

The gold bust (*imago*) of Septimius Severus from Didymoteicho (*Plotinopolis*)

Anne de Pury-Gysel

The ancient city of *Plotinopolis* lies on Aghia Petra hill which rises gently above the plain south of Didymoteicho (Thrace), not far from the Hebros river. Little information on the city, which was renamed by Trajan, has come down to us, although it features on ancient route maps and was mentioned by Ptolemy (3.11.3) and Procopius (*Aed.* 4.11.19).¹ Few archaeological excavations have been carried out, and of the city itself few vestiges remain (fig. 1). In 1965, while the Greek army was excavating a trench at Didymoteicho, a gold bust of an emperor wearing a cuirass came to light.² There is no documentation on its discovery, no report on the Greek army's intervention, nor even any information on the follow-up excavation carried out by A. Vavrtsas.³ Having initially been hidden by its discoverers, the bust narrowly escaped being melted down – the fate suffered by the majority of antiquities made of gold – for already in the days directly after the discovery one part of the edge of the cuirass was cut into pieces and sold off by the soldiers. This reckless action betrayed the bust's discoverers and made it possible for the unit's officers to recover the bust. Considering its extreme rarity, this type of object is important, not only for the questions it raises regard-

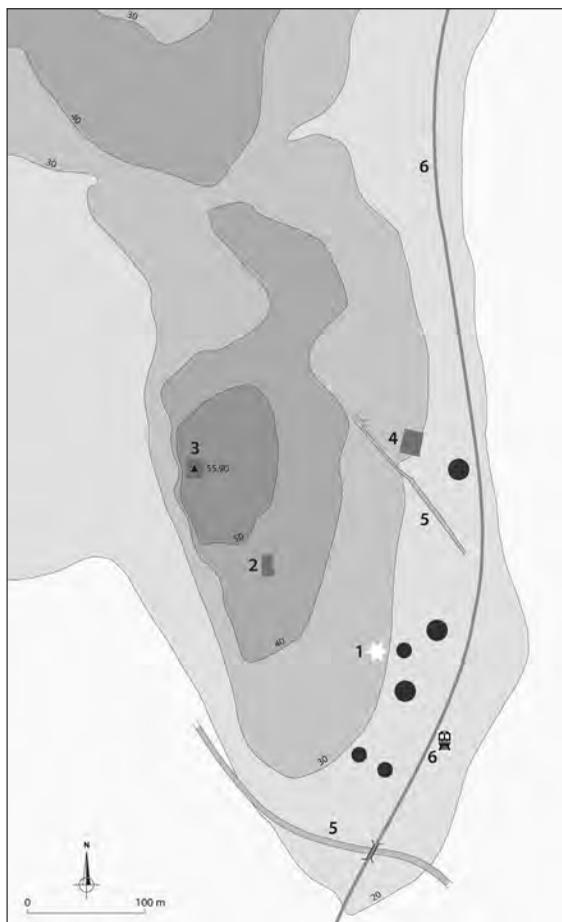


Fig. 1. Simplified contour map of Plotinopolis.

1. Approximate spot where gold bust was discovered. 2. A set of steps from the Byzantine era. 3. Partially excavated Roman building. 4. Roman cistern and winged building housing baths and mosaics (2nd/3rd c.). 5. Current line of the road. 6. Line of the Thessaloniki-Istanbul railway. Dark spots indicate late-antique tombs.

Frequently cited: de Pury-Gysel 2017 = *Die Goldbüste des Septimius Severus. Gold- und Silberbüsten römischer Kaiser. Mit Beiträgen von A. Giunlia-Mair. Fotos der Goldbüste von T. Kartsoglou* (Basel), and at http://edoc.unibas.ch/56095/1/9783952454268_rights_restricted%285%29.pdf

1 *Itin. Ant.* 175.7 (*a Plotinopolim*) and 322.7 (*Plotinopolim*). *Tab. Peut.* 7B3/7B4 (Talbert). See de Pury-Gysel 2017, 18-20.

2 The bust was first noted by G. Daux at *BCH* 89 (1965) 683.

3 A. Vavrtsas, "Eine Goldbüste aus Didymoteichon," in *Actes du premier congrès int. des études balkaniques et sud-est européennes. Sofia 1966* (Sofia 1969) 419. During the course of the on-site inspection, a 7th-c. coin was found in a layer deeper than that at which the bust was found, but the latter's location, on the side of the hill, does not exclude the possibility of the soil having banked up as a result of erosion, resulting in a kind of inverse stratigraphy.