

A Note on 2011 Season of Porolissum Forum Project

Eric C. De Sena (John Cabot University, Rome, Italy)

Established in 2004 by Dr. Alexandru Matei and Dr. Eric De Sena, the Porolissum Forum Project is intended to explore a public area of the Roman city where a forum may lie. Following a program of magnetometry in the 1990s, which revealed a series of structures surrounding an open rectangular space consistent with a forum, trenches have been excavated in order to investigate the site's development and function. To date, we can confirm the presence of a courtyard which is surrounded on three sides by colonnades and is closed on the fourth side by a bath. Monumental public architecture has been identified on the north, west and east sides of the courtyard. In terms of building phases, the site was first occupied in the Trajanic period by wooden structures which were protected by an agger and vallum system. During the reign of Antoninus Pius the wooden structures were abandoned and the first campaign of public building in stone commenced. Based upon the dimensions and configuration of the structures, the PFP team assumes that this area already served as a central place, such as a forum. The buildings underwent structural modifications during the Severan period. In some cases changes were relatively minor, while in other instances the Antonine buildings were demolished with other types of structures built over the rubble. An unusual "late" phase is noted in portions of the site, which includes a series of hearths and sealed colonnades and doors.

The 2011 campaign of the Porolissum Forum Project was conducted June 27-August 5 with a Team of about 25 staff, students and workers. We focused on small areas on the north, east and south sides of the courtyard, including a re-examination of Trench 22N and a section of Trench 11. Trench 33 set on a rise to the SW of the courtyard was new.

By the end of the 2010 season, the excavation team had reached a depth of about 0.9 m. in Trench 22N at which point a hearth (Fig. 2) was discovered. The hearth was set below the topsoil and rubble of the site, indicating a relatively late date in the sequence. We decided to pursue the investigation of the hearth in PFP 2011 as well as any underlying features; we were also determined to reach sterile soil in Area 22, which we had never achieved in previous seasons. We began by sectioning the 2010 trench in order to seek crucial dating evidence. Unfortunately no artifacts were found below the hearth, which was situated upon a layer of stone rubble. The general lack of any post-Roman pottery in seven years of excavating is leading us to believe that there was not a significant presence at Porolissum (at least in the area of the forum) after the Romans. To date, our hypotheses about a post-Roman settlement is vanishing and we are considering a scenario involving post-Severan soldiers and civilians struggling to survive the 3rd century AD political and social crisis. Perhaps the area of the forum was "fortified" during the apocalyptic time between the death of Severus Alexander and the rise of Aurelian. Below the hearth we excavated through a series of floors and fills. At a depth of nearly 3 m. we encountered the timber phase - a series of features which may represent fallen timber beams, foundations and a pit - found in conjunction with early 2nd century pottery and a coin of Trajan. Below this was sterile soil.

Two trenches (33 and 33.2) were excavated on a rise to the SW of the courtyard in an area the PFP had not explored previously. Considering that this is one of the highest points of the site, we suspected that this was the likely position of a major public building. Instead after digging to a depth of just 0.4 m. we encountered sterile soil - dense reddish brown clay; in one area we even dug to a depth of 2 m. just to be sure. There was, however, a structure built on top of the clay which had been spoliated to the very foundation (Fig. 3); in some cases we did not find wall, but wall negatives - the places where walls had

once stood but had been robbed. There were major walls 10 m. apart on the north and south sides of Trench 33; another major wall was discovered at the east end of Trench 33.2. There was a partition wall running W-E and two secondary walls running between this and the major wall to the north. On the south side of Trench 33 we unearthed a "fire feature" consistent with a kiln or furnace. The firing chamber was roughly round and had been dug into the clay with a diameter of about 1 m. Its "floor" was significantly burnt and we discovered a large quantity of daub, suggesting that its interior had been lined with clay. There was an entry channel on the west side. No industrial waste was discovered; hence, we cannot determine the function of the "fire feature". We suspect, however, that it was located in a small courtyard between the major wall to the south and the W-E partition wall. Was this a large house or a series of shops? We will explore this area further in future seasons. The shallow level of clay still perplexes us and we cannot preclude the idea that this was virgin clay heaped at an early phase of Porolissum's history to form an earthen defense.

