on the plateau with the highest deposition, is difficult to argue.

Evidence of habitation from the Early Middle Ages has been recorded within the fortified area in sections SI and SII<sup>95</sup>, as well as around the Byzantine enclosure, at the base of the promontory to the west and east, and in front of the walls to the northwest. On the western side, approximately 110 m from the enclosure, archaeological research has revealed several dwellings, including one with stone-lined walls and a horseshoe-shaped oven built from stones, along with several waste pits, attributed to the 10<sup>th</sup>–11<sup>th</sup> centuries<sup>96</sup>. Also on the western side, midway down the slope leading to the modern city’s port, numerous early medieval ceramic fragments were uncovered during the investigation of some enclosures. However, these were found in secondary positions, having been deposited as a result of clearing activities within the fortress<sup>97</sup>.

On the eastern side, approximately 50 m from the small enclosure, habitation dated to the 11<sup>th</sup> century and possible the beginning of the 12<sup>th</sup> century has been documented, consisting of dwellings with stone-built ovens and storage pits<sup>98</sup>. A craftsmen’s quarter had also formed in this area, where a workshop for producing and repairing metal objects was identified. Based on its inventory, it appears to have been operational as early as the last quarter of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, though it may have continued into the early 11<sup>th</sup> century, likely contemporary with the construction of the small enclosure<sup>99</sup>. Additionally, two kilns for firing ceramics, dated to the second half of the 11<sup>th</sup> century<sup>100</sup>, were discovered. Both the workshop and kilns were built into a massive deposit of redeposited soil, which had been accumulated by the fortress’s inhabitants after clearing construction debris from within the enclosure. In

<sup>93</sup> MĂNUCU-ADAMEȘTEANU 2017b, p. 539–540.

<sup>94</sup> CIOBANU 1970; PANAIT *et alii* 1995–1996; PARASCHIV-TALMAȚCHI, TALMAȚCHI 1999; TALMAȚCHI, PARASCHIV-TALMAȚCHI 1999; MĂNUCU-ADAMEȘTEANU 2017b, p. 540–541.

<sup>95</sup> PARASCHIV-TALMAȚCHI 2009, p. 426.

<sup>96</sup> DAMIAN *et alii* 1994, p. 31; DAMIAN *et alii* 1995, p. 41; DAMIAN, DAMIAN 1997, p. 234; DAMIAN *et alii* 1997, p. 26.

<sup>97</sup> COVACEF, NICOLAE, DUMITRU 2005, p. 170–171; COVACEF, NICOLAE 2007, p. 178–180.

<sup>98</sup> PANAIT *et alii* 1995–1996, p. 129.

<sup>99</sup> ȘOVA 2021, p. 61–62.

<sup>100</sup> PANAIT *et alii* 1995–1996, p. 129–133; PARASCHIV-TALMAȚCHI 2009, p. 429–433.

one of the layers cut by one of the ceramic kilns, an anonymous *foliis* of Class E was found, issued during the first part of Emperor Constantine X's reign, specifically between 1059 and 1062/1063<sup>101</sup>.

On the northwestern side, approximately 35 m from the wall of the Byzantine enclosure, a stratigraphic test trench partially investigated a dwelling attributed to the 11<sup>th</sup> century, based on its inventory, which includes two jugs<sup>102</sup>.

