

# Medieval Fortification in Dupljaja near Bela Crkva (Southern Banat)

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## Abstract

*Grad near Dupljaja has long been known in archaeological literature as a prehistoric site. It was not until recently, thanks to the excavations which have been carried out since 2002, that it also became well known as a large medieval complex. The results of the previous excavations indicate that this site could be the largest archaeological site in the southern Banat, dated into the 11<sup>th</sup> and the first half of the 13<sup>th</sup> century.*

## 1. The location of the site

Dupljaja is a small village in the southeast of the Serbian Banat. It is located in the valley of the river Karaš, at about 10 km north from its old confluence with the Danube, near Stara Palanka (Fig. 1). The village was built on the rim of a loess terrace, on the right bank of the Karaš. On the opposite side of the river begins Deliblatska Pescara (Deliblato Sands), some 50 to 100 m higher. The construction works on the great channel Danube-Tisa-Danube have completely changed the ancient appearance of this part of the Karaš valley (Fig. 2). The river's old flow has been artificially poured into the new channel, while many meanders and effluents, intersected and covered by embankments, have been left aside as „dead” parts of the ancient flow.

## 2. Topography

The place called Grad was located 1 km southwest from the village's centre. It includes a plane plateau descending steeply from the north and the west side towards the Karaš (Fig. 3). A low marshy terrain stretches at the south, and it is only at the east that the extension of the loess terrace stretches towards the present day village.

The site consists of two parts (Fig. 4) – the fortified Grad and its suburb, the village (the area of Vinogradi). The fortification was built at the edge of a high loess terrace, about 30 m above the Karaš' old bank. Three sides of Grad, built as an irregular trapezoid of over 5 hectares, were defended by double walls girdled by the Karaš River. There is a large and high rampart with a deep dry moat in front of it, located on the east side. Today, the moat is up to 20 m wide and its bottom is at about twenty meters below the rampart's

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preserved height. Further to the east, according to the archaeological material found on the surface covering an area of not less than 7 hectares, stretches an area known as Vinogradi, that used to be a suburb, that could have also been protected by less stronger fortifications. The excavations have confirmed the existence of a lower town, which used to stretch south from the city and along the flow of the Karaš at a length of about 1 km.

### 3. History of the investigations

The remains of old fortifications in the valley of the Karaš, the so called „earth towns” in Grebenac, Dupljaja and Orešac, have been attracting the attention of researchers since the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>1</sup>. These sites were assumed to contain the remains of fortifications from prehistoric periods and Roman times. Grad, near Dupljaja was first recorded in 1866 and the fortification’s first sketches of ground plans, designed with the cross-sections (Fig. 5) were published in 1905<sup>2</sup>. Dupljaja is famous for its “Dupljaja carriages” – two Bronze Age votive cart specimens discovered at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century near the village. Feliks Mileker believed that both of the items were found before 1903 in the north-eastern part of the Dupljaja-Grad site<sup>3</sup>.

Test excavations at the site of Grad were carried out in 1972<sup>4</sup>. A necropolis dating back to the 11<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> century was discovered, on that occasion, inside the fortification. Further on, the excavated trench on top of the rampart uncovered carbonized wooden structures’ remains. More recently, researches were conducted in cooperation with the Department of Archaeology of the Faculty of Philosophy at the University of Belgrade and Town Museum of Vršac. These studies started in 2002 and they are still being carried out<sup>5</sup>. Their purpose was to define the site’s main characteristics, as well as its scope, dimensions, stratigraphy and dating.

### 4. Stratigraphy

So far, trench-type excavations have been carried out all through Grad, but also on the outlines of Vinogradi and Veliki Prokop”. Culture layers have an average depth of 1 m. In addition to the medieval 10/11<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> century layers there are other findings as well.

