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3. Stroyno Excavation Project, introduction to the site of Yurta–Stroyno and report on the 2014 season

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With Pls. 5–7

Abstract: The Roman site of Yurta–Stroyno was for the first time described in year 1978, then later excavated by a short period rescue excavation in 2006 and 2007. In 2014 a new cooperation on the archaeological excavation started between Regional Historical Museum in Yambol and doctoral students of the Institute of Classical Archaeology of the Charles University in Prague. The first season of the joined project enclosed foundations of a four-room structure and brought to light many findings including diverse pottery classes, different kinds of metals, glass, worked stones and bones and a spectacular marble head of a small statue.

Keywords: Thrace; Yambol District; Yurta–Stroyno; Roman settlement; vicus; SEP

The Yurta–Stroyno Excavation Project (in short SEP) takes place in the Yambol District, Elhovo municipality, in close vicinity to the small village of Stroyno.¹ The project runs under the supervision of Stefan Bakardzhiev, the director of the Regional Historical Museum in Yambol in cooperation with doctoral students of the Institute of Classical Archaeology at the Charles University in Prague, Petra Tušlová and Barbora Weissová. The 2014 season, the first year of the project, was divided into two parts. The excavation itself took part in the first four weeks from the 16th of June till the 11th of July. Three weeks post-documentation of the excavated material followed until the 3rd of August. In total seven students of the Institute of Classical archaeology at the Charles University in Prague participated in the project with one archaeologist from the Regional Historical Museum in Yambol.²

Introduction to the site

The site, known as Yurta, was archaeologically described for the first time in 1978 (DIMITROVA – POPOV, 26) as one of four Roman sites located in the lands of Stroyno. It is situated about 1.5 km north-east from the village of Stroyno in a gentle slope (north to south), directly on the Dereorman River, east tributary of the Tundzha River. The Dereorman River is currently, under normal weather conditions, about one to three meters wide and up to one meter deep. Despite relatively small dimensions, the river was powerful enough to destroy the southern and south-eastern part of the site. In several places, on both banks along its course, big stones and architectural ceramics accompanied by smaller amount of pottery can be

¹ The project 'Archaeological excavation of Stroyno, Yambol district, Bulgaria' was funded by Specific University Research Grant for 2014 of Faculty of Arts, Charles University in Prague.

² We gratefully acknowledge all of the participating students (in alphabetical order): Tomáš Chlup, Viktoria Čiřáková, Věra Doležalková, Petra Janouchová, Markéta Kobierská, Johana Tlustá, Veronika Ženíšková and a member of Regional Historical Museum in Yambol – Miroslav Kozarev. Many thanks also belong to Todor Vulchev and Yavor Rusev, for their help during preparations as well as excavation. Additionally, Markéta Kobierská digitalized the ground plan of the site and profile drawings; Johana Tlustá prepared photographs of small finds for their publication.

found. The area in immediate vicinity of the site next to the river is covered by scrubby bushes and trees, while its northern, most extensive part, is agriculturally cultivated. The ploughing and harrowing of the fields caused spread of the surface material into an extend area. Taking into account results of field survey of Tundzha Regional Archaeological Project (there in after as TRAP)³ conducted on the cultivated fields, as well as surface scatter spread over the uncultivated area, in total 31 hectares of surface material might be connected with the site (Pl. 6).

More than 50 exceptional finds have been found on the site without proper excavation. The most spectacular ones include a hoard of 29 silver coins from the first half of the 3rd c. AD; marble Roman-Doric capital of type I dated to the second half of the 1st c. AD (DIMITROV 2004, 221), part of a bronze military diploma of *classis Misenumensis* (fleet of Misenum) veteran, dated between years 152 and 158 AD⁴ (BOYANOV 2006, 239; BOYANOV 2007, 69–74), or part of a marble slab with a depiction of Thracian horseman and an inscription in Greek mentioning Latin name *Avilii* (BAKARDZHIEV 2008, 472).

The potential of the site, which had never been systematically examined, enjoyed great attention from robbers and suffered from illegal interferences that led to a short period of rescue excavations, conducted in two seasons in 2006 and 2007 by RIM (BAKARDZHIEV 2008, 471–473; BAKARDZHIEV 2007, 238–241). However, no stable funding was available; neither to explore larger area of the site, nor to protect it from illegal excavation which continue to the present days.

