

Discoveries within the Roman and Early Byzantine Fortress of Sucidava (Celeiu), Romania

*By Elena Ene Drăghici-Vasilescu**

Interesting findings are continuously coming to light on the archaeological site of the former Roman fortress of Sucidava that is located on Danube in the West of today Romania. The Romans were present there between the first and the sixth centuries AD – that includes the early Byzantine period. Objects dating to the above-mentioned time exist within the museum belonging to this archaeological site and are recorded all the time. Many of these are introduced and described – along with their images – in my article; among the most recently unearthed items are the pieces of ceramic from July 2024, Figure 15 (An interpretation of the incidence of these discoveries in Sucidava is attempted).

Historical Remarks

What is known even today as Sucidava is the old capital of the Dacian tribe of Suci (hence the name *territorium Sucidavense* under the Romans).¹ It is located close to the modern town of Corabia, Olt County, Romania; map at Figure 1. The site was one of the largest Roman forts in Oltenia, on the lower Danube. It is also known as the Castrum of Celeiu (from the name of a former village, which it is now an urban neighbourhood having the same name within Corabia).

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1. Vasile Pârvan “Cetatea Ulmetum. Descoperirile primei campanii de săpături din vara anului 1911. Cu 24 tabele, 24 figuri de text și o hartă”, *Analele Academiei Române*, Seria II, Tom XXXIV, Memoriile Secțiunii Istorice, No. 8, 1912, pp. 1-112 (141 with the tables, illustration, and the map]. In this publication Pârvan mentions Sucidava and also refers to it as the “*territorium Sucidavense*”) on pp. 1-2.

