

Legionary fortress and Early Byzantine town of Novae

Protecting the past – Engaging the future

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INTRODUCTION

On the banks of the Danube River, the ancient Roman fortress of Novae stands as one of most significant archaeological landmarks in Bulgaria. Founded in the 1st century AD as the base of the First Italic Legion, the site developed from a strategic military fortress into a vibrant settlement—a meeting point of cultures, ideas, and identities.

The restoration project completed in 2013, supported by the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Bulgaria and the Municipality of Svishtov, marked a major step in turning the ruins into shared cultural heritage. Today, the Archaeological Park of Novae presents a preserved and interpreted ancient landscape, offering visitors a space for learning and discovery—walking along reconstructed streets, exploring the remains of the legion's headquarters, Roman baths, and basilicas, and touring the park, the on-site museum, and the ongoing excavations to learn about the site's past and new archaeological findings (Fig. 1).

Research at Novae is one of the largest and longest-running projects of the National Archaeological Institute with Museum at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. It represents the institute's most enduring international collaboration, involving renown Polish scholars. The long-term partnership with the University of Warsaw led to the creation of a four-party research consortium. It includes two archaeological teams from the University of Warsaw—the Faculty of Archaeology and the Research Centre for the Antiquity of South-Eastern Europe—together with archaeologists from the Regional History Museum "Aleko Konstantinov" in Svishtov and a research team from Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań.



Fig. 1: Archaeological Park in Novae (photo by M. Pisz)



Fig. 2: Novae. Sector XII
(photo by B. Wojciechowski)



Fig. 3: Novae. Central part of the site and the area to the south of the principia—possible location of the legionary commander's residence (photo by A. Tomas)

CURRENT RESEARCH

Legionary fortresses were not only places where soldiers lived in barracks. Soldiers, together with their commanders and extensive administrative staff, required large, purpose-built facilities. These included the headquarters building (*principia*), baths (*thermae*), hospital (*valetudinarium*), the commander's residence (*praetorium*), and various other structures used for administration, storage, and manufacturing. To date, archaeologists have uncovered, among others, the headquarters, the military hospital, an officer's house, and the baths.

Sector XII (Fig. 2) is an important part of the site, investigated since 2011 by the team from the Antiquity for South-Eastern Europe Research Centre. Excavations reach more than four metres and expose the level of early timber barracks, a unique example on the Lower Danube. The course of the road separating the barrack blocks and defining on the south the boundary of the stone phase of the centurion's house of *legio I Italica* has been established. The bath with a preserved rooms, hypocaust and wall flue system has been identified. Surviving plaster indicates wall painting of green and red garlands on a white ground. The 'great canal' running along the building has been recorded, with two junctions linking it to the street drain and with feeders from the bath. The next step is to secure the exposed structures, reconstruct them, and carry out their semantic digitisation.

Much remains to be discovered to the south of the *principia*, where excavations have been carried out since 2022 (Fig. 3). The site has been prepared for extensive investigation, including the use of modern non-invasive prospection methods. Archaeologists from the Faculty of Archaeology, University of Warsaw aim to identify the precise location of the legionary commander's residence. Selected areas are being excavated to document artefacts and collect samples for laboratory analyses, which may help determine the chronology of the buildings, as well as provide insights into the inhabitants' living conditions. The project also seeks to examine the later history of this zone, when the commander's residence may have lost its original function.

In 2014, excavations began on the main street of the Roman military fortress (*via principalis*), located east of the western gate (Fig. 4). The investigation revealed a massive storage building, subsequently adapted for gatherings of the First Cohort (*scholae*), as well as the street, which runs along the inner perimeter of the fortress walls (*via sagularis*). Remarkably well-preserved, the street retains its stone pavement and carefully crafted curbs, offering a vivid glimpse into the planning of Roman infrastructure.

Since 1977, a part of the *canabae* has been under excavation in Sector VIII A. Today, the work focuses on uncovering graves from the early Byzantine necropolis, the Roman and late Roman peristyle building (Fig. 5), and the street leading to the western gate of Novae.



Fig. 4: Novae. *Via sagularis* and a large storage building in Sector VIII/IX (photo by V. Valchev)



Fig. 5: Sector VIII A. Buildings in the western part of the *canabae* (photo by K. Chakarov)

PERSPECTIVES

Future research at Novae will be aimed at identifying key residential and administrative buildings. Planned activities include geophysical surveys, excavations, and interdisciplinary studies in the areas of the legionary commander's residence, the legion's headquarters, and along the *via principalis*. Investigations will also continue outside the fortress walls in westerly direction, where recently uncovered finds have offered impressive and intriguing evidence about life surrounding this important military complex.

At the same time, Novae is entering a new stage in the preservation and socialization of cultural heritage. The upcoming second phase of restoration and site interpretation will enhance the second main tourist route, connecting the western gate, the *via principalis*, and the *valetudinarium*, the only fully preserved military hospital known from a Roman legionary fortress, making Novae a unique destination.

Current research projects:

- Project Lip3D: Living forever the Past through a 3Digital world. Digital Europe Programme (DIGITAL), Cloud Data - AI 05 Cultheritage. Data Space for Cultural Heritage.
- Discovering the praetorium. Layout, chronology and function of the commander's residence in the Roman legionary fortress Novae (today Bulgaria), Opus 27, no. 2024/53/B/HS3/03816, National Science Centre, Poland.

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