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PREHISTORIC NOVAE

ABSTRACT

Neolithic flint tools were discovered in three sectors in Novae (II, IV, and XII): polished axes, scrapers, and blades. An arched beaked point was discovered at the Ostrite Mogili site, east of Novae. These discoveries prove that a previously unknown Neolithic settlement existed there, at least within the site of Novae. This seems to be confirmed by the finding of a ceramic fragment with

a motif characteristic of the Vădastra Culture. The tools discovered in Novae were made of raw material extracted from flint deposits located near Novae – in Nikopol. It can, therefore, be assumed that the prehistoric settlement belonged to the Vădastra Culture and its inhabitants specialised in the extraction, processing, and export of flint tools.

Keywords: Novae, flint tools, Neolithic pottery, Vădastra Culture

Situated by the Danube in northern Bulgaria (ca. 4 km eastwards from the present-day Svištov) (Fig. 1), in what was initially a part of the Roman province of Moesia, renamed to Moesia Inferior in AD 86, the ancient archaeological site of Novae is known first and foremost as the home town to the *legio VIII Augusta* and then to the *legio I Italica* (Fig. 2). Starting from the mid-3rd century AD (Fig. 3) and until the medieval period it remained an important urban centre.² However, the history of the town began before the first Roman legionaries, ever arrived by the Danube.³ Evidence for this has been discovered in three spots within the site (Fig. 4). The first spot was the area excavated by us and situated just beside the *porta praetoria*, at the junction of two streets: *via praetoria* and *via sagularis*. It is the so-called Section IV, which contains an unearthed military hospital – *valetudinarium*. The second spot is the so-called Section XII – located on the eastern side of the *principia* – where wooden barracks of the First Cohort of the *legio VIII Augusta*

once stood, later replaced by the stone-built house of the centurion – *primus pilus* – of the First Italic Legion.⁴ Finally, the third spot was an *intervallum*, situated near the western fortification wall of the fortress, excavated in the 1980s by archaeologists from the University of Wrocław.⁵ Finds from these three spots included a fragment of a polished axe, scrapers, and blades.

When subjected to archaeological prospection, the area known locally as Ostrite Mogili, located ca. 3 kilometres eastwards from Novae, yielded an arched beaked point (Fig. 5).⁶ The prehistoric times are also witnessed by yet another artefact. On the Danubian bank westwards from Novae, a ceramic fragment was found, bearing a decorative motif characteristic of the Vădastra Culture, identified in 1933 by I. Nestor.⁷ These artefacts show that Novae and the surrounding area must have been intensively settled both in the Palaeolithic and the Neolithic periods – despite centuries of disruption in the area a relatively large number of prehistoric relics were preserved.

² Novae I, 115–246.

³ Dyczek 2001.

⁴ Dyczek 2018, 43–57.

⁵ Dyczek *et al.* 1987, 105–110.

⁶ A detailed analysis of the flint artefacts was to be performed by Prof. Stefan K. Kozłowski, a long-term employee of the Centre. Previously, he delivered a preliminary identification of

the tools, see *Novensia* 22, 2011. Sadly, his passing brought a halt to these analyses. The present paper is dedicated to his memory. I am greatly indebted to Dr Małgorzata Kot and Prof. Karol Szymczak for support and all the remarks which made writing it possible.

⁷ Nestor 1933, 56.