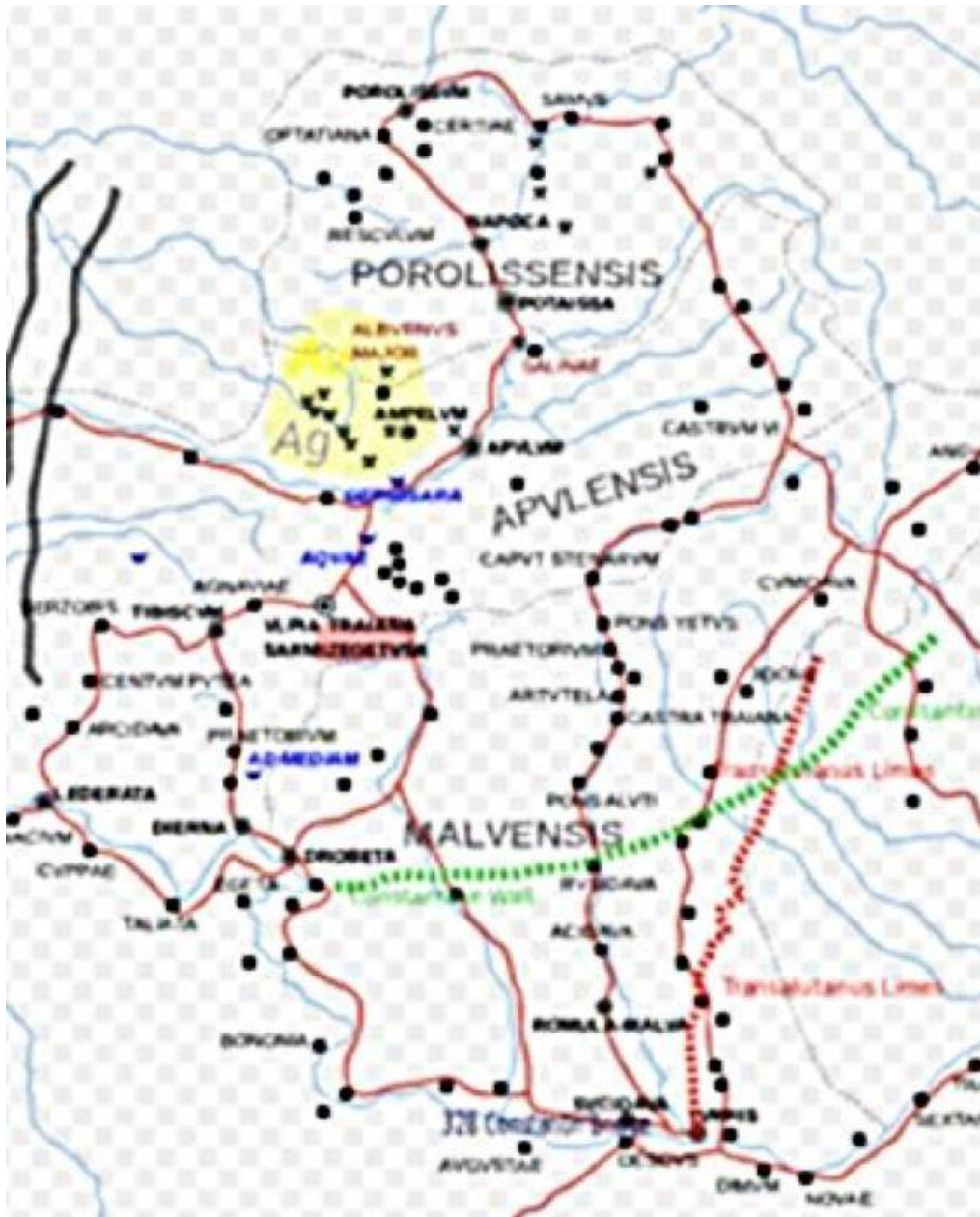


Figure 1. The Map of Western Dacia where Suci Used to Live

Source: <https://danubelimesbrand.patrimoniu.ro> > en > sucidava-oras-corabia-jud-olt ...

Sucidava became a Roman town after 87 AD when the army led by Cornelius Fuscus (d. 87 AD) conquered it.² Fuscus is mentioned by Tacitus in his *Histories*

2. Cornelius Fuscus (Prefect of the Praetorian Guard 81-86 AD) was a Roman general who fought campaigns under the Emperors of the Flavian dynasty. He first distinguished himself as one of Vespasian's most ardent supporters during the civil war of 69 AD, known as the Year of the Four Emperors. Vespasian's son, Domitian (51-96; ruled 81-96) employed Fuscus as Prefect of the Praetorian Guard, a post he held from 81 until his death. According to the entry dedicated to him by B. Campbell within the *Oxford Classical Dictionary* (2016)

(*Hist.* 2. 86).³ In 86 AD Emperor Domitian dispatched this general (and Prefect of Illyricum) to the north of the Danube with five legions. Although he was initially successful in the campaign against Decebalus' soldiers, eventually Fuscus was defeated by them at the battle of Iron Gates. He was ambushed along with Legio V Alaudae and eventually the entire legion was annihilated and its leader killed. Then Domitian sent Tettius Julianus to fight against the Dacians, but he lost at the first Battle of Tapae (86/87); Tapae was a place on the territory of today Transylvania, Romania.

In 119, when Hadrian divided Roman Dacia into Dacia Superior ("Upper Dacia") and Dacia Inferior ("Lower Dacia"), Sucidava became a part of Lower Dacia, later called *Dacia Malvensis*. During its Roman occupation the town was administered by two *quinquennales*⁴ aided by the *curiales* delegated from the villages around it. In the reigns of Aurelian (214-275; ruled 270-275) and Gallienus (218-268; ruled 253-268) a citadel was constructed over the Roman necropolis. This defensive construction was continually reinforced and restored under the Tetrarchy (293-324) and under Constantine the Great (after 280-337; ruled 306-337). The place flourished after that, and especially after 270s AD, when the Romans built a strong fortress with eight towers over defensive walls (Figures 2-3). They did so because a stronghold was needed to protect the pontoon bridge and the road which the Romans used during their withdrawal from Dacia. A customs post existed between Dacia and Moesia, which was coordinated by two *servi villici* (stewards).⁵ Ruins and paved streets from the second and the third century have been discovered on the site. Remains of the *thermae* have been identified, as well as those of a Christian basilica (V-VI). A *puteus* (well) existed at Sucidava from the second century on.

Fuscus supported the Flavian commander M. Antonius Primus in the invasion of Italy; see Publius Cornelius Tacitus, *Historiae/Histories* (written in c. 100-110), Book ii: Bk. 2, edited by Rhiannon Ash (Cambridge Greek and Latin Classics), Cambridge University Press, 2007. See also *Oxford Research Encyclopedias*, <https://oxfordre.com/acre/fore-9780199381135-e-1847>.