In the inventory of early medieval dwellings and in the stratigraphic layer, the majority of the collected material is ceramic (**Fig. 12–14**), predominantly household vessels made on the slow and fast wheel, from common clay and kaolinitic clay, mostly oxidant-fired. The ceramics made from common clay paste are represented by the pot without handles, in various sizes, the pot with handles, the truncated-conical bowl with a thickened base, the bowl with a slightly profiled shoulder and straight neck, the lamp, and the cauldron. Vessels made from kaolinitic clay are well represented in discoveries and include the pot without handles, the pot with handles, bowls, and lamps. Very rarely, fragments of vessels decorated with red paint appear (a few fragments). A notable feature is the significant quantity of vessels decorated with impressions made with a toothed wheel (**Fig. 12/1–2** and **14/1–11, 14**), leading to the observation that Hârșova represents the southernmost centre of this period, where such discoveries hold a significant percentage. Alongside common ceramics, a smaller proportion of vessels were made mostly on the fast wheel, from a purified clay paste, fired oxidant or reductant. These typically have their outer surface covered with an olive glaze (sometimes featuring incised or applied decoration) (**Fig. 12/14–15**) or with micaceous engobe. Typologically, these include jugs of medium and small sizes, mugs, and cups, found in fragmentary condition. Amphoric material is also well represented, generally in fragmentary form, consisting of spheroidal and piriform amphorae with a collar<sup>103</sup>.

The register of discoveries can be further supplemented with other ceramic objects (a glazed clay egg – **Fig. 15/1**, spindle whorls, fishing net weights), bronze items (small crosses, buckles, belt appliques and that were sewn onto fabrics – **Fig. 15/11–15**, rings, earrings, fishing hooks), bone and antler artefacts (handles for battle whips – **Fig. 15/10**, dagger hilts, simple or marked astragali with perforations, spindle whorls, awls), glass objects (bracelets – **Fig. 15/6–9**), stone artefacts (spindle whorls made of jasper – **Fig. 15/2–5**, millstones, whetstones for sharpening metals), iron objects (arrowheads, knives, nails), and coins<sup>104</sup>. All these finds provide insights into daily activities, the beliefs of the inhabitants, the fashion of the period, and evidence of trade exchange and the distribution area of certain product categories.

<sup>101</sup> PANAIT *et alii* 1995–1996, p. 133; MĂNUCU-ADAMEȘTEANU 2017b, p. 526.

<sup>102</sup> PARASCHIV-TALMAȚCHI 2017, p. 272–273, fig. 1/1.

<sup>103</sup> PARASCHIV-TALMAȚCHI 2011, p. 103–107; PARASCHIV-TALMAȚCHI 2017, p. 271–278.

<sup>104</sup> PARASCHIV-TALMAȚCHI 2011, p. 107; PARASCHIV-TALMAȚCHI 2016, p. 135–136, pl. V; MĂNUCU-ADAMEȘTEANU 2017b, p. 533–538; PARASCHIV-TALMAȚCHI 2024, p. 249–253.

## Conclusions

The investigation of the small enclosure on the promontory of Hârșova has revealed that, near the Danube crossing point from the Wallachian Plain to Dobruja, serving as a gateway into the territories conquered in 971, the Byzantine Empire did not opt to repair the Roman fortress. Instead, it chose to undertake large-scale construction work, preceded by clearing and preparing the terrain. The construction *a fundamentis* of an enclosure, even if of smaller dimensions, along with the building of a landing stage, places this new fortification and its assigned territory among the strategically important objectives and zones of the empire. This demonstrates the significant role attributed to this border fortress, both from a military and an economic perspective.

Like most fortifications on the right bank of the Danube, the settlement gradually developed, acquiring a semi-urban character, while also facilitating the growth of craftsmanship and an active commercial life. The organization of a space dedicated to certain occupations emerges as a result of this evolution, highlighting the presence of specialized artisans. These craftsmen served the local market but could also meet the needs of inhabitants in the surrounding settlements, turning the small fortress into a centre of interest during that period. At the same time, trade played a key role in the economic activity carried out here, as evidenced by the discovery of products originating from workshops in the northern Black Sea region (a glazed clay egg, jasper spindle whorls) or from centres near Constantinople and the Balkan Peninsula (amphorae, micaceous engobe pottery, bronze objects, glass bracelets), as well as Byzantine coins from the 10<sup>th</sup>–11<sup>th</sup> centuries.

