

Timacum Minus in Moesia Superior – Centrality and Urbanism at a Roman Mining Settlement

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When Walter Christaller first introduced his ‘central place theory’, he stated that centrality patterns were logical and organic and, thus, immanent to principles of settlement development. Accordingly, a central place for Christaller was a town. He even went as far as stating that the main ‘profession’ of a town was merely to be central to its environment.¹ Since the 1930s, however, common consensus has shifted to believe that central place theory is not as static as suggested and does not solely relate to urban settlements.² Yet, to build critically on these ideas derived from central place theory, interpretations need to be able to differentiate urban from non-urban sites. In Roman archaeology, however, the outline of urban criteria is no easy task. Problematically, the Roman town has not only been viewed as a manifestation of Roman imperialism and the implementation of power and political strategies in the provinces, it has also been perceived as both the primordial and constant of Roman culture. Throughout the Roman Empire a Roman town has been identified as such if it was officially installed as a manifestation of Roman ideological and imperial power in the provinces and resembled Rome in terms of its architectural markers, which conveyed the meaning of this manifestation.³ Although the debate of the past two decades has long acknowledged that Empire-wide patterns of idealistic implementations of urbanism are a myth,⁴ the theoretical vacuum of Roman urbanism has not yet been successfully filled; traditional approaches to urban character in the provinces’ settlements remain predominant today.⁵ These approaches primarily focus on the official status of settlements as *coloniae* or *municipia*, which relates to their independent administration, and on their monumentality both in size and architectural equipment, which relates to urbanization and urbanization rates. The criteria a Roman town needed to fulfil to be perceived as a Roman town has been more contingent upon ideological perceptions of urbanism, politics, and culture than upon local and regional circumstances for its development.⁶

In Roman urbanism, centrality is one of the basic conditions for towns. According to the economic function of towns as consumers and/or market vessels and the principles of territorial administration Roman towns somehow always were central places. The mining settlement of Timacum Minus (fig. 1: no. 5) in Moesia Superior is a vibrant example of how to go beyond this basic notion, as it displays different levels of centrality.⁷ First, the settlement was geographically central. Timacum Minus lay just amidst the Timok Valley, the Timok Valley road, and at the spot where the various Timok tributaries coalesced.⁸ Thus, Timacum Minus may be viewed as the prime example for the ‘law of location’, if one might paraphrase Christaller’s intention to search for logical patterns in site and settlement location.⁹ The settlement of Timacum Minus developed at its specific site because this site had a central location, where – given the local and