<sup>1</sup> B. Milleker, “Dél-magyarország római régiségletei,” *Történelmi és régészeti értesítő* VIII/II-III (1892), 108, 110; B. Milleker, *Délmagyarország régiségletei a honfoglalás előtti időkből*. I. rész: Óskori leletek (Temesvár, 1897), 121; G. Téglás, “A temesváraljaji (Duplaji) Grad – Cetate nevű földvár. (Három ábrával),” *Archaeologiai Értesítő*, Budapest, 25 (1905), 218-221; B. Milleker, *Délmagyarország régiségletei a Honfoglalás előtti időkből*, III. rész (Temesvár 1906), 44-45, 217-218, 262-263. Milleker 1899, 71 = B. Milleker, *Délmagyarország régiségletei a honfoglalás előtti időkből*. II. rész: Romai, romai korszaki es nevpandorlaskori leletek (Temesvár, 1899), 71; Téglás 1904a, 318–321 = G.Téglás, “A Traianus előtti Dacia alduai határkapuja,” *Archaeologiai Értesítő*, Budapest, 24 (1904), 318–321; Téglás 1904b, 397-404 = G.Téglás, “A Gerbenczi várcsoport,” *Archaeologiai Értesítő* 24, Budapest (1904), 397-404).

<sup>2</sup> G. Téglás, “A temesváraljaji (Duplaji) Grad – Cetate nevű földvár. (Három ábrával),” 218-221.

<sup>3</sup> С. Милекер, Праисторијска колица из Дупљаје. *Старинар* III серија, књ. 5 (Београд 1930), таб. VIII.

<sup>4</sup> С. Барачки, *Југоисточни Банат у раном средњем веку, са прегледом раносредњовековних налазишта*, каталог изложбе (Вршац 1977), 18.

<sup>5</sup> Dj. Janković, D. Radičević, “The stronghold from Dupljaja. A medieval archaeological discovery,” *Banatica* 17 (2005), 275-278.

Fragments of Neolithic, Roman, Late Antiquity and Early Byzantine pottery have been found on the surface. The existence of a Middle Bronze Age site is confirmed by small shards found outside units that were buried under more recent layers. The uncovered part of a stone and Roman brick wall could belong to a Roman villa. Some fragmented pottery dating back to the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries was also found near the site's eastern edge.

### 5. Ramparts

Since the beginning of excavations, the works have been focused on the cutting through the fortresses' eastern rampart (Fig. 6). The cross-section has not been completed yet. This wall, over 6 m high, was built out of loess excavated from the digging of the moat. The excavated loess was probably backfilled in the structures that were made out of horizontal wooden girders. There have been two site's construction phases defined. Some parts of an older rampart have been discovered - a structure made out of surfaces of compacted loess placed between horizontal girders (Fig. 7). Regularly delimited rectangular surfaces covered with fired loess are separated. There is a surface covered by pure loess between them, without any burning traces. The older rampart had been flattened at one moment and, later, a much wider and higher rampart was built above it. Due to the terrain's leveling, and, afterwards, to the construction of a new rampart, a layer containing pottery, which could be dated during the 10<sup>th</sup> -11<sup>th</sup> century, was closed next to the older rampart's west side (Fig. 8). Stone and mortar were found on top of the later rampart, while a layer of fine gravel leaning against the rampart was uncovered on the inside. That layer was dated thanks to the findings of Hungarian and Byzantine coins dating back to the second half of the 12<sup>th</sup> and the first decades of the 13<sup>th</sup> century<sup>6</sup>. The most numerous findings are represented by means of pottery fragments (Fig. 9).