Based on the existing excavation and findings, Yurta was preliminary identified as a Roman *vicus*, unfortified settlement of veteran soldiers, permanently inhabited from the 1st till the 4th c. AD (BAKARDZHIEV 2007, 240).

Geography of the site and an overview of contemporary settlements in its hinterland

The site of Yurta–Stroyno is situated about 12 km east of the Tundzha River, which was navigable in antiquity and together with Maritza River served as the main fluvial trading route between the Mediterranean and the Roman province of Thrace. Along the river a road was built during the reign of Emperor Trajan (MADZHAROV 2009, 237), leading from the Danube River through the towns of Kabyle and Hadrianopolis, further to the Northern Aegean coast at Aenus, located on the estuary of the Maritza River.

Yurta–Stroyno was presumably connected with the Trajanic road by means of a local road leading in east-western direction along the southern bank of the Dereorman River (Pl. 6). Its existence is maintained in the local oral tradition, as well as suggested by stones visible on the surface over an elevated notch in the foot of the Bakadzhik hill (282.7 msl), the highest peak in the surrounding area, which is almost directly adjacent to the river. The exact course of the road has not been determined yet, however it is possible that it led to the east as far as to Deultum, the administrative centre of the adjoining area (KARAYOTOV 2012, 92–95).

Regarding contemporary settlements with Yurta–Stroyno, Dimitrova and Popov note six similar concentrations of Roman material in the land of Stroyno and adjacent lands of Borisovo and Boyanovo village (DIMITROVA – POPOV 1978, 26; Pl. 7). One of them is most probably a Roman villa, excavated for the first time in 2014 by D. Agre and according to the preliminary results coexisting with Yurta.⁵ It is located in the eastern part of the Stroyno village, 100 m east from the monastery of Sv. Ilya and ca. 1.5 km southwest from Yurta. The existence of the remaining five sites has not been verified in the terrain yet; nevertheless, they are mentioned in the list of archaeological monuments of the Yambol district (DIMITROVA –

³ More about the TRAP project available at: <http://www.tundzha.org/>.

⁴ To be seen in permanent exhibition in Archaeological Museum in Kabyle, Bulgaria.

⁵ The forthcoming report will be published in *Arheologicheski otkritiya i razkopki prez 2014 g.*

POPOV 1978) as Roman habitations identified on the basis of pottery scatters on the surface. Two of the sites are situated in the land of Stroyno; one northwest and the other southeast from the village. Remaining two are situated west and southwest from Borisovo. Concerning the land of Boyanovo, one scatter of Roman pottery was described east of the village.

Regarding possible burial-grounds of Yurta–Stroyno, there are three burial mounds in the immediate vicinity (500 m to the north), heavily damaged by aggressive ploughing and as such barely visible on the surface. However their existence was confirmed during the intensive survey conducted in the area by TRAP (ILIEV *et al.* 2012) in 2009. Although not archaeologically excavated, their connection with the site is highly probable. In the entire land of Stroyno, out of 12 burial mounds recorded in the terrain, two were archaeologically excavated (CHRISTOV 2013, 164; AGRE 2007, 76–77; AGRE 2008b, 237–239). In addition, parts of three lids of Roman sarcophagi were found just next to the monastery of Sv. Ilya, brought here by robbers from an unknown location, however beyond all dispute from some of the adjacent graves.⁶ Further in the land of Boyanovo, out of 23 recorded burial mounds, six were excavated (AGRE 2008a, 235–237; AGRE 2010, 251–253, BAKARDZHIEV *et al.* 2011, 117; BAKARDZHIEV 2009, 3–5). The land of Borisovo revealed until now five excavated mounds (AGRE 2009, 279–282; AGRE 2012, 217–219; AGRE 2013, 164–166; TANCHEVA-VASILEVA 1984, 69–76) out of 25.

In general, the examined territory of Stroyno, Borisovo and Boyanovo lands features 60 burial mounds, 13 of which have been archaeologically excavated and nine of them revealed also Roman graves coexistent with Yurta (AGRE 2007, 76–77; AGRE 2008b, 237–239; AGRE 2009, 279–282; AGRE 2010, 251–253; AGRE 2012, 217–219; AGRE 2013, 164–166; BAKARDZHIEV 2009, 3–5; BAKARDZHIEV *et al.* 2011, 117; TANCHEVA-VASILEVA 1984, 69–76). The Roman burials are altogether dated to the 2nd half of the 1st – the beginning of the 3rd century AD. Several of the excavated graves revealed rich offerings; some of the deceased were accompanied by carriages with yoked horses, sacrificed *in situ* during the funeral service (AGRE 2009, 280; AGRE 2012, 218).