3. Tacitus, *Histories*, Book ii.

4. *Quinquennales* were municipal officers who were elected every five years to perform overseeing duties.

5. V. Pârvan, "Știri Nouă din Dacia Malvensis", <http://www.cimec.ro/Arheologie/ParvanArticole/ParvanStiriNouaDinDaciaMalvensis.pdf>.

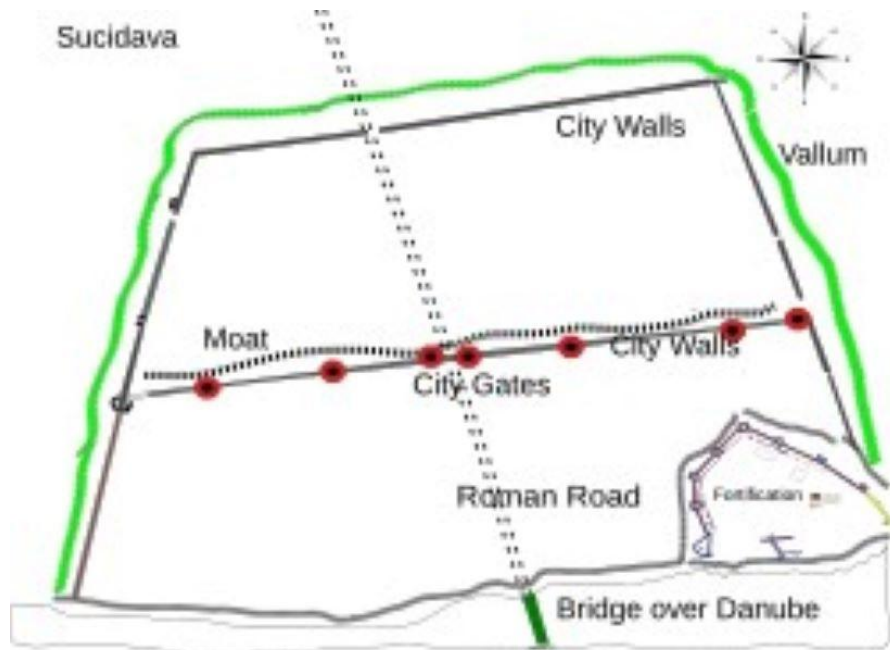


Figure 2. The Plan of the City of Sucidava in the Fourth Century AD
Source: <https://danubelimesbrand.patrimoniu.ro> > en > sucidava-oras-corabia-jud-olt ...