Trenches 11, 11.2 and 11.3 provided very different kinds of features, namely a series of walls consistent with a major public building (Fig. 4). In fact, we knew in 2007 that a public building was situated here after excavating two long exploratory trenches - 10 and 11. This is the area we thought a basilica might be located. The excavation in 2011 confirmed that this structure was first built in stone during the reign of emperor Antoninus Pius and we had to excavate to a depth of 4 m. in order to reach the foundation of the Antonine walls. Putting evidence from 2007 and 2011 together we have a large building which measures at least 15 x 12 meters with 0.9 m (3 Roman feet) thick walls. The building is rectilinear and while we have unearthed small areas with hypocaust pillars, there are no features consistent with basins which would indicate a bath complex. Therefore, this may indeed have been a place of business, politics and law. There were internal modifications during the Severan period, but nothing as significant as what we observed in Area 22.

After seven field seasons, the PFP has made significant progress, but we are still many years away from a full understanding of this area of Porolissum. The basic Roman phases are clear: Trajanic timber/earth phase; Antonine stone phase - public buildings around a courtyard; Severan modifications. We are re-thinking what "late" means in the area of the forum. As stated above and in discussions of previous years, we had assumed a fairly significant post-Roman settlement in this area of Porolissum. While we have many "late" features, there is a complete lack of post-Roman artifacts, suggesting a period of decadence in the post-Severan/pre-Aurelian phase of the city. Fourth century AD coins discovered at other portions of the site (see Gazdac 2006) indicate a human presence at Porolissum, but who these people were and how they utilized the site is still uncertain. For more information about the project, please visit www.porolissum.org

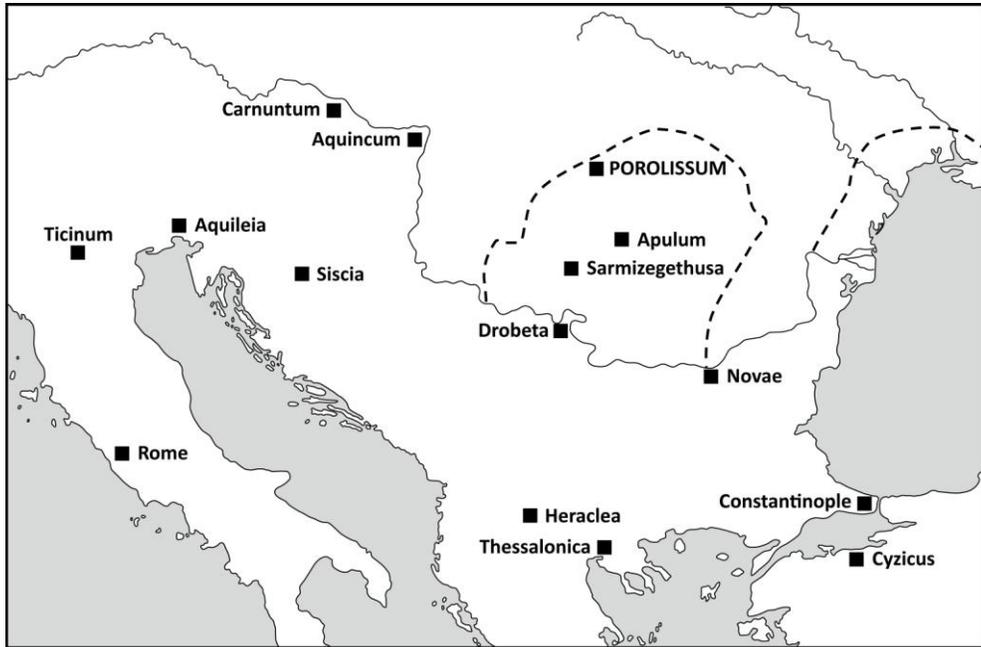


Figure 1. Map indicating location of Porolissum.



Figure 2. PFP 2010, Trench 22N. Late Roman hearth.



Figure 3. PFP 2011, Trench 33. Roman walls set on foundation of clay.



Figure 4. PFP 2011, Trench 11.2. Antonine wall to left with subsequent building phases.