Dense concentration of Roman settlements and burial grounds, all roughly dated into the time range between the second half of the 1st and the 3rd century AD, points out the importance of the area during this period. Rich graves, some even with marble sarcophagi, advert to a high status and wellbeing of local elite. Close vicinity and coexistence of the sites during the same period proven on Yurta and Sv. Ilya also suggests collaboration of inhabitants on agriculture activities and crafts.

The excavation results

The area excavated during the first season targeted a structure uncovered previously by robbers and as such visible in the terrain. The place is situated in a turn of the Dereorman River which constitutes its western border. The main site grid was created in 5.0 m to 5.0 m with possible northern (N), southern (S), western (W) or eastern (E) halves of the trench of dimensions 5 m x 2.5 m; or in NE, NW, SE, SW sub-squares of size 2.5 m x 2.5 m. The first trench 100E – 100N was placed on the wall cross-section visible in the terrain. Other trenches were situated around, named always by its south-western corner (**Fig. 1**). This naming strategy allows us to expand in all cardinal directions; it is very useful when the exact extension and plan of the site is not known, as in this case.

The excavation followed the visible structure and disclosed foundations of four rooms (A,B,C,D) situated almost in cardinal directions only with three degree deviation from the direct east–west and two degrees from the direct north–south orientation. The foundation

⁶ Currently these sarcophagi are to be seen in the Archaeological museum in Kabyle as part of the open air exposition.

walls which are built from quarry stone with simple earth bonding are preserved up to 0.80 m. The maximal inner dimensions of the two nearly completely disclosed rooms (B,C) are approximately 4.90 m (N-S) x 4.70 m (W-E). Robbers excavated the inner area of rooms A,B and C and destroyed the stratigraphic order. Nevertheless, due to this fact we were able to proceed easily and quickly remove the soil from the rooms. The wall in south-western corner of the room B was dug out by robbers who probably started here with their illegal digging. The direct area further west was not fully excavated due to a large tree which is covering by its roots the closest wall [SU018] in the room A. The tree is growing directly on the edge of the bank of the Dereorman River. Therefore we may assume the western part of the structure was taken by the river.

The base of the structure is created by very characteristic yellow sandy layer [SU007] which seems to be the sterile soil. The layer [SU007] appears about 70 cm under the preserved surface (the robbers' soil which was covering most of the investigated area). As it results from the excavation, robbers dug until they reached this layer and then opened two ditches on both sides of the western wall [SU003] in rooms B and C to make sure no cultural layer continues. The ditches are about 80 cm wide and 20 cm deep, their length varies from one meter in the room B to two meters in the room C. Two fillings, however, escaped robbers' attention. They are both situated in cuts in the aforementioned yellow layer [SU007], slightly further from the walls.

The first filling [SU021] is situated in the room B, trench 95E – 100N (SE), with dimensions of 70 cm (N-S) x 45 cm (E-W) and a depth of about 20 cm. The cut is located next to the tree which most probably prevented illegal excavation. In total 144 pottery fragments were found here, of total weight 2103 g (+ one fragment of a dolium rim weighing 2983 g). Various pottery fragments, especially transport amphorae, were placed on the top of the filling. Closer to the wall [SU003], 16 cm long piece of plaster was situated. Inside the filling pieces of pottery (mixture of amphorae, fine ware, coarse ware, common ware and handmade frgs.), glass, plaster, bones, charcoal, iron nails and hooked nails were found.

