

## Nicopolis ad Istrum

**Dr Andrew Poulter**, of the University of Nottingham is the British Director of a joint British-Bulgarian project at the site of Nicopolis. Below he describes the recent investigations and considers their significance for understanding the development of city life in late antiquity.

The city of *Nicopolis ad Istrum* (the City of Victory near the Danube) was founded by the emperor Trajan c. AD 110. Although the remains of Roman Nicopolis are remarkably well-preserved, the British excavations were carried out within the Late Roman city which occupied an adjacent site and afforded a unique opportunity to examine the layout and function of an early Byzantine town, using a combination of geophysical survey and selective excavation. A central aim was also to develop a large-scale environmental programme, studying the animal bones and seeds, as well as the small-finds and pottery, to build up an economic picture of the city as it existed in the 5th and 6th centuries AD. Since remains of the Roman and Late Roman city were also discovered beneath the early Byzantine fortifications, the scope of the project was widened to provide a full economic study of the city's development throughout the five hundred years of its existence. The quality of the evidence exceeded all expectations.

From the earliest years, workshops were making high quality pottery and the surrounding countryside was producing grain, fruit and vegetables for the urban population. The rapid development of a full Roman economy is quite remarkable. Public buildings were erected during the second and third decades of the 2nd century and its first stone defences were built by c. AD 200, substantial sections of which, including the gates, were uncovered by excavation. Fine houses were constructed outside the defences, one of which, still standing to head height, was excavated; its walls were covered in frescoes, depicting architectural scenes, and one room had fine moulded stucco cornices. During the 4th century, the city contained large houses built for some twenty or so wealthy families whereas the rest of the interior was occupied mainly by administrative and religious buildings. It seems that the intramural population was limited, comprising several hundred, certainly not thousands. However, outside the walls, the area was densely settled by inhabitants of clearly inferior social status, their roughly built houses and agricultural buildings jostling one another along narrow alleyways and



tracks which criss-crossed the plateau on the south side of the town. Despite difficult times in the late 4th century, there is no sign of any change in the city's economic dependence upon its own agricultural resources. Indeed, there seems to have been an even greater variety of food available and no evidence that the city needed to import much

*The paved Roman road and entrance to the agora, flanked by statue-bases, Nicopolis*





*Environmental archaeology: drying soil samples from Gradishte*

in the way of foreign goods, except for olive oil (which cannot be produced locally as the winters are too cold) and, perhaps, for the good quality wine from the Mediterranean. This picture of a Roman to Late Roman city is unique in its detail and complexity.

However, the establishment of early Byzantine Nicopolis witnessed radical change, not only in the layout of the city, but also in its economy. The regular planning with paved streets, centrally placed public buildings around a market place (*agora*) and outer suburbs divided into regular *insulae* for housing is typical of a Graeco-Roman city (*polis*) and exemplified in the Roman plan

of Nicopolis itself. Early Byzantine Nicopolis had none of these characteristics. It lacked a regular plan. The episcopal basilica dominated the town but occupied the highest point within the interior, on the eastern side. There was a second, smaller church, workshops and ancillary buildings of simple stone with earth bonding but also immense store buildings of mudbrick, probably two stories high, flanking the main route across the centre of the site, protected by immensely strong fortifications, the walls 8 m high, its towers soaring to as much as 20 m in height. Even so, much of the interior was empty and used either for cultivation or for only temporary accommodation, perhaps for the Byzantine field army. No less dramatic was the change in the economy. The palaeobotanical samples suggested that large scale grain cultivation was no longer supplying the city. Instead, Spring grown crops such as millet were more plentiful and pulses (bitter vetch, lentil and field bean) were consumed more than in the Roman or Late Roman periods. Essentially the food supply suggested more of a market-garden form of cultivation, not one drawing upon the rich agricultural resources of the hinterland. This change was accompanied by a pronounced increase in imported pottery, fine wares and amphorae from the Mediterranean. Though in name Nicopolis remained a *polis* it bore no resemblance to the city it replaced but rather seems to have been a military and ecclesiastical stronghold, divorced from its former territory but no doubt supported by central authority and provisioned by the Byzantine state. All evidence for civilian occupation now comes, not from within the new fortifications, but from makeshift houses occupying the abandoned ruins of the former Roman city. Such a radical change in the nature of urbanism in the 6th century had not been suspected before and requires a reassessment of what constituted a 'city' in the age of Justinian.

