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[Review of] Andrew Poulter. 2019. The transition to late antiquity on the lower Danube

Citation for published version:

Crow, J 2020, '[Review of] Andrew Poulter. 2019. The transition to late antiquity on the lower Danube: Excavations and survey at Dichin, a late Roman to early Byzantine fort and a Roman aqueduct. Oxford: Oxbow; 9781785709586, hardback, £70.', *Antiquity*, vol. 94, no. 376, pp. 1092-1094. <https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2020.107>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.15184/aqy.2020.107](https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2020.107)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Antiquity

Publisher Rights Statement:

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ANDREW POULTER. 2019. *The Transition to Late Antiquity on the Lower Danube: Excavations and Survey at Dichin, a Late Roman to early Byzantine Fort and a Roman Aqueduct*. Oxford: Oxbow; 9781785709586, hardback, £70.

This is not just an excavation report of a Roman fort in Bulgaria, rather it is an especially intriguing and revealing *late* Roman fort with surprising finds including cow bells, scythes, spindle whorls, loom weights, quantities of burnt grain and a ballista bolt bent in action. Behind lofty, well-constructed walls (over 9m) built in the Constantinopolitan manner with mortared stone and brick in bands, were ranks of mud brick two-storey buildings on stone socles with a central street leading from a narrow gate to granaries. The site of Dichin is set in the Danube hinterland of the late Roman province of Moesia II. The excavator Andrew Poulter has dedicated his career to the investigation of urban and rural communities of Roman Moesia, moving on from the successful excavation of late Roman Nicopolis ad Istrum, the main local town, he set out with his Bulgarian colleague Ventzislav Dinchev to find a contemporary village site as a comparator. In the foothills of the Balkan mountains many fortified settlements date from this period but their precise role remains enigmatic: were they defended villages, garrisoned settlements or refuges? The excavations revealed site finds of 406 coins ranging in date from the end of the fourth century to the late sixth. Coin supply and usage indicate a military presence although no ancient name is recorded. The unusual fortification 1.8 hectares in area is situated within a loop of the river Rositsa, south of Nicopolis and close to the line of the city's aqueduct. It does not lie on a known communication route, but the river provided access to the city and the Danube frontier garrisons to the north.

The destruction of the eastern field army in 378 AD by the migrant Goths at Adrianople (Edirne) together with the death of the emperor Valens signalled the failure of the Danube frontier to secure the interior provinces and the capital, Constantinople. The new fort at Dichin postdates that disaster and, through a careful assessment of the coin distribution, Peter Guest suggests a date after 400 and Poulter links the construction with an imperial rescript concerning restoration in Moesia II in 408. The fortifications are unusual for such a small site. Dobri Dyal, a fortified hilltop 15km east excavated by the same team (Poulter 2013), also has mortared walls but without the careful construction seen at Dichin, which includes regular bands of brickwork, buttresses and internal stairs. Such construction is comparable with other major late antique cities such as Hisar (Diocletianopolis) or Plovdiv

(Philippopolis) showing that Dichin was defended in the manner of a Thracian city or a frontier fort. Inside the walls were regular rows of buildings varying in size but mostly around 5m wide and between 10–16m in length. Steps lead up to second floors where the living accommodation was situated with byres and stores below. Towards the west end a range of buildings were shown to be granaries with raised floors supported on mudbrick piers. What is unusual in the main occupation Period (Period 2) is the absence of any recognisable command and administrative centre, common in Roman forts and still found on the Danube forts at this period. Across the west side an additional outer wall (*proteichisma*) was added later in the fifth century, very close to the main curtain, as a further defence. The main wall incorporated some spolia, including blocks shown to be from the nearby aqueduct, which had ceased to function by this time. Period 2 came to an end around 500 when there was a major fire across the interior, after which the site was radically rebuilt over the demolished remains of the mud brick buildings, but to a similar plan. The demolition levels produced the richest haul of stratified finds and ceramics which provide remarkable insights in to life in the fifth century fort.

At Dichin the pattern of much of the interior was revealed through a network of robber trenches and the results of six seasons of excavation present not just detailed descriptions of the structures but also associated finds. The main specialist reports will provide a crucial datum for future comparisons and research in the late Roman world. The coins are rigorously and assiduously analysed to present a model report. The range of metalwork reads like a fifth-century ironmongers manifest, from weapons (not so many, but indicative of conflict) to scythes, ploughs and a range of other agricultural implements, including cow bells. Surely here from grazing dairy cattle not just draught oxen as suggested, and perhaps indicative of cheese production. The finds also hint at the character of the garrison. Spinning and weaving suggests women and families, finds rarely found on third and fourth century forts on Hadrian's Wall. The fire destroyed but also preserved significant quantities of grain. Poulter argues that the fort was occupied by *foederati*—federates drawn from the Gothic settlers—in part based on the absence of a church in Period 2, and a recognisable headquarters structure. There are Christian finds however in this phase, glass and tiles, and parts of the interior of the fort remains uninvestigated. Absent from most discussions of the Roman army in the region are attempts to identify the presence of the regional field army known to have been restored by the early fifth century. Their location remains enigmatic but it is possible that a combined agricultural production centre and military garrison may have addressed their needs through

the system of the Annona, a taxation in kind, rather than serving frontier troops on the river. There seems little doubt that we are dealing with soldier farmers in this context, but not impoverished peasants, there was still a demand for imported ceramics, they ate off metal dishes and the local economy appears to have been monetised. A major discovery from the destruction deposits in Period 2 and Period 3 (c.580) was that analysis of burnt grain demonstrates continuing cultivation for a wide range of plant species into the late sixth century, questioning the historical view of collapse and dearth. The author and his team of collaborators are to be congratulated for contributing not just a report and challenging analysis from their fieldwork, but for creating a major and enduring resource for future comparative research into the material culture and history of the region.

References

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JAMES CROW

School of History, Classics and Archaeology,

University of Edinburgh, UK

(Email: jim.crow@ed.ac.uk)