### 6. The settlement

Several semi-dugout dwellings with earth ovens were found at various depths in layers near the eastern rampart (Figs. 10 and 11). Those which are closer to the rampart are covered by the above mentioned layer containing fine gravel and coins. That is why they can be precisely dated to a period before the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century. The most numerous findings are pottery fragments. Other findings include iron artifact fragments (spikes, knives, scissors, etc), spindle whorls as well as fragments of glassware and glass bracelet. The inventory of vessels mainly consists of pots, cauldrons and bowls produced by using of the slow-moving potter's wheel. Technological characteristics of this pottery are mostly uniform. The vessels were produced of sandy clay with addition of mica/quartz. They are usually gray or brown. Some pot-shards with various ornaments incised by comb could be dating back to the 10<sup>th</sup> -11<sup>th</sup> century. The ornament covers the vessel entire exterior. Pots and other vessels were decorated with incised horizontal lines, oblique incisions, small impressions or ornaments executed by serrated wheel, dating back to the 11<sup>th</sup> up to

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<sup>6</sup> Lj. Bakić, "Findings of Coins from the Medieval Site of Dupljaja – Grad," in *Proceedings of the 5<sup>th</sup> International Numismatic Congress in Croatia, Opatija, September 17–19, 2007* (Rijeka 2008), 11-25.

the first half of the 13<sup>th</sup> one. Some of the exterior polished or glazed jug-shards are dated within the same period.

Sampling excavation located in the western part of Grad have revealed the remains of a large building that could have had a rectangular ground plan, of about 30 x 15 m in dimensions (Fig. 12). There were foundations preserved that consisted of a mesh made out of several layers of wooden girders forming a loess backfilled lattice. According to pottery shards found on the structure's margins, one can suppose that the construction dates back to the 12<sup>th</sup> century. An earlier medieval culture horizon, containing buried structures, was found in the same area. The horizon is to be dated chronologically into the 10<sup>th</sup> – 11<sup>th</sup> century.

The large building has not been completely uncovered. Only some parts of it have been superficially revealed. Silver jewelry and coins hoard found near the foundations indicate the point to which the building was functional. The hoard contains: a fragment of white quartz, a pair of earrings with three berries, 8 bracelets, 9 rings and 3 buckles. The remains of different issues were preserved on certain objects. The total number of coins exceeds 1000 pieces and it includes Hungarian, Frisian, English and Irish coins. The analysis of the hoard indicated that it was buried during the Mongol Invasion in 1241<sup>7</sup>. At the moment, this hoard represents also the latest finding of the site of Grad, since the former excavations have shown that, after those events, the life within the fortification was never restored.

### 7. Churches and cemeteries

According to the excavations from 1972, it could have been assumed that there used to be a church with a surrounding graveyard somewhere in Grad. The position of a masonry structure was defined by a higher concentration of debris on two lots located on the plateau's western part, on the side facing the Karaš (Figs. 5 and 12). These findings were defined as the remains of a church in 2006<sup>8</sup>. Therefore, the objective of a recently completed campaign in 2011 was to uncover that particular structure as much as possible. The southern half of a single-nave church, with a semi-circular eastern apsis, 16,5 m long and about 8,5 m wide (Fig. 13) was uncovered. The church was oriented with a great offset from the main east-west direction, almost to the northeast-southwest. The traces of a square-based masonry column, with 0,8 m long sides were discovered on the church's western side. The ancient foundation, made of stone and lime mortar, was completely taken out and it was only in some parts, at the bottom of the trench, that a thin layer of the ancient mortar and several regular stone blocks were preserved. The foundation trench is about 1,3 m wide and it is buried at a relative depth of 1,5 m.

Former research of the area surrounding the church's south-west corner included the excavation of 64 graves dating back to the 12<sup>th</sup> century up to the first half of the 13<sup>th</sup> one.

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<sup>7</sup> М. Вуксан, "Средњовековна остава сребрног новца и накита из Дупљаје," in *Српско археолошко друштво, XXX годишњи скуп и 125 година постојања, Зајечар, 5-7. јун 2008. Програми, извештаји, информације и апстракти*, ур. Б. Анђелковић, (Београд 2008), 91.

<sup>8</sup> Ђ. Јанковић, "Д.Радичевић, Дупљаја, локалитет Град," *Археолошки преглед* 4, нова серија (Београд 2008), 155-158.