Because our information about the interior planning – let alone the economy – of cities in this period is so incomplete, it is not possible to determine whether the case of Nicopolis was typical of urbanism in the Eastern Empire or whether it was unusual, perhaps a product of regional problems, either natural and the result of climatic deterioration, or stemming from the political and economic turmoil of the period when the Balkans were threatened by invading Slavs and Avar armies. It was to resolve this important question that the second programme of excavation and survey commenced in 1996. The objective is to establish whether there was an

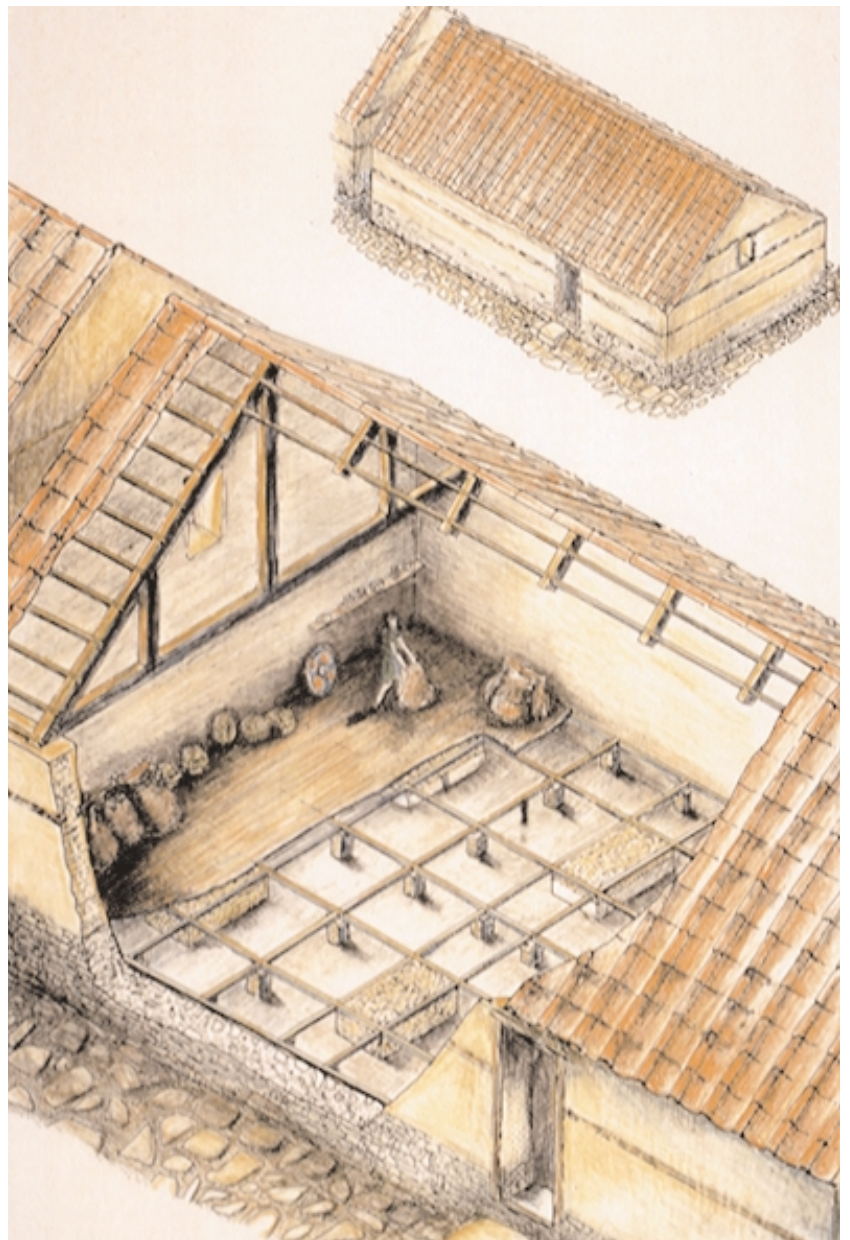


economic collapse in the 5th century which could explain the character of the Nicopolis in the 6th.