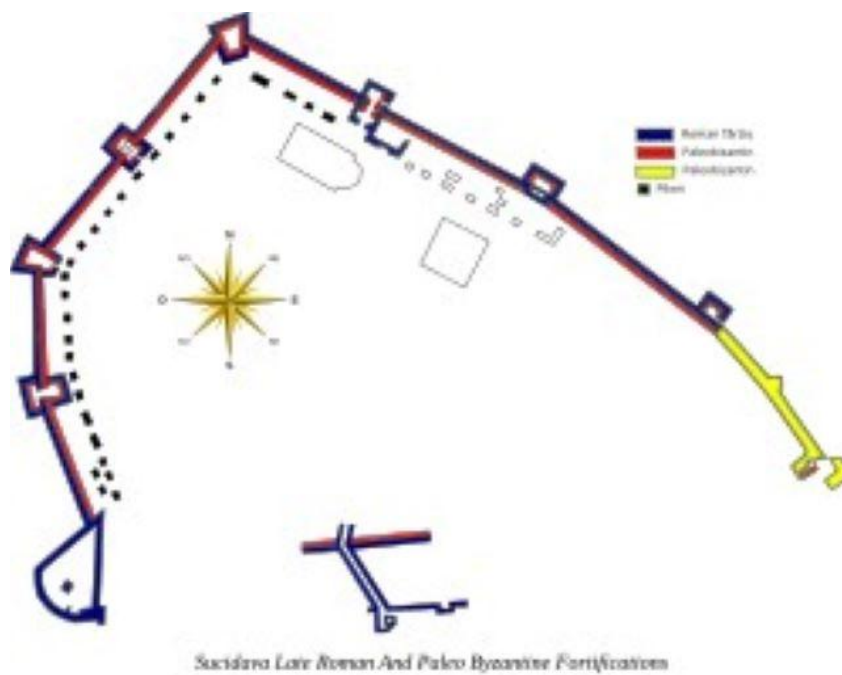


Figure 3. Sucidava's Later Roman and Early Byzantine Fortifications (Fifth-Sixth Centuries)
Source: <https://danubelimesbrand.patrimoniu.ro> > en > sucidava-oras-corabia-jud-olt ...

The underground fountain which existed under the walls of the city – with its spring outside these – has been discovered; its stone reinforcements date to the sixth century, but since no other source of water was discovered there and no mention of one exist in any sources, it is to be assumed that this well is the same as the *puteus* mentioned above. The secret fountain was discovered in 1958 and restored, with a long corridor leading to it, in 1968. The well has been well preserved and still provides fresh drinking water today (Figure 4 a, b, c, d, e; Figure 5).

Figure 4 a, b, c, d, e. *The Secret Fountain as it is Now* (Nowadays one needs to go underground in order to access its water. That explains why today it is called ‘the secret fountain’.)





Figure 5. *The Reconstruction of a Part of the Roman Fortress with the Access to its Fountain in View*



Source: Image inside the Museum in Sucidava.

The Romans repaired the road that went from Sucidava to Romula (*milliarium*) in 328, during the reign of Constantine the Great. The same emperor ordered the construction of a bridge over the Danube, very close to the fortress, because he wanted to reconquest Dacia himself (the ruins of the structure, Figure 6). The bridge was also completed in 328; it connected Sucidava with the fort of Oescus in Moesia (today Ghighen in Bulgaria). At 2,437 meters (1137 m above the water) it was the longest such construction of its time, and it is very probable that Constantine attended its official opening on 5 July 328 AD.⁶ The bridge was modelled after that designed by Apollodorus of Damascus at Drobeta.



Figure 6. *The Remains of Constantine's Bridge at Sucidava*
(The quality of the cement between its stones is to be admired.)

Source: Photo of the article's author by Mircea Negru.

The bridge at Sucidava might have been conceived by the architect Teofilus Patricius (who projected the nearby bridge at Constantiana Daphne fortress, close

6. Ioan C. Opreș, Alexandru Dan Ionescu, Adrian Constantin Surleanu, Andrei Eugen Stănișteanu, Mihai Dragomir Cătălin George Simion Alexandru Ioan Cercel Vicențiu Speriatu Cătălin Dobrinescu Adrian Șerbănescu Vlad Călina, "Pons per Danuvium ductus. Date noi despre podul lui Constantin cel Mare dintre Oescus și Sucidava" / *Pons per Danuvium ductus. New data for the bridge of Constantine I between Oescus and Sucidava*, in *Cercetări Arheologice* 29.2, 2022, 631-664, <https://doi.org/10.46535/ca.29.2.11>.

to today Oltenița).⁷ The former remained in use for four decades; the Romans benefitted from it especially when they fought against the Germanic people who attacked the region. An important city developed around the fort after the bridge became functional. The scholar and Prince of Moldavia Dimitrie Cantemir (1673–1723; ruled 1693, 1710–1711) references this structure in his *Hronicul vechimei a romano-moldo-olahilor/The Cronicle about the past of the Romanian-Moldo-Walachians* as follows: “[The Romans] built a bridge over the Danube. But as much as I tried, I was unable to find out where; the historians do not know”.⁸ As we shall see further, since Cantemir’s time the remains of the bridge have been discovered.

Procopius of Caesarea mentions Sucidava as Skibidi/Skedevà in *De Aedificiis/On Buildings (De aed., IV. 7)* when he refers to the restoration work Justinian carried out on the Lower Danube.⁹ Also the *Notitia Dignitatum* (ca 395–413), in its first part, refers to Dacia along the River [Danube], i.e. ‘riparian Dacia or Moesia prima’.¹⁰ *Tabula Peutingeriana* attests the existence of the site, as the map in Figure 7 shows.¹¹

7. Daphne was a Roman fortification inaugurated, most probably in 327, on the left bank of the Danube, across Transmarisca, in the delta of the Argeș River.