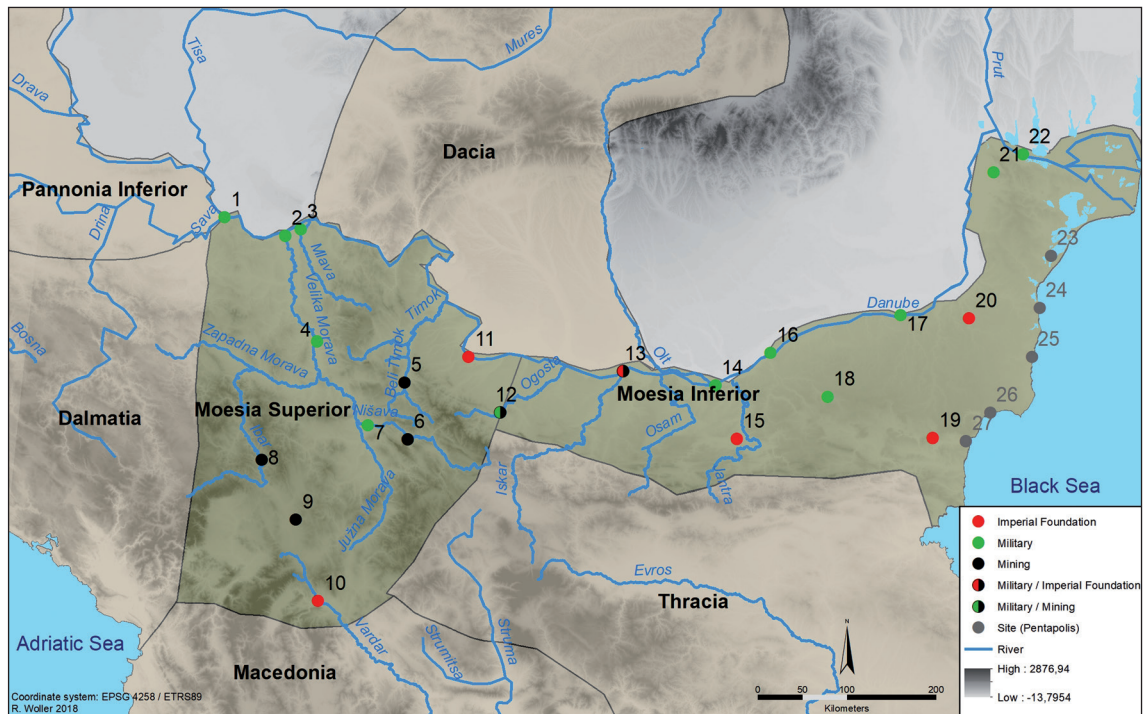


Fig. 1: Overview of urban settlements in Moesia (Superior, Inferior) based on the development factors of mining, military presence, and imperial foundation.

regional circumstances during the Roman Principate – a settlement had to emerge. Despite the locational centrality, the settlement also displays a second, much more crucial form of centrality – a hierarchical centrality. The natural resources offered by the Timok Valley and its surroundings, together with the large-scale mining industry, which was installed on the basis of a fiscal mining district in the 2nd century AD, turned Timacum Minus into a regional center.¹⁰ The organizational primacy of the site clearly made it hierarchically central. Timacum Minus did not have official administrative status and is, thus, normally left out of discussions of urbanism in Moesia. The central location and the mining characteristics of the site, however, turned it into an economically and socially attractive settlement spot. Given the local and regional circumstances, these clearly also turned it into an urban settlement.¹¹

When working on urban settlement in the Roman Empire, the most significant aspects to consider are systems of attractions and the dynamics of settlement. The ideology of urban form, which has long been questioned but is still used as a condition of Roman urbanism, does not fit the reality of settlement in Moesia. Urbanism studies should primarily understand agglomeration. I argue that focusing on development factors for a settlement (e.g. mining; fig. 1) instead of using its administrative status or monumentality as the main trait of an urban site facilitates the characterization of Roman urbanism and its development on local and regional levels. The centrality pat-

terns and mechanisms resulting from these development factors, which go beyond the notion that settlements were central to their hinterland, further help to understand not only the initial agglomeration but also the development of agglomeration. The principle of ‘centralities’, which I introduced in this paper using the urban mining settlement of Timacum Minus as a case study, clearly shows that to properly assess urbanity and urbanization in Moesia, the status of a site takes a back seat in favor of the decisive factors that made it become a site. Christaller explicitly stated that he did not intend to introduce a new definition of ‘the urban’ with his central place theory as this would lead to “considerable confusion”.¹² I, however, argue that using centrality as a criterion for urbanity and a condition for urbanization dissolves confusion about urbanism in Moesia rather than creates it.

Notes

¹ Christaller 1968, 21. 23. 25. A full version of this article including details concerning the geography, history, and archaeology of Timacum Minus can be found in Diers 2018c.

² e.g. in Martínez Jiménez – Tejerizo García 2015, 81–103.

³ On these perceptions: Laurence 1997, 1–20.

⁴ Alcock 2000, 221–226.

⁵ This can e.g. be seen in Panzram 2011, 275–296 and Zanker 2000, 25–41.

⁶ This is also discussed in Diers 2018a, 47–58; Diers 2018c; 2019, 175–186.

⁷ For an introduction to the site characteristics and history of Timacum Minus: Petrović 1995a; Petković 2005; Diers 2018b, 58–81; Diers 2018c; 2019, 175–186, including further detailed references.

⁸ On the Timok valley road: Petrović et al. 2014, 97–142.

⁹ Christaller 1968, 13.

¹⁰ Petrović 1995b, 195–202.

¹¹ Diers 2018b, 58–81.

¹² Christaller 1968, 25.

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