Among the most spectacular finds are four fragments and one complete terracotta lamp. The intact one is a variation on type Loeschcke VIII, dated most probably into 2nd century AD (Pl. 5). From the reminding, shoulders of one are decorated by alternating motive of vine grapes and leaves resembling type Broneer XXVII, Group B; lamps produced in Athens and later in Corinth (BRONEER 1977, 64). This example might be dated approximately into the 3rd century AD. For the reminding three we have not found any close parallels yet.⁷

The second preserved filling [SU008] is located in a room C, trench 100E – 100N (S), with dimensions of 145 cm (N-S) x 105 cm (E-W) and depth 65 cm. In the depot 673 pottery fragments of weight 5500 g were found containing the same pottery classes as the previous filling with predominant fine and coarse ware. Among amphorae several diagnostic fragments of Dressel 24 and Kapitän II were discovered. In total 31 small finds are connected with this layer containing various items such as three blue beads, an amber bead or a complete bone pin (Pl. 5:2). The most exceptional find, however, is a complete marble head of a bearded male, presumably Asclepius (Pl. 5:3). The head is about six centimetres high and has a small hole in the neck, which either served as a mortise (hole for the tenon) for the body of the statuette, or it is a mark of reparation after the head broke of the body. The head is very carefully carved, using only chisel. It resembles statues produced during the period from Hadrian to Antoninus Pius (Lippold 1963, 208–209; Schröder 2004, 350). Consequently, it might be dated into the first half – mid of the 2nd century AD.

The area outside the structure on the north, trench 100E – 105N (S), as well as on the east, trench 105E – 100N (E), revealed several low fragmented water tubes. They run in the

⁷ We thank Robert Frečer, doctoral student at the Institute for Classical Archaeology in Prague, for assistance with the lamp identification.

same line along the north-south wall, crossing both trenches; however in this state of excavation they do not create any comprehensible arrangements.

The northern trench 100E – 105N (S) was rich in metal finds; especially noteworthy is the bronze coin of Augustus (Pl. 5:4) which was minted in Ephesus during years 23 – 21 BC to pay Roman soldiers in the Asia Minor. The coin is very rare in Bulgaria where only other ten examples are known.⁸ Further a bronze fibula close to type Almgren 162 'Fibeln mit umgeschlagenem Fuss' (1923, 76–78, Group VI, Plate VII; here Pl. 5:5) and decorative bronze belt fitting with iron nails on both sides (Pl. 5:6) were found. However, all those objects come from the top soil [SU015].

Two more sub-squares were opened further north in the trenches 90E – 105N (NE) and 95E – 105N (NW) (Fig. 1, 2). They both revealed similar stratigraphy: 55–60 cm of top soil [SU005], [SU012] followed by 15–25 cm thick layers [SU010] and [SU016], both rich in pottery and bones, with fragments of glass, tiles and pieces of slag and iron. It seems to be some kind of levelling composed of mixed fragments and materials. In the trench 90E – 105N (NE) remains of road [SU011] were found under the rich layer [SU010] in about 85 cm under the surface. The road consists of quarry stones of average dimensions 20 cm x 15 cm complemented with gravel and sand. In adjoining sub-square of the trench 95E – 105N (NW) the rich layer [SU016] changed directly into dark brown sterile soil [SU025] which was excavated 15 cm below the level of the road without any finds.

The northernmost excavated sub-trenches are untouched by robbers' activities. It is very well noticeable on the western profile of 100E – 105N (S) where the soft light brown soil with roots of plans [SU001] excavated by robbers covers the wall [SU018], but it does not exceed further north to the top soil [SU015] of dark brown compact soil rich in metal finds (Pl. 5:4–6; Fig. 3).

The eastern area of the structure (starting by the room D) was partly disturbed by robbers who dug out stones of the wall [SU002], but did not reach further behind the wall. Both areas offer perspective for the future excavation to clarify the stratigraphy and chronology of the site.

Conclusion

The site of Yurta-Stroyno proved its potential by revealing rich finds and substantial remains of stone architecture. Despite of being heavily disturbed by looters, unexcavated areas with closed contexts are still to be found. For the next seasons, continuation in the northern and eastern trenches is planned to clarify dimensions and function of the excavated structure.

The military diploma, as well as the coin of Augustus minted in Ephesus, point out to the presence of soldiers at the settlement. There were only few regular unites and no legions kept in the province of Thrace; the middle flow of the Tundzha River had no major military importance and furthermore there is no fortification wall attested at the site. Consequently, those facts support the idea of Yurta being village of Roman military veterans – a *vicus*.

The first objects as well as Roman burials excavated in the vicinity of Stroyno (both discussed above) are dated to the second half of the 1st century AD. During this period (70 AD, reign of Vespasian), colonia Flavia Pacis Deultensium was founded by veterans of Legio VIII Augusta at the Burgas Gulf (BALABANOV 2011, 107) which is located about 70 km east from Yurta-Stroyno. Perhaps larger area was inhabited by veterans during this period, reaching up as far as to the site, located in the middle of fertile fields, suitable for cultivation.

