

The 'Valu lui Traian': a Roman frontier rehabilitated

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Introduction

Cutting across the Dobrogea in eastern Romania from the Danube near Cernavodă (*Axiopolis*) or Cochirleni to the Black Sea coast near Constanța (*Tomis*), and covering an overall distance of up to 61 km (38 miles), are three separate but interlinked linear fortifications: a Stone Wall, a Large Earthen Wall, and a Small Earthen Wall (fig. 1). In both popular historical tradition and when first recorded, all three were considered to be Roman, more specifically Trajanic in origin, and referred to collectively as the 'Valu lui Traian' (Trajan's Rampart).¹ Since the 1950s, however, the system has been assumed by Romanian archaeologists to be 10th or 11th c. A.D. (see below). As a result, the complex has not featured in specific surveys of the Roman military archaeology of the area or in various standard overviews of Roman frontiers in Europe;² to all intents and purposes, it has disappeared from the consciousness of Roman military archaeologists. Since the 1960s there has been minimal excavation and very little other primary work on the system, so that neither the detailed chronology nor the relationship of the different elements is firmly established archaeologically.

Our own involvement with the monument is twofold. Both of us have particular research interests in Roman frontier zones and a wider appreciation of archaeological landscapes in Romania and their evolution. In recent years we have undertaken extensive aerial photographic survey in the area, alongside assessment of vertical photography from the Second World War, declassified Cold War satellite photographs and recent high-resolution satellite imagery, in order to map the archaeological landscape of the southern Dobrogea.³ The aim of this paper is to review critically the evidence for the overall character and general date of these linear fortifications with a view to returning two of them to their rightful place as elements of a well-preserved and chronologically-complex Roman frontier system. This makes it the most easterly example of a man-made barrier in the empire. Its rehabilitation is all the more important as over recent decades numerous changes have affected and are continuing to impact deleteriously the remains. These include the construction of the navigable canal between the Danube and the Black Sea; the intensification of quarrying; the expansion of vineyards and arable agriculture, with concomitant plough erosion; the expansion of urban areas, especially in the eastern and central sectors around towns such as Constanța and Medgidia; and infrastructure development, such as major irrigation canals, gas pipelines, and motorway construction (the latter ongoing at the time of writing).

1 The name subsequently adopted in 1925 by the village of Hasancea, which sits between the Stone Wall and Large Earthen Wall some 13 km (8 miles) west of Constanța.

2 Specific surveys: e.g., Aricescu 1980; Scorpan 1980; Zahariade and Gudea 1997. Standard overviews: e.g., Maxfield 1987; Breeze 2011. Though a single 'earth wall' is indicated on the map of the Danube region (fig. 8) in Whittaker 1994, the frontier is not mentioned in the text.

3 E.g., Oltean and Abell 2011; Oltean and Hanson forthcoming; Oltean forthcoming.