It is still not known at which point the burials had started, i.e. the earlier graves' horizon found under the church's foundations has not been dated yet.

The graves have been discovered at relative depths from 0,55 to 1,31 m, with maximum depths between 0,80 and 1,10 m. Children's graves were buried at smaller depths. Those were individual burials in simple burial pits, usually without any grave construction. Iron nails found in the grave layer within the area of necropolis, show that, at least in some rare cases, the dead were buried in wooden coffins. Simple grave structures made out of vertically placed stones and bricks have been found only in several children's graves.

Regarding the interment procedure and funeral rituals, there can be sorted out two graves which have been found in the profiles of the dugout. The bottoms of those burial pits were covered by a thin layer of soot upon which the deceased was laid.

The deceased were buried laid on their back, in a stretched position, with their heads placed on the occiput. In graves where the position of arms could be precisely identified, the arms were placed in different positions, but mostly placed or crossed on the chest or pelvis. Their arms were rarely stretched next to the body. Most of the graves follow the orientation of the church. There is also a group of graves which is closer to the west-east orientation. Those could be conditionally concerned as a part of a separate horizon of interments which are older than the church.

One of the general characteristics of the excavated graves consists of modest grave findings. There are three graves where Hungarian coins were found, one in each of them, used as obols. As for the other inventory, small silver and bronze links were found, four "S" type earrings made out of plain or spiral wire and three silver rings made also out of spiral wire. The discovered coins can be roughly dated back to the second half of the 12<sup>th</sup> or the first decades of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. They have been found in the graves that present the same orientation as the church.

The church, as well as the cemetery around it, could have been used at the latest up to the Mongol invasion, after which, according to the former excavations, the life in Grad has never been renewed. On the other hand, it is still not known at which point the burials started, i.e. if there had existed an older graves' horizon. The cemetery's total surface has not been defined, but the partly discovered grave located in one of the squares at about 50 m from the church, shows that it could not have been a small area.

There is a site called Veliki Prokop (Fig. 5) located south of the site in Grad, on the lower town's east edge. There is about 3 m high prehistoric tumulus located in that site. Qam medieval church was built above it. The excavations on the church and necropolis started in 2002 and haven't been finished yet. A cross-based church has been discovered. It contains an inner semi-circular apsis and a rectangular one on the outside (Fig. 14). The church has been uncovered only at its surface, while the interior hasn't been fully uncovered. The foundations made out of well compacted earth were preserved, showing that the elevated wall parts were built out of bricks and stones joint by means of lime mortar. The foundation is 8,65 m long and up to 8 m wide. There was a 6 m long outer narthex uncovered upon the church's western part. The existence of a necropolis was confirmed on the tumulus' area and the one surrounding it. The necropolis has been more thoroughly researched upon the church's northern side. The excavations have shown that

the church was built above the existing necropolis, but the exact time of its construction has not been defined yet. Therefore, the graves found under the foundations have not been useful, since they don't contain any findings.

Individual burials have been discovered within the excavated surface. The burial places were simple burial pits without any grave construction. Grave construction haven't been discovered only in two of the graves. In both cases, these were children's burials. Burial pits were not visible during the excavations and that is why there are no data on their shape and dimensions. There are few graves that present wood remains next to skeleton. A great number of iron nails were found within the necropolis' area. Some of these nails could have been originally used for building the coffins. The deceased were buried laid on their back, in a stretched position, with their heads laid on the occiput. The arms have been found in various positions, but usually laid or crossed on the pelvis, stomach or chest. The graves in which the arms of the deceased are stretched next to the body are very rare.