None of the finds revealed in the territory of Yurta-Stroyno are satisfactory dated later than into the 3rd century AD. Consequently we may see its decline during this period. Most

⁸ We thank Dr Evgeni Paunov, Cardiff University, for coin identification.

likely it is connected with rides of Goths to the central Thrace, probably with the most destructive one in the mid of the 3rd century AD when many cities in the province were destroyed (Haynes 2011, 8).

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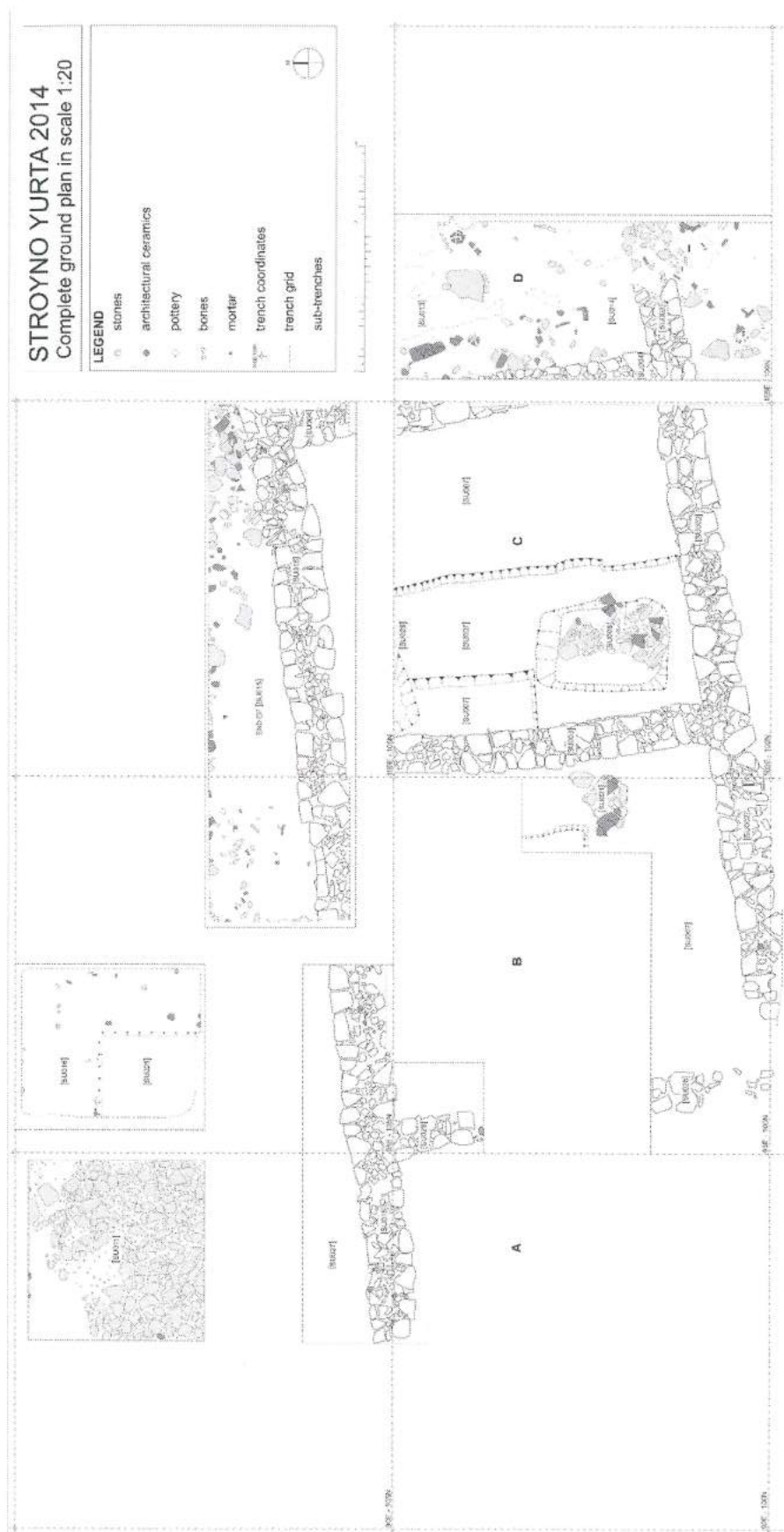


Fig. 1. Descriptive ground-plan of Yurta-Stroyno, the complete area excavated in year 2014 with marked fills: [SU008] and [SU021].