8. “Au zidit pod peste Dunăre. Iară unde și în ce loc să fie zidit acel pod, pre cât a noastră nevoie a să întinde au putut, la istorici afla n-am putut”. Dimitrie Cantemir, *Hronicul vechimei a romano-moldo-olahilor* 3. 2. Dimitrie Cantemir, *Hronicul vechimei a Romano-Moldo-Vlahilor*, 1835, with a text in the Romanian language, but written with Cyrillic letters; the site of the Library of the University of Iași: Biblioteca Universității Iași.

9. Procopius of Caesarea, *De Aedificiis*, “On Buildings”; *De aed.*, IV. 7. See Procopius of Caesarea, *Complete Works*, the Greek ed. by K. W. Dindorf, the Latin trans. by Claude Maltret, *Corpus Scriptorum Historiae Byzantinae Pars II, (Gothic Wars I–IV)*, Bonn: Weber, 1833, vol. 2; and Procopius of Caesarea, *Buildings*, edited and translated into English by H[enry] B[ronson] Dewing, Loeb Classical Library, vol. VII, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1940.

10. Here is the information from *Notitia Dignitatum* that refers to Moesia secunda: “I. Register of the Dignitaries both civil and military in the districts of the East. In [the diocese of] Thrace two: of Moesia secunda; of Scythia. in [the diocese of] Illyricum two: of riparian Dacia; of Moesia prima.”, in William Fairley, *Notitia Dignitatum or Register of Dignitaries*, in *Translations and Reprints from Original Sources of European History*, Vol. VI:4, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, n.d., p. 4. Pagination preserved in this text; *Notitia Dignitatum* (thelatinlibrary.com). See also a newest edition of the Roman register, thus: *Notitia Dignitatum*, ed. Robert Ireland, (Teubner, 1999, catalogue no. 1552). Within the Bodleian Library in Oxford there are two manuscripts of *Notitia Dignitatum*. One is MS. Canon. Misc. 378, 1436; digital facsimile online. This manuscript was produced in Basel, Switzerland; miniatures by a French artist, script and initials by an Italian (perhaps Paduan) scribe. The other document is MS. D’Orville 147, 1460–1465 (selected pages online). It is an Italian piece; Cremona, Brescia, and Bologna (?).

11. *Tabula Peutingeriana* (Peutinger’s *Tabula* or *Peutinger Table*) is an illustrated road map (itinerarium) of the Roman roads. Its more recent version is a thirteenth copy of a Roman map drawn under the direction of the general Marcus Vispanius Agrippa (after 12 BC), but which was updated in the fourth century AD.