The burials in this particular necropolis were performed for a long period of time. The oldest coins belong to the Hungarian king Coloman (1095-1114) followed by anonymous forgings dated between the rule of the King Béla III (1173-1196) and the rule of Andrew II (1205-1235). So far, the latest coins can be attributed to forgings of King Matthias I Corvinus (1458-1490). The latest cemetery layer, dated accordingly by means of found coins and rare jewelry pieces, belongs to the second half of the 13<sup>th</sup> century up to the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> one. On the other hand, according to the findings inside the cemetery, the earliest discovered layer dates back to the 12<sup>th</sup> century and was characterized by findings consisting of "S" type earrings, ribbon rings made out of thin silver sheets and bronze rings made out of stranded wire. Distinctive and very rare findings from the area of Serbian Banat are represented by glass bracelets - a bracelet made out of light blue glass slightly twisted on the outside and a more luxurious piece made out of dark blue glass and decorated by painting.

According to the results of the former excavations, burying was practiced from the 12<sup>th</sup> to the 15<sup>th</sup> century, at the latest up to the mid 16<sup>th</sup> century. Until the next excavations, it will remain unclear whether the graves belonging to the earliest horizon of burials found so far, dated to the 12<sup>th</sup> century according to the findings, precede the construction or they were also buried around the existing church.

Approximately 300 m north-east of Veliki Prokop is located a small mound with brick fragments and clods of mortar. In the same place there is also a tombstone from the 18<sup>th</sup> century. By all appearances these seem to be the remains of another church.

Without diggings it is impossible to determinate its dating. The situation is alike in regard to the cemetery discovered in the north-western part of Vinogradi site. 8 tombs were explored on that respective site, but no funeral inventory was found, thus only the future researches will be able to establish its chronology.

### **Conclusion**

Grad near Dupljaja could be the largest archaeological site of the 11<sup>th</sup> – first half of the 13<sup>th</sup> centuries located in southern Banat. The size of the site and Grad itself, the existence

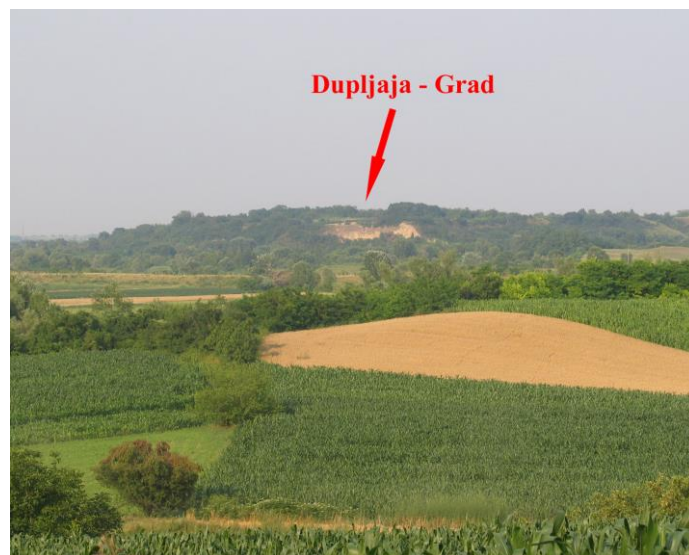
of several churches and also the discovered objects prove the importance of this place. It could be the main town and administrative centre of a bigger territory. Fortifications from that period have not yet been studied systematically in Banat. The discovered culture material offers the possibility to study the blending of the cultures from the territories south and north of the Danube. It would be particularly important to excavate and study the churches because there aren't too many data about churches within the Banat territory before the Tatar invasion.