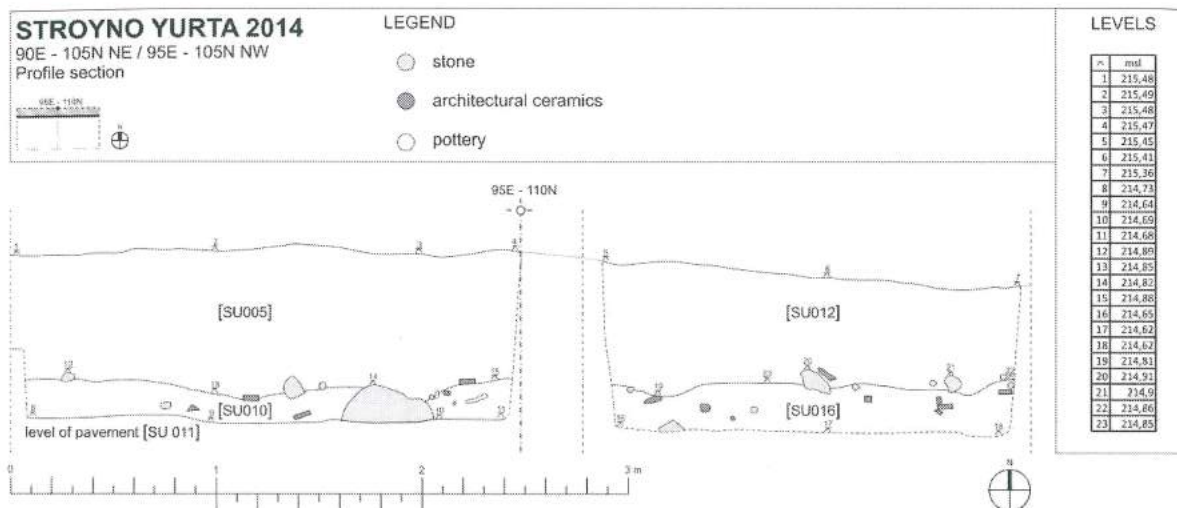


Fig. 2. Northern section of the sub-trenches 90E – 105N NE and 95E – 105N NW. Layers [SU005] and [SU012]: the topsoil; [SU010] and [SU016]: the probable levelling level; [SU011]: remains of the pavement.

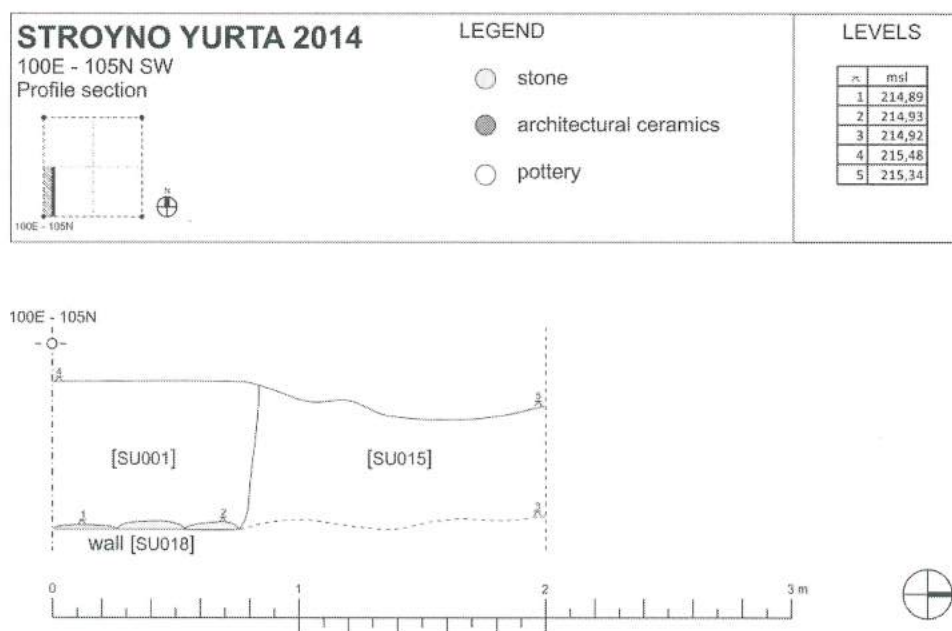


Fig. 3. Western section of the sub-trench 100E – 105N SW. Layer [SU001]: the soil excavated by robbers; [SU015]: the top soil; [SU018]: top of the northern wall of the room C.