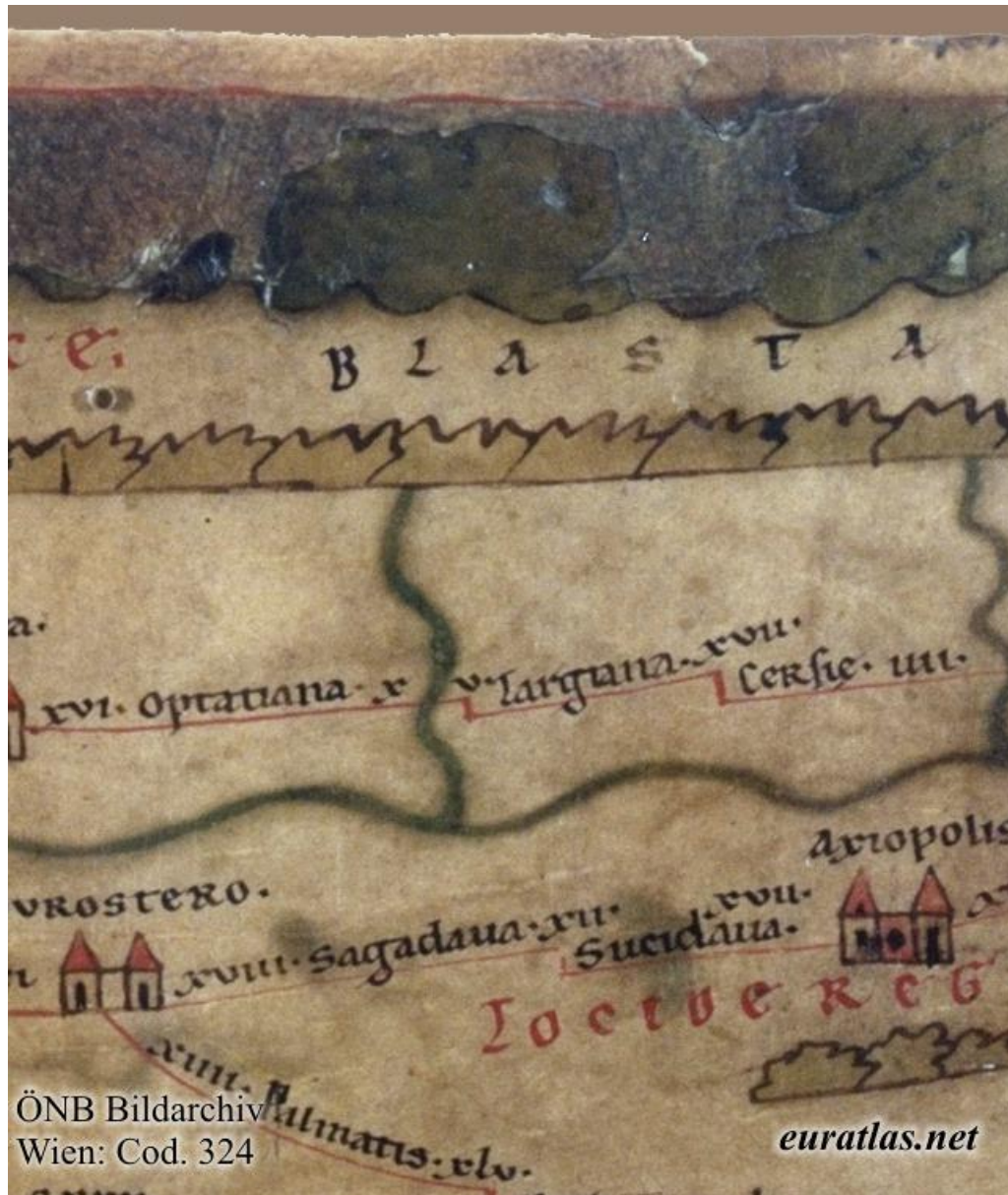


Figure 7. Part of the Map Showing Eastern Carpathians on the Territories of Today Romania and Bulgaria as Well as the Lower Danube Region in These Countries (Sucidava is clearly marked on the lower right side.)

The Romanian historian Vasile Pârvan wrote about Sucidava (of which name sometimes he spells Σucidava) in a few articles. He speaks about the importance of archaeological objects in providing information concerning the lives of the locals, Romans, and Daco-Romans (i.e., the mixture of people in the area after the official withdraw of Rome from it. Some of the former soldiers of the Roman garrisons of

Moesia inferior settled in Sucidava and married local women).¹² Pârvan also mentioned that a strong Roman garrison, Legio V Macedonicae commanded by a Praefectus, was kept at Sucidava even after the abandonment of Dacia.¹³

The Visigots attacked the fortresses along the Lower Danube. Emperor Valens (328–378; ruled 364–378) came personally to the area during three consecutive years to fight against them. In 367 he crossed the Danube *via* the bridge at Constantiana Daphne fortress (today Oltenița). He eventually defeated Athanaric (d. 381), the first king of several branches of the Thervingi or Thervingian Goths (i.e. the Visigoths) at Noviodunum, today Isaccea.

The Huns began their own attacks from 375 on using Constantine's bridge at Sucidava. The archaeological evidence shows that in 443–447 the latter city and the fortress were sacked by these invaders; by this time the bridge nearby was already weakened by their previous actions. The city was restored under Justin I (518–527) or Justinian I (c. 482–565; reigned 527–565). Around 600 it seems that the Roman – by that time Byzantine – garrison abandoned the city. After the departure of the Byzantines this was finally destroyed by the Avars, who reached the lower Danube in late 560s, and by the Slavs (during the sixth century). But Sucidava began a new life as the medieval town of Celei. However, I need to mention that the territories of the Roman and medieval settlements do not completely overlap, and this fact makes the access to the archaeological site reasonably easy. A road that branches from the main highway and goes to the archaeological site via Celei has been recently improved.