**Fig. 1**



**Fig. 2**



**Fig. 3**



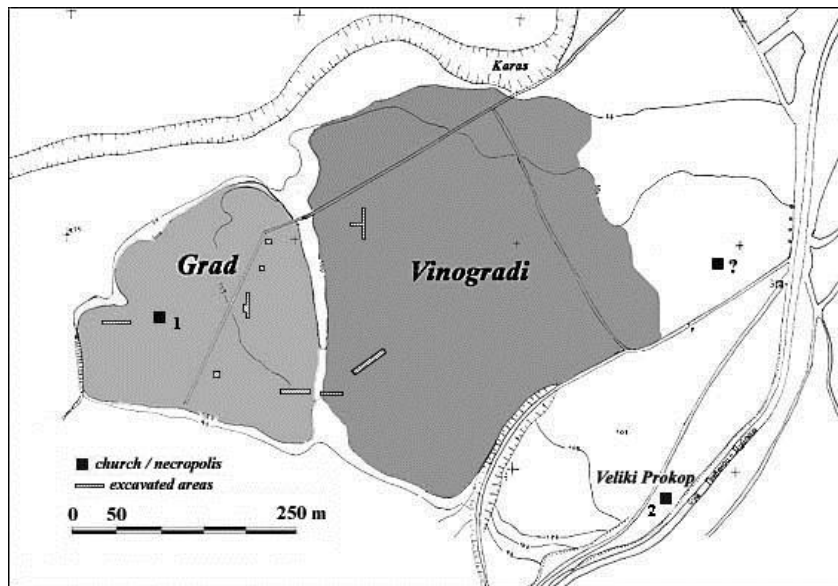


Fig. 4

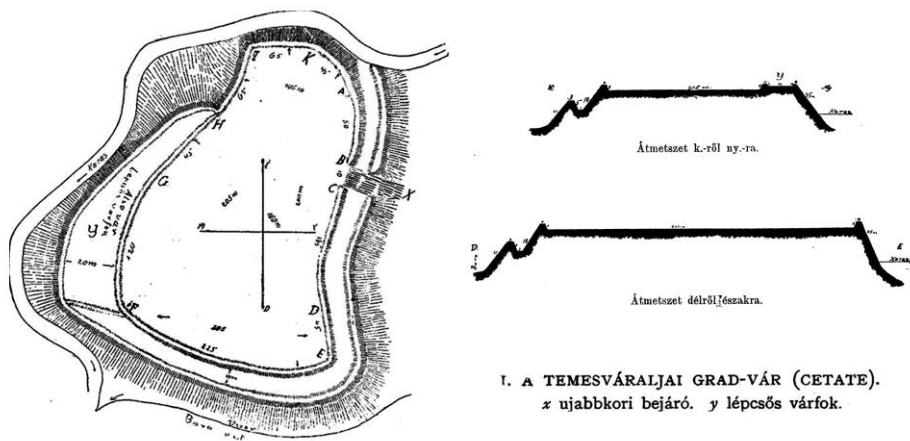


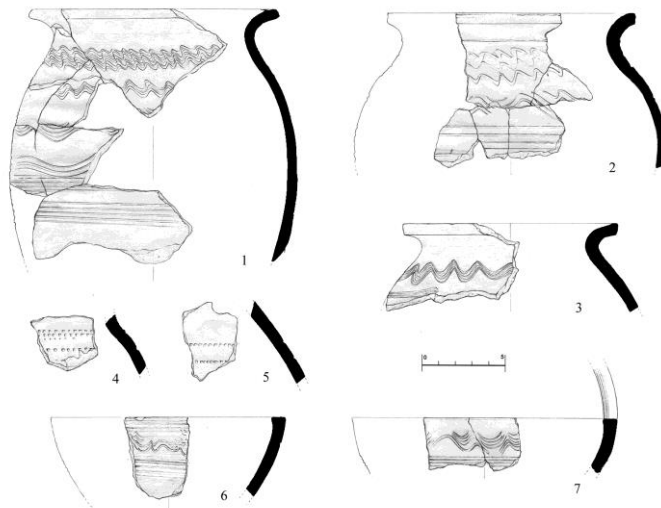
Fig. 5



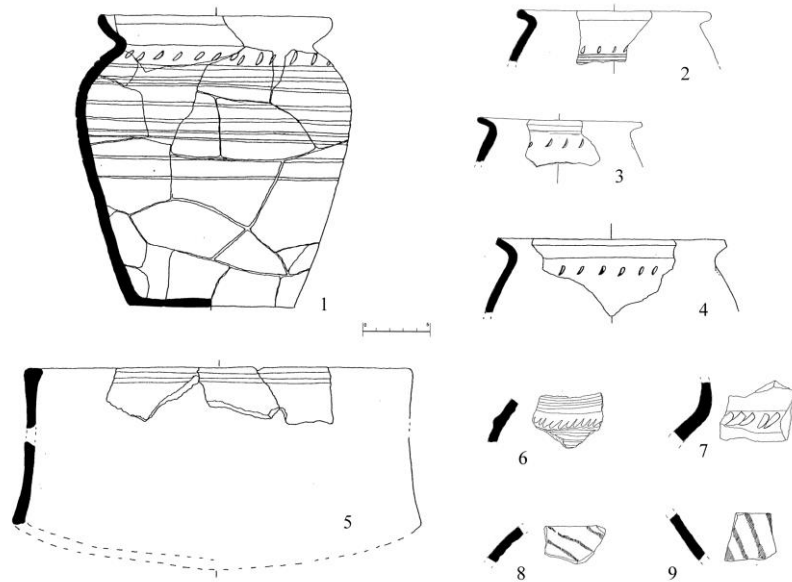
**Fig. 6**



**Fig. 7**



**Fig. 8**



**Fig. 9**



**Fig. 10**



**Fig. 11**



**Fig. 12**



Fig. 13

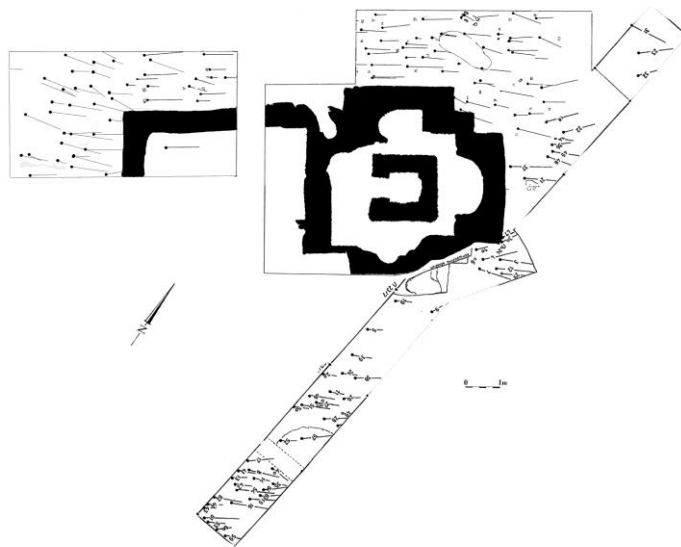


Fig. 14

- Fig. 1. The location of Dupljaja in Banat.
- Fig. 2. The terrain around Dupljaja, with the site position.
- Fig. 3. Dupljaja – Grad, view from the southwest.
- Fig. 4. Dupljaja – Grad, site plan with excavated areas.
- Fig. 5. Dupljaja – Grad, site plan (after Téglás 1905, pp. 218-221).
- Fig. 6. Cross-section through eastern rampart, view from the west.
- Fig. 7. Eastern rampart with remains of the older rampart, view from the west.
- Fig. 8. Pottery from the earlier rampart.
- Fig. 9. Pottery from the later rampart.
- Fig. 10. Dupljaja – Grad, mediaeval dwelling.
- Fig. 11. Dupljaja – Grad, mediaeval oven.
- Fig. 12. Dupljaja – Grad: interior of a fortress, view from the west.
- Fig. 13. Dupljaja – Grad: church, excavated area, view from the southwest.
- Fig. 14. Dupljaja – Veliki Prokop, ground plan of the church and excavated part of the necropolis.