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# The Roman to Byzantine transition in the Balkans: preliminary results on Nicopolis and its hinterland

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## Introduction

To discover whether a Roman city founded in the early 2nd c. A.D. still preserved the same social and economic structure in the 6th was the aim of British excavations which began in 1985. Had the site been any other than Nicopolis ad Istrum in N Bulgaria such an objective would have been far too ambitious; but largely uncontaminated by later occupation, and on a site adjacent to its well-preserved Roman predecessor, early Byzantine Nicopolis offered a rare opportunity to investigate the layout of a 6th-c. city by geophysical survey in combination with selective, open-area excavation (fig. 1). Apart from reconstructing the physical appearance of the city in late antiquity and in sufficient detail to compare with its Roman precursor, environmental and ceramic research was carried out to chart its economic development. Eight seasons of fieldwork were conducted up to 1992. The first volume, describing the results of the excavations, coins, inscriptions, frescoes and geophysics, was published in 1995, the second, containing pottery and glass, in 1999,<sup>1</sup> while the final volume, on finds, environmental and other scientific reports, is in preparation. Despite excellent results which greatly exceeded expectations, the project raised fascinating but awkward questions, the most important being why Nicopolis in the 6th c. proved to be so unlike its Roman predecessor, both in its appearance and its economy. So different was the early Byzantine city that it is most improbable that it maintained any of the civic characteristics so apparent of Nicopolis at its zenith during the Severan period.<sup>2</sup> As further excavation within Nicopolis is unlikely to resolve this issue, a new programme, the 'Transition to late antiquity' project, was begun in 1996 to explore the hinterland of the city, to discover if there had been a change in the pattern of settlement or economy in the region. Since the Roman city derived its wealth from its rich agricultural territory, any disruption there would presumably have affected its prominent citizens and reduced their ability to maintain civic institutions and amenities.<sup>3</sup>

## Roman urbanism in the Balkans: the case of Nicopolis

The traditional view has been that there was no fundamental change in the nature of urbanism in the southern Balkans but rather a slow decline in the cities' economic and social importance, arrested only by a revival in their fortunes during the reign of Justinian, before they faded away during the latter years of the 6th c.<sup>4</sup> Recently, a fragmentary but still consistent picture has begun to emerge which suggests otherwise: far from being a gradual process, profound changes had occurred in cities along the Danube already by the early 4th c.<sup>5</sup>

Nicopolis was a Trajanic foundation established in c.110; it is mentioned briefly in historical sources during the 3rd and late 4th c. and again in the 5th and 6th.<sup>6</sup> Excavations in and around the agora by our Bulgarian colleagues have uncovered the well-preserved remains of public buildings and roads paved with massive limestone slabs.<sup>7</sup> To the south of the city's Rom-

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1 Poulter 1995 and R. Falkner in Poulter 1999a.

2 Poulter 1992a.

3 The inscriptions from Nicopolis confirm that euergetism on the part of its wealthier inhabitants, as elsewhere in the empire, was the usual way of paying for civic building projects, gladiatorial fights, and public monuments: Poulter 1992a.

4 Velkov 1977; Jones 1940.

5 Poulter 1992b.

6 Poulter 1995, 1-18.

7 Ivanov and Ivanov.