During the summer of 2024 I conducted research for this article at the archaeological site of Sucidava; this was when the Limes of the Roman Empire in Central and Southeastern Europe were declared World Heritage objectives by the UNESCO. Sucidava is a part of their chain and I am glad that its historical value has been recognised while I was there – hence my work was also acknowledged. The information from Brussels reached me directly. Figure 8 shows the reproduction of an image concerning this site as it is today; this is displayed by the local museum within its precinct.

12. Pârvan, "Știri Nouă din Dacia Malvensis", <http://www.cimec.ro/Arheologie/Parvan/Articole/ParvanStiriNouaDinDaciaMalvensis.pdf>.

13. *Ibid.*



Figure 8. A Part of Sucidava Fortress as it is Today

Source: My photo of the museum's display, July 2024.

Objects from the Museum in Sucidava

The discoveries at Sucidava date to the period between the second and the sixth centuries AD. I will focus especially on the items produced after the fourth century, as my main speciality is Byzantine culture of which development began at that time. As mentioned at the outset of the article, some of the objects presented here are from the museum that belongs to the archaeological site and some were excavated at the place while I was there, in July 2024. The photographs were taken by myself in that period unless otherwise specified.

Pottery

The **oldest** whole piece of ceramic in Sucidava Museum is a drinking vessel wrought in barbotine technique;¹⁴ Figure 9. This decorating method was known in the area during the middle of the second century.

14. Barbotine is a ceramic decoration technique that involves applying a liquid clay slip layer to a ceramic object before firing it. The technique creates a textured, raised, or 3D effect on the surface of the ceramic



Figure 9. Roman Drinking Ceramic Vessel Wrought in Barbotine Technique, the Second Century
Source: Sucidava Museum.



Figure 10. Byzantine? Amphora, the Sixth Century
Source: Sucidava Museum.

The most remarkable (the largest well preserved) ceramic piece within the museum at Sucidava is an amphora from the sixth century; Figure 10. Its decoration is unusual.

It consists in a visual motif that seems to be a clover leaf on the left, possible Greek or Dacian¹⁵ lettering on the right. Concerning the latter, an ‘H’ and an ‘v’ seem to be the written; perhaps also an ‘φ’ or ‘ω’ under the ‘H’ on the right. These might be the initials of the makers’ name and the landmark of their workshop. Other pieces of ceramic are the remains from the second-third centuries of a plate decorated in relief with Medusa visual motif, fig. 11, and vessels from the sixth century. The label for the latter within Sucidava Museum states: “Byzantine-Roman ceramic from the sixth century”; Figure 12. Other Byzantine vessels – pitchers and jugs (Figure 13) and ceramic remains (Figures 14, 15) – are hosted by the above-mentioned museum. The existence of these receptacles – both for food and wine – proves that both cereals and grapes were cultivated in and around Sucidava. The local production of wine is, according to Pârvan, attested by the will of a local landowner engraved on a stone slab;¹⁶ at the time of my work in the town, that was not on display. Some wine was also imported, as there were pieces of *terra sigillata*.¹⁷ In addition to the objects mentioned above, also a piece of limestone with a Latin inscription on it has been found at Sucidava (Figure 16), as well as Byzantine jewellery items; Figure 17.

15. Concerning the Dacian language, see among others: Strabo, *Geographica/The geography of Strabo*, edited by Horace Leonard Jones, translated by Horace Leonard Jones; John Robert Sitlington Sterrett, London: William Heinemann and Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, Loeb Classical Library 49, 50, 182, 196, 211, 223, 241, 267, 1917–1961, vol. 1; Hadrian Daicoviciu, *Dacii* (in Romanian) [The Dacians] Bucharest, Editura Enciclopedică Română, 1972; Benjamin W. Fortson, IV, *Indo-European Language and Culture: An Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004; Peter Heather, *Empires and Barbarians: Migration, Development, and the Birth of Europe*, Oxford University Press, 2010.