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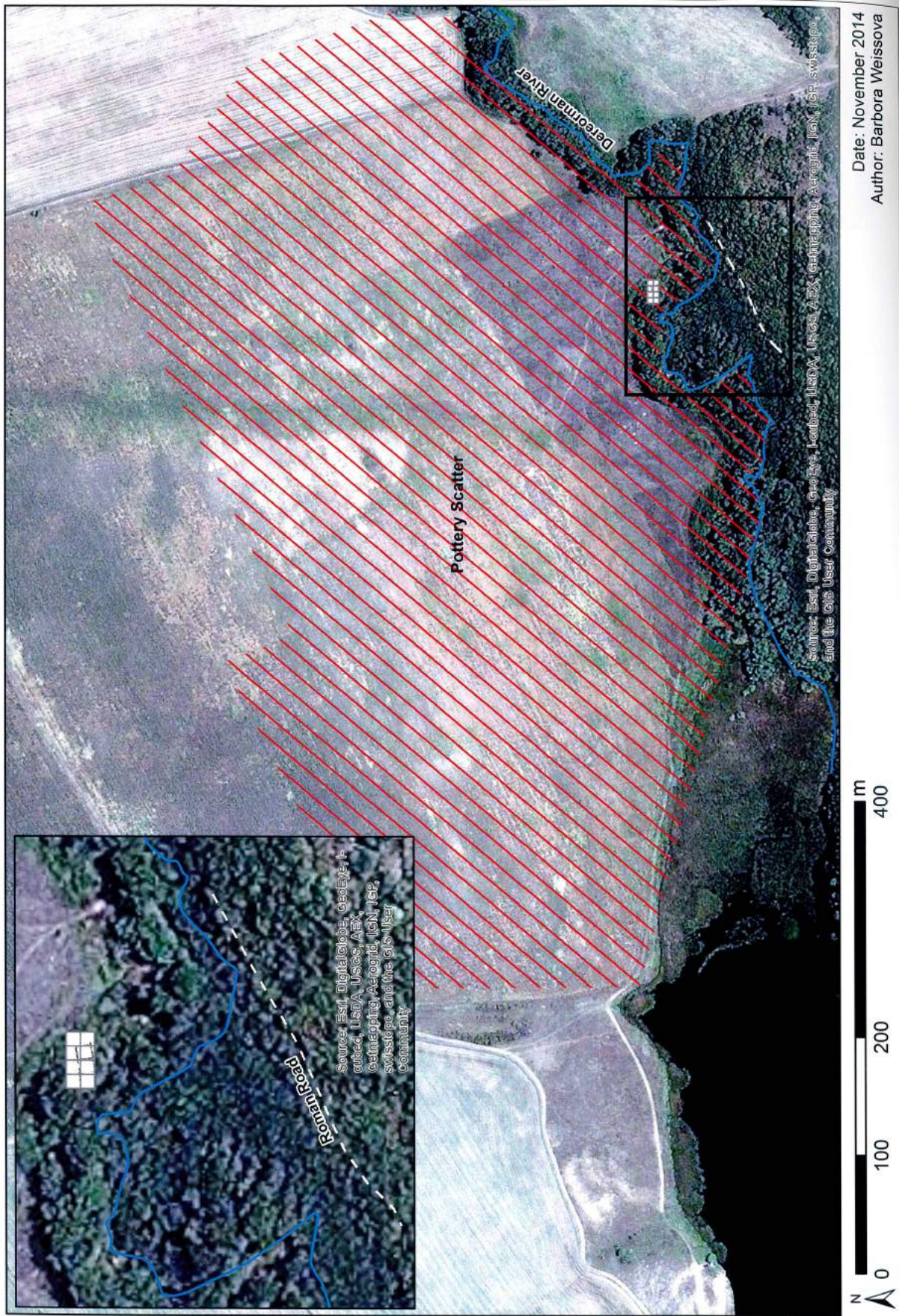


