Halmyris, a settlement and fort near the mouth of the Danube: interim report

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Geography and environment

Ancient Halmyris lies in the NW corner of the Dobrudja region in SE Romania. It lies c.2.5 km east of the village of Murighiol on a rocky promontory which is slightly higher than the surrounding marshes. This is at the E end of the Dunavat peninsula (known in antiquity as Extrema Scythiae Minoris: Jord., Get. 266) and it is bordered by the Danube delta on the north and east, Razelm lake on the south, and the Tulcea hills on the west (fig. 1). The site was occupied continuously from at least the mid-first millennium B.C. up to the 7th c. A.D. The local environment, flora and fauna were favourable to settlement until as a result of natural causes the Danube became almost inaccessible; from that point on, the settlement became vulnerable to human and other natural events and eventually it became deserted.¹

The site is known today as Batarea or Cetatea. In the early 20th c. the locals still called it the Genoese stronghold (Geneviz-Kaleh). In antiquity it lay on the bank of the southern arm of the Danube called Puce (now known as Sfantu Gheorghe).² Today the southern arm of the Danube runs 2 km north of the site and it is connected to Lake Murighiol by the Peribona canal. Until 1983 there were two lakes, c.100 and c.200 m from the site, modern relics of the ancient course of the river. To the east lie the Dunavat hills and to the south is Dealul Cetatea (“fort hill”) (fig. 2).

History of research and the name of the site

In 1643 H. Rosweydus began collecting hagiographic information and his successor J. Bolandus drew further attention to the name Halmyris-Salmorus, a toponym connected to the martyrdom here of two Christians.³ In 1898 the engineer P. Polonic visited the site and proposed locating here Ad Stoma.⁴ In 1909-10 the numismatist C. Moisil made a summary description,⁵ emphasizing the numismatic finds that included a Republican coin hoard. He postulated for the first time the location of ancient Salmorus, the name of which was later corrupted in the Notitia Dignitatum to Thalomonium, and by linguistic analysis he linked the Latin variant Salmorus with the Greek Halmyris. He was the first to postulate the location of Halmyris near the modern village of Murighiol. This has been shown to be correct by our own work (see below). Shortly afterwards the Austrian J. Weiss suggested placing Halmyris at the fortlet of Dunavatu de Jos because it lay on the bank of lake Razelm.⁶ Later the historian V. Părvan invoked the name of a fort called Gratiana known from the Notitia Dignitatum and

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² Strabo 7.3.15; Plin., NH 4.i2.79; see also C. Bratescu in Analele Dobrogei 2 (1921) 227-41, id. in Bul. Soc. Regale de Geografie 54 (1935) 32-37; R. Vulpe, Dobrogea (Bucharest 1940) 63 and 80.
³ Acta Sanctorum, Mensis Iulii f.539, 4. Bolandus quotes Rosweydus’s opinion as follows: ex his collegitur Almiridum civilatem in Scythiam esse ... forte Salmorudis Antonini.
⁴ His notes in abbreviated form were not published until 1935. His manuscript was included in Tocilescu mss. 5132, f. 95 today in the Romanian Academy.
⁶ J. Weiss, Die Dobrudscha im Altertum (Sarajevo 111) 55-56.