The method has been to examine a region of 2,000 square kilometres, stretching north to the Danube, the frontier, and south to the foothills of the Stara Planina. Extensive survey by the staff of Veliko Turnovo Museum has identified some 268 settlements of Roman to early Byzantine date. During Spring campaigns teams of Bulgarian students, together with British and Bulgarian field-staff, are engaged in exploring the layout, date and function of these sites, using a combination of intensive surface collection of pottery and building materials along with geophysical survey. The results have been impressive: Roman villas, industrial centres and nucleated villages have been identified across the region. However, the results so far suggest that this patchwork of wealthy Roman farms did not survive into the 5th century. In order to provide more detailed information – especially environmental evidence – a type site, a Late Roman fortress, was selected for excavation.

Gradishte lies *c.* 15 km west of Nicopolis, close to the south bank of the river Rositsa. Excavation quickly established that this was a major military fortification, impressive enough to rival the walls of Byzantine Nicopolis. The remains of the 5th century were singularly well-preserved; barracks and store rooms with raised timber floors, upstanding walls of earth bonded buildings with mudbrick superstructure and impressive stone defences, including the main gate, towers and an outwork (*protechisma*). Immediately after its destruction, the fort was rebuilt and then finally abandoned after a fire in the late 6th century. The site provided an unprecedented quantity of well-dated finds (weapons, shields and agricultural tools) and especially environmental evidence. Substantial quantities of different types of grain and quernstones indicate that Gradishte was used as a collection centre and store base for food-stuffs, perhaps for transfer to the city of Nicopolis or north to the Danubian garrisons on the frontier.

Already a number of preliminary conclusions can be drawn. It does now seem that there was a major change in the countryside during the early 5th century; the villas were abandoned and the villa economy collapsed. Nicopolis was deprived of the support of that small but wealthy class of inhabitants which had occupied its opulent town houses and upon whom its survival depended. The



*5th century granary with raised timber floor, Gradishte. Excavation (above) and artist's reconstruction (right).*

The Academy has supported the project through the award of a series of research grants, and through its exchange agreements.



*Roman ring, Nicopolis*

intervention of central authority is not only evidenced in the construction of new 'urban' defences but also in the countryside where the protection and control of the land was now directly in the hands of the military; forts, such as Gradishte replaced the villa owners who had previously occupied the land and who had played such a central role in the development of the Roman city.

Neither programme could have been carried out without the support of the British Academy and the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. The British excavations started well before the collapse of the Eastern Bloc and played a not insignificant role in strengthening links between Britain and a country then sealed behind the Iron Curtain. Nor were such contacts confined to Bulgaria. During the excavation season, up to 100 university students from Czechoslovakia, Russia, Hungary and Poland worked alongside and with the British team. After the restoration of democratic institutions and the fall of Communism, the strong links established

between the British archaeologists and those in the Bulgarian Institute of Archaeology and the Veliko Turnovo Museum, provided the foundation upon which to build the new initiative. However, the scale of the programme and its success would not have been possible without the organisational skill and the work carried out by our Bulgarian colleagues.

Last summer we were pleased to welcome Professor Nico Mann, the Academy's Foreign Secretary, and the Assistant Secretary, Jane Lyddon, who visited the team during the final season of full-scale excavation, 15 years after the first excavations began. The anniversary was also celebrated by an international conference held during the excavation at which specialists from Britain, Bulgaria and other European countries were able to assess the results at Nicopolis and Gradishte in their historical context: that crucial period which separates the terminal years of the Roman Empire from the early medieval states of Europe.



*Bronze weight with architectural scene, 5th/6th century, Gradishte*