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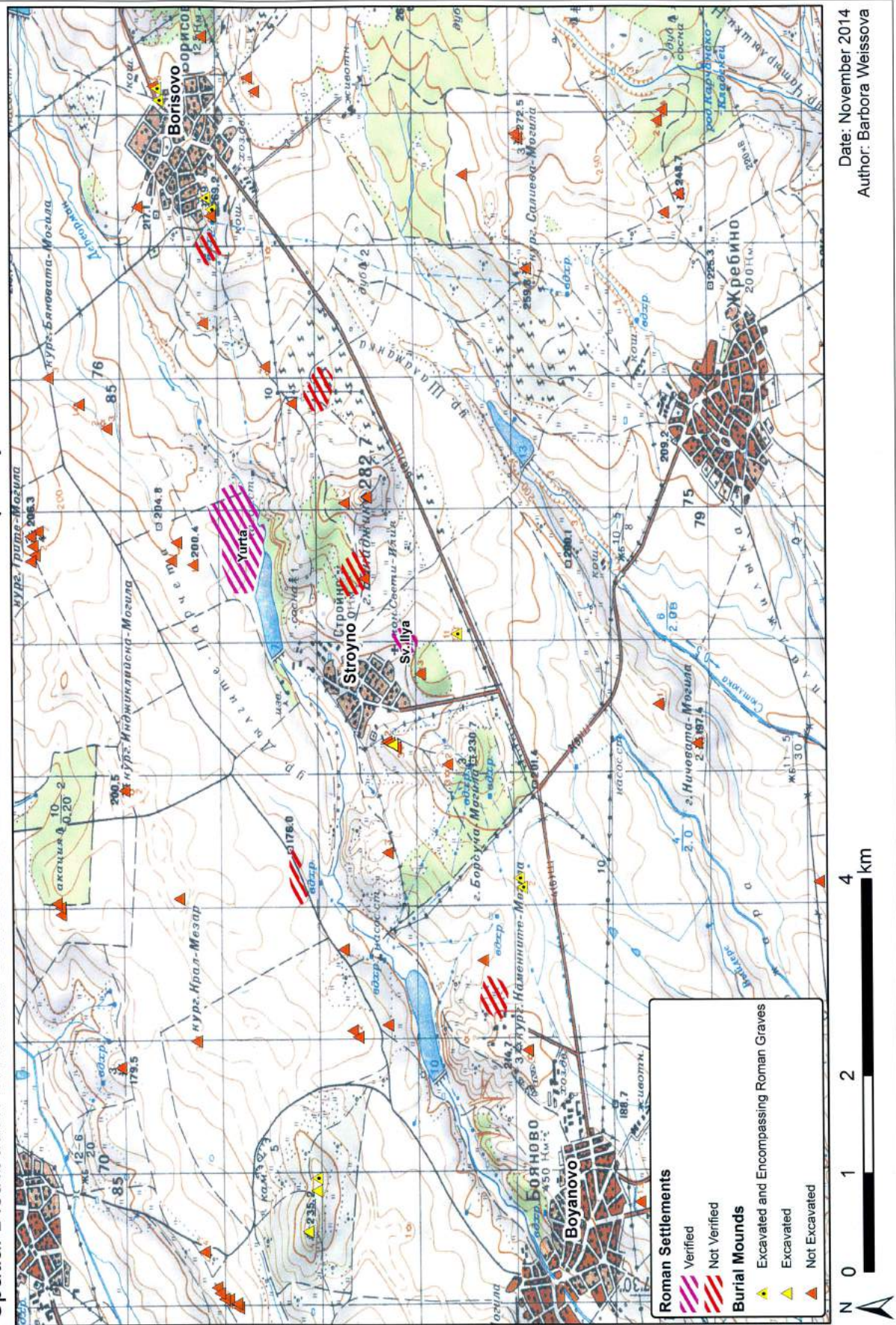
1 terracotta lamp, 2 bone pin, 3 marble head of Asclepius, 4 bronze coin of Augustus, 5 fibula Almgren 162, 6 decorative belt fitting, bronze.

Pottery Scatter of the Site Yurta with Trenches Excavated by SEP in 2014



Yurta-Stroyno, extend of the site.

Spatial Distribution of Roman Settlements and Burial Mounds Contemporary with Yurta



Date: November 2014
 Author: Barbora Weisssova

Topographic map of Yurta-Stroyno and its surrounding.