From the moment of its construction and throughout the period under study, the existence of the small fortress was dictated and shaped by its integration into the chain of fortifications protecting the Byzantine frontier along the Danube. It experienced periods of peace alternating with conflicts, benefiting from craftsmanship development and inclusion in both river and land trade routes, all within the dynamic reality of a fortress situated on the edge of an empire.

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**Fig. 1.** Fortifications located along the Byzantine frontier at the Danube where actions of clearing, repairing, and construction were recorded after 971: 1 – *Dorostolon-Silistra* (capital of the Theme Paradounavon); 2 – Păcuiul lui Soare; 3 – Dervent; 4 – Rasova; 5 – Cetatea Pățulului; 6 – *Axiopolis-Cernavodă-Hinog*; 7 – Capidava; 8 – *Carsium-Hârșova*; 9 – *Beroe-Piatra Frecăței*; 10 – *Troesmis-Turcoaia*; 11 – *Arrubium-Măcin*; 12 – *Dinogetia-Garvăn*; 13 – *Noviodunum-Isaccea*; 14 – *Proslavița-Nufăru*; 15 – *Salsovia-Mahmudia*. In red: enclosures raised *a fundamentis* that were equipped with port installations.



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Fig. 2. 1 – Google Earth image of the Hârșova area marked with the fortress and the ford over the Danube (Giurgeni-Vadu Oii); 2 – Aerial image of Hârșova fortress marked with the small enclosure and harbour area (photo M. Stoian).



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Fig. 3.1 – Hârșova, the rock with the Danube at its base, and the ruins of the fortress seen from the modern port (1908); 2 – “Commander’s Tower” and ruins of the fortress on the rocky promontory (1913) (postcards from the collection of Dr. Eng. Gheorghe Stănescu).



Fig. 4. Aerial image of the southern part of the northern side of the small enclosure and the "Commander's Tower".



Fig. 5. Aerial image of the southern part of the northern side of the small enclosure and the "Commander's Tower", seen from the southeast.



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**Fig. 6.** 1 – Aerial image of the northern part of the northern side of the small precinct and the “Commander’s Tower”; 2 – Detail of the small precinct and the “Commander’s Tower” where the same construction technique can be observed, indicating that they were built during the same period.



**Fig. 7. 1** – Aerial view of the investigated perimeters to the south (SI, SIA, SIB) and north (S1N, S2N, S3N) of the northern side of the small (Byzantine) enclosure, in 2020;  
**2** – The foundation of the tower on the north side of the small precinct on the rock.



**Fig. 8.** 1 – Aerial image of the rock on which the northern side of the small precinct was built (from SIA), showing also the wall of the Roman building embedded in the foundation of the wall erected after 971; 2 – Detail of the Byzantine precinct foundation with the holes for the wooden beams marked in yellow and the iron reinforcements inside them (2 a-c), which served to strengthen the structure.



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Fig. 9. 1 – The harbour area of the Hârşova fortress; 2 – The wharf.