16. Pârvan, “Știri Nouă din Dacia Malvensis”, <http://www.cimec.ro/Arheologie/Parvan/Articole/ParvanStiriNouaDinDaciaMalvensis.pdf>.

17. Terra sigillata, also known as Samian ware or red slip ware, was a type of Roman pottery that was popular from the first century BC to the third century AD. It was characterized by a glossy finish, red or orange colour, and fine smooth texture.



Figure 11 a. The Remains of a Plate Decorated in Relief with Medusa Visual Motif **b.** the Details of the Figure 10a, Second-Third Centuries
Source: Sucidava Museum.



Figure 12. *Byzantine-Roman Vessels; the Sixth Century*
Source: Sucidava Museum.



Figure 13. *Various Types of Byzantines Pitchers and Jugs; the Sixth Century*
Source: Sucidava Museum.



Figure 14. *More Earthenware Pieces; the Sixth Century*
(Some of these fragments have not only decorations on them, but also parts of inscriptions.)
Source: Sucidava Museum.





Figure 15. *Pieces of Ceramic Excavated on the 3rd of July 2024 on the Archaeological Site of Sucidava*



Figure 16. A Limestone Fragment with an Inscription in Latin; Sixth Century
(The visible content of the inscription is as follows: "...UC ET SAVIA? BRO?..."; i.e. "...uc? and wise bro?..")

Source: Sucidava Museum.



Figure 17. Byzantine Ceramic and Jewellery; the Sixth Century

Source: Sucidava Museum.

Coins

Seven hordes of early Roman and Byzantine coins have been excavated at Sucidava and they provide an uninterrupted series from Aurelian (214-275; ruled 270-275) to Theodosius II (401-450; ruled 408-450). There are also some pieces that were found isolated, and these date as late as the sixth century. The coins which are on display within the museum (mostly of copper and silver) are presented here in Figures 18a, b, c and Figure 19. They show the follow emperors: Aurelian (214-275; ruled 270-275), Valerian I (c. 199-after 260/264?; ruled 253-260); Gallienus (218-268; ruled 253-268); Claudius II Gothicus (214-270; ruled 268-270); Constantine the Great (after 280-337; ruled 306-337); Valens (328-378; ruled 364-378); Julian (331/332-363; ruled 361-363); Theodosius I (347-395; ruled 379-395); Honorius (384-423; 393-423); Theodosius II (401-450; ruled 408-450). The few coins found isolated represent Marcian (396-457; ruled 450-457), Leo I the Thracian (401-474; ruled 457-474), Zeno (425-491; ruled 474-491), and Anastasius (c. 431-518; ruled 491-518).





Figure 18 a, b, and c. Roman and Byzantine (Sixth Century) Coins Unearthed at Sucidava
Source: The local museum.



Figure 19. *Reproduction of More Roman Coins at Sucidava*
Source: the original photo belong to the local museum.

Other Objects Discovered at Sucidava

Among other Roman artefacts discovered at Sucidava there are some made of bone (Figure 20) and of lead (Figure 21) in the second and third centuries AD.



Figure 20. *Items Made of Bone*
(The label within the museum in Sucidava states: "Pieces made of bone; Roman period.")



Figure 21. *A Lead Holed Weight for Fishing, Second-Third Centuries AD*

Finding objects wrought in the latter material provides additional evidence that *plumbarii* (workshops to use it) existed in the city; previous diggings on the site discovered more than 100 lead mirror frames.

Today the Roman fortress of Sucidava looks as in the following image (Figure 21), which indicates the good preservation of the site.



Figure 22. *The Roman Fortress of Sucidava as it Looks*
Source: Photo Mircea Negru; July 2024.

Conclusion

The past and current discoveries on the archaeological site of Sucidava provide information that confirms what is known from research conducted on similar finds in the Roman/Byzantine chain of strongholds along the Danube. The castrum discussed here, which during the third century had eight towers instrumental in its defence, was part of an extensive economic and military network that was aided by the existence of a bridge over the Danube, paved streets (of which some survived until now), and a main road that led over the above-mentioned bridge. Not only the army used the transportation links in Sucidava, but also suppliers of wine, ceramic, and other goods.

The research at Sucidava continues; excavations are carried out there every summer.

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