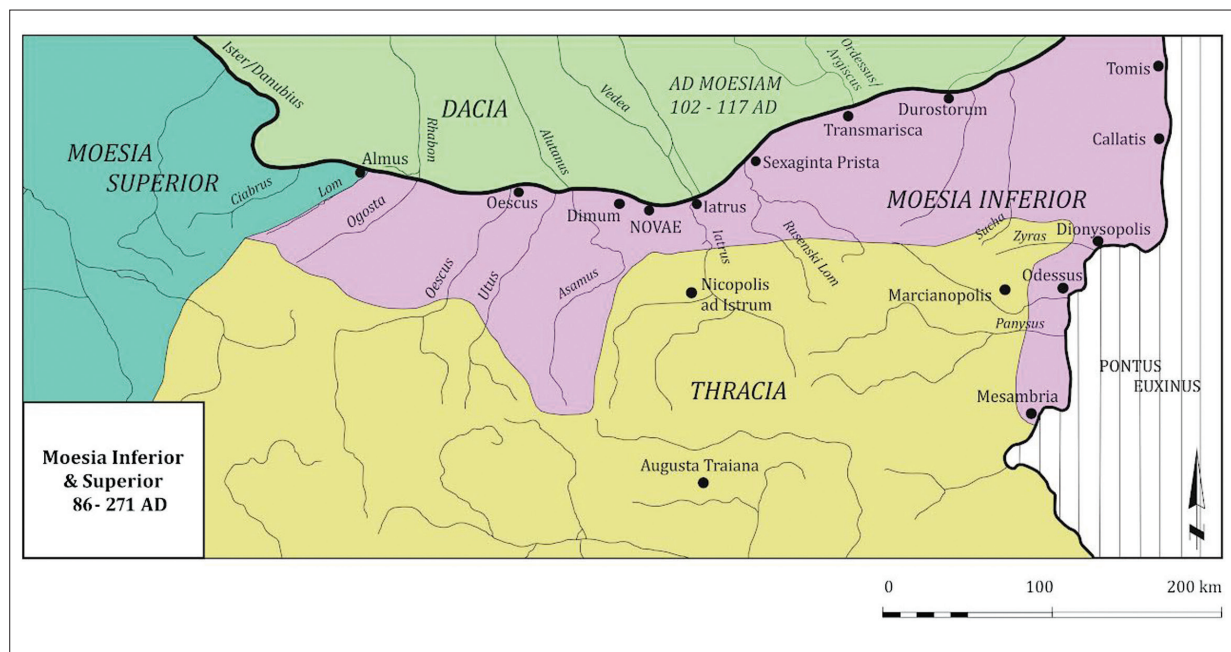


Fig. 1. Moesia Inferior after AD 86, compiled by P. Dyczek.

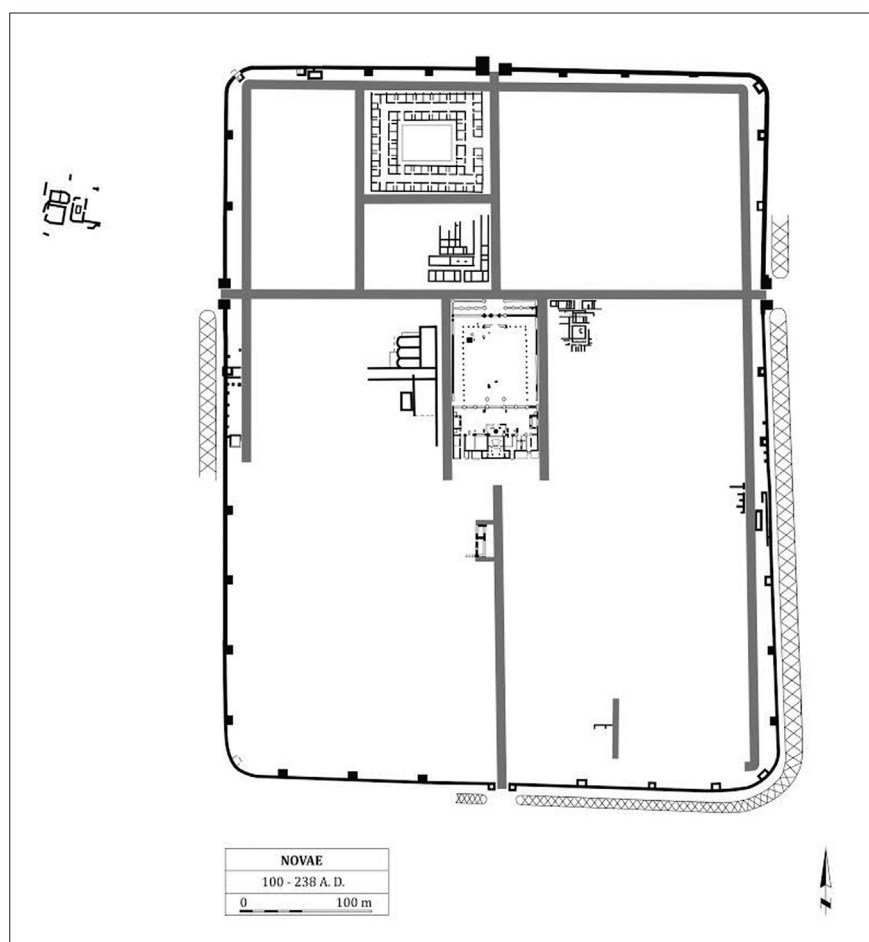


Fig. 2. Plan of *castrum* Novae, drawing by P. Dyczek, T. Słowik, B. Wojciechowski.

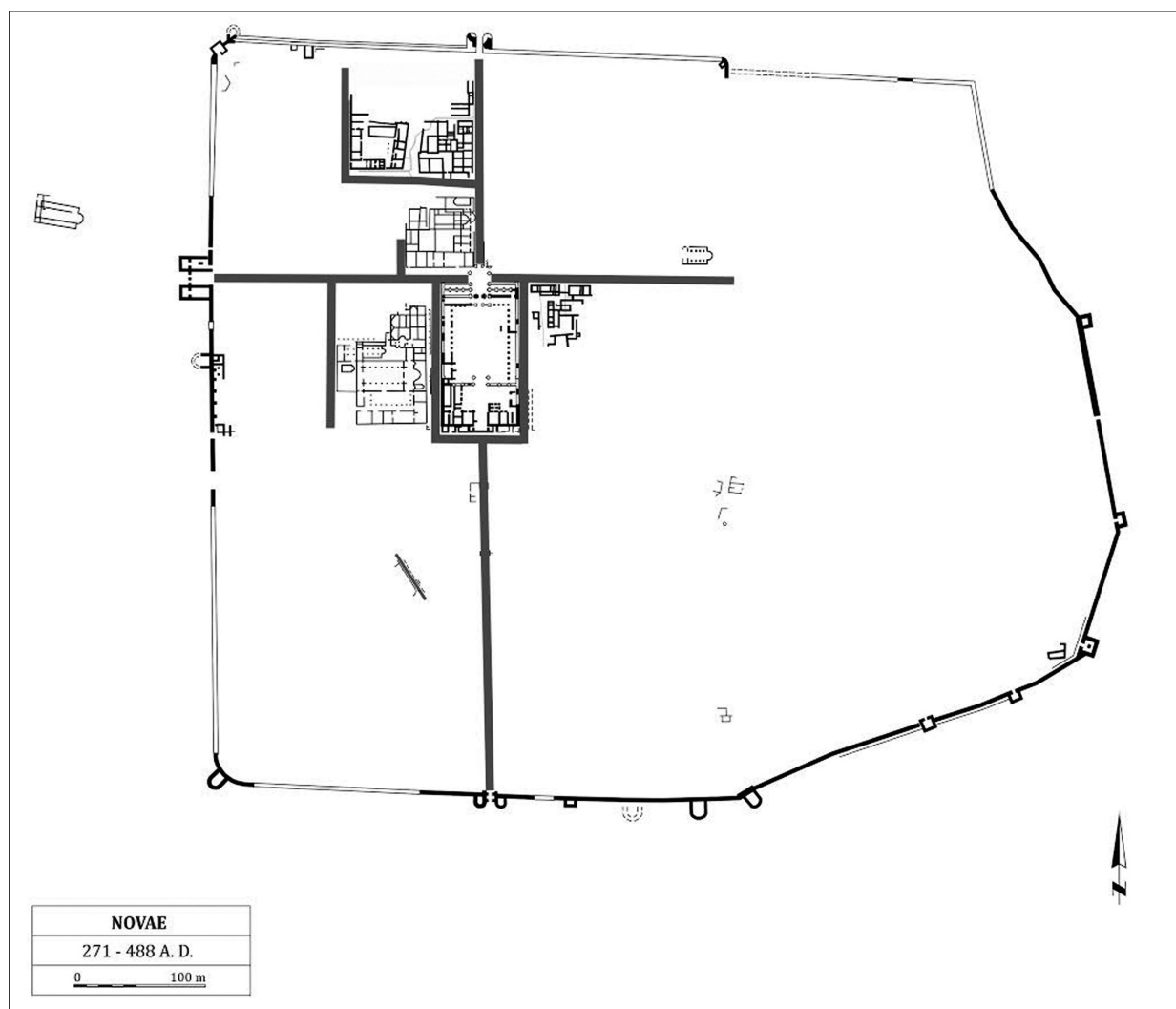


Fig. 3. Plan of Novae – Roman town, compiled by P. Dyczek, T. Słowik, B. Wojciechowski.

The flintstones were discovered either in the top part of a loess layer forming the natural geological substrate or in the construction strata left by the legionary structures, whose foundations were embedded directly in the natural ground. The excavations reached the loess level in only a few deepest trenches and no other remains of these early periods were found. However, it is statistically justified to say that the area where the camp was later built used to be a significant settlement site already in prehistory.

Admittedly, no Bronze Age relics have been found so far, but the excavations revealed a considerable number of fragmented hand-built Thracian pottery, characteristically formed as an urn decorated with a thread motif. It means that there must have been important reasons attracting settlers to this place in different periods. In my opinion,

two things explain such settlement dynamics. The first is topography. The area is situated at the exact spot where the bed of the Danube bends maximally towards the south. Moreover, a number of variously sized islands were and still are created near the river bend, thus making it easier to cross. The discussed area lies on a high – and well-protected – embankment by the Danube. It descends slightly towards the river, limited by low hills from the south. To the west, there is another erosional scarp, at the foot of which the river called Dermendere flows today.

In addition, the elevation itself is surrounded from the west and east by relatively deep ravines, which perhaps acted as a natural barrier for settlement. The whole area, at least in the Roman Period, was covered by a mixed forest dominated by oaks.⁸ The easy access to

⁸ Dyczek 2019a, 55–64; Jankowska, Kozakiewicz 2018, 83–98.