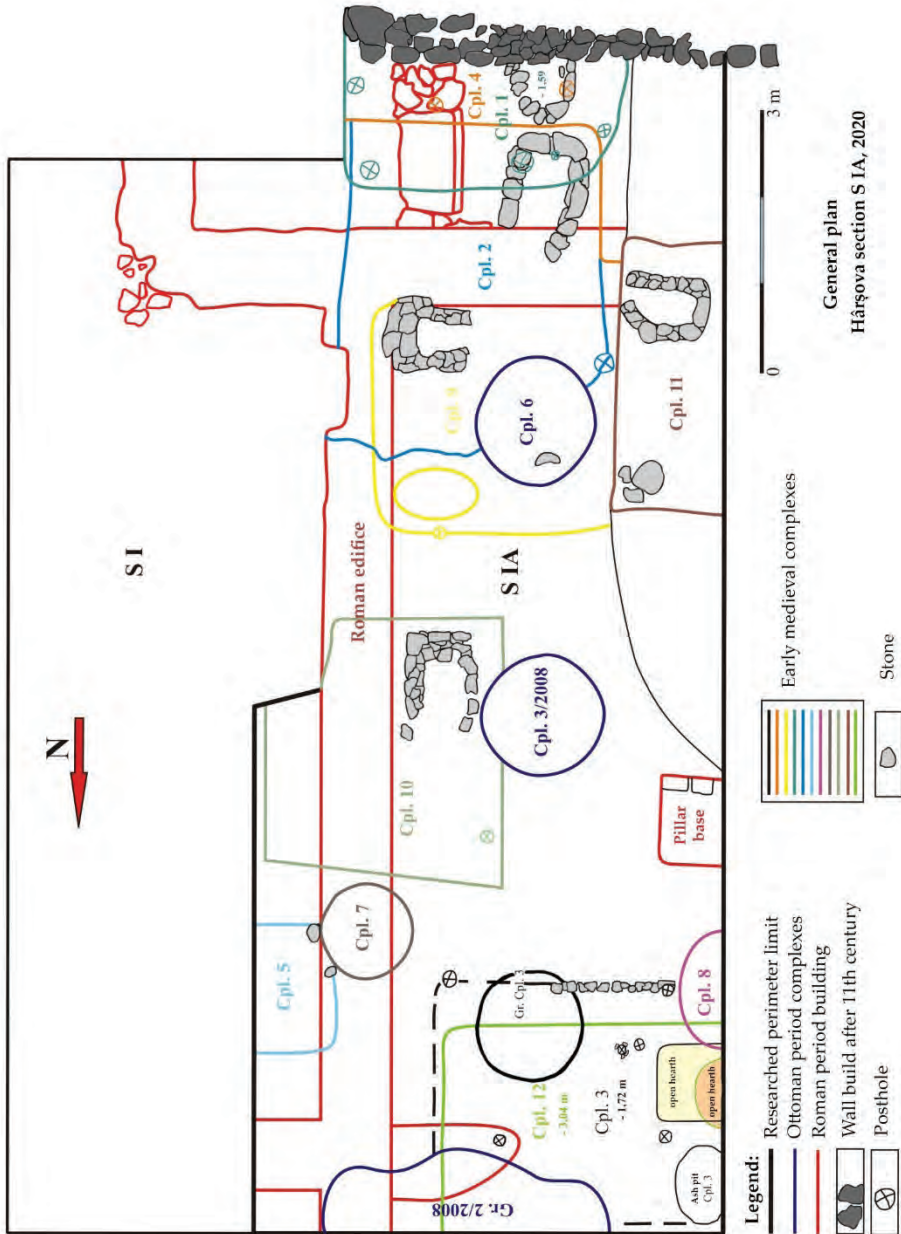


Fig. 10. Plan of section SIA (*intra muros*), with the majority of the complexes discovered in 2020.



**Fig. 11.** 1 – Ovens built of stones from Complexes 2/2020 and 9/2020, from SIA; 2 – The northern part of Complex 1/2020, an early medieval sunken dwelling above which lies the wall that marks the southern boundary of section SIA.



**Fig. 12.** Ceramics discovered in the Byzantine enclosure at Hârșova: pots without handles (1–2, 5), pots with handles (4, 9–10), lamps (3), bowls (6–8), glazed jugs (14–15), cauldrons (16–18) and potter's marks (11–13).

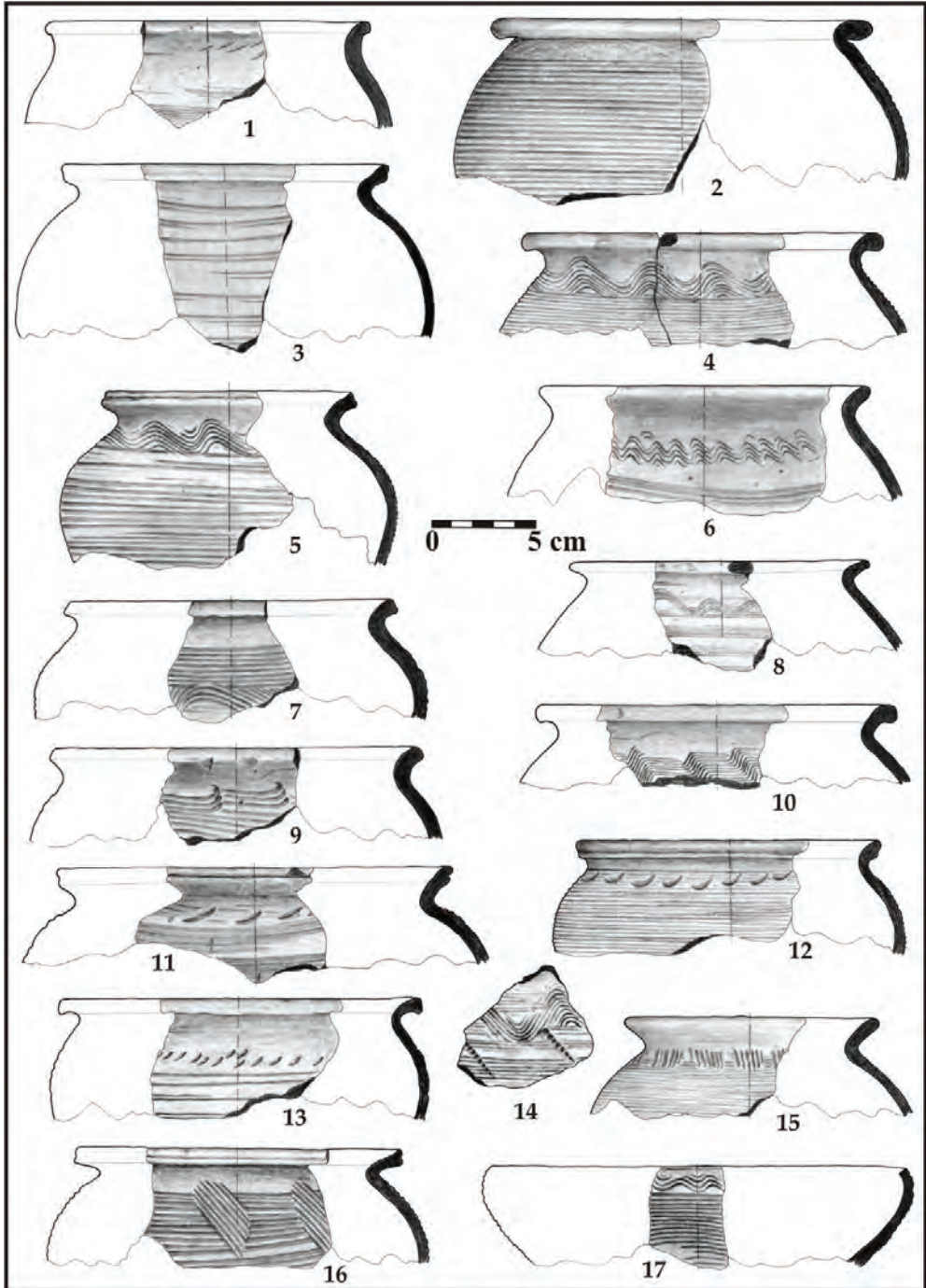


Fig. 13. Ceramics discovered in the Byzantine enclosure at Hârşova: pots without handles (1–16) and bowl (17).

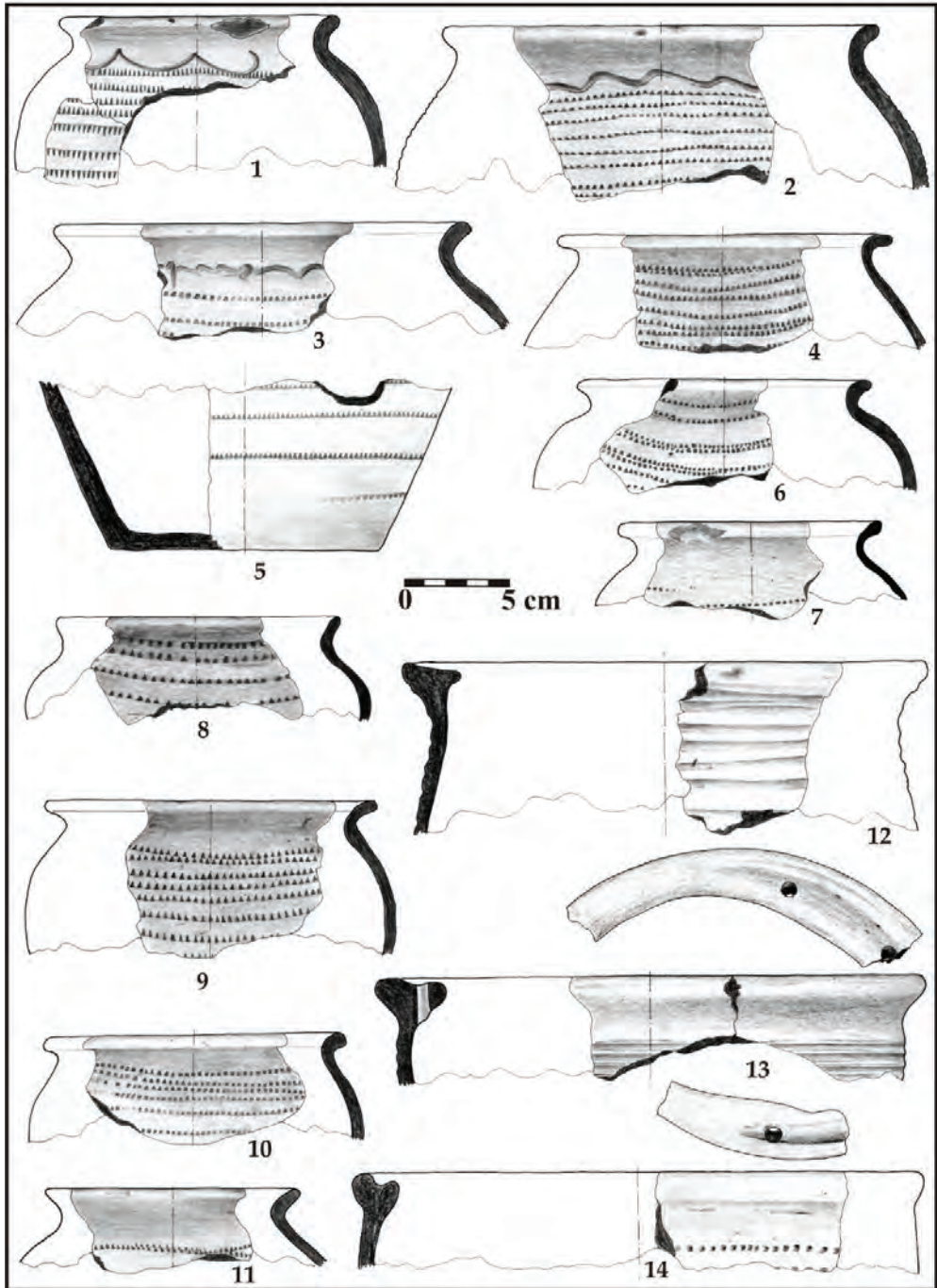


Fig. 14. Ceramics discovered in the Byzantine enclosure at Hârșova: pots without handles (1–11) and cauldrons (12–14).



**Fig. 15.** Artefacts discovered in the Byzantine enclosure at Hârşova: glazed clay egg (1), spindle whorls made of jasper (2–5), glass bracelets (6–9), handle for battle whip (10), belt appliques (11–14) and that were sewn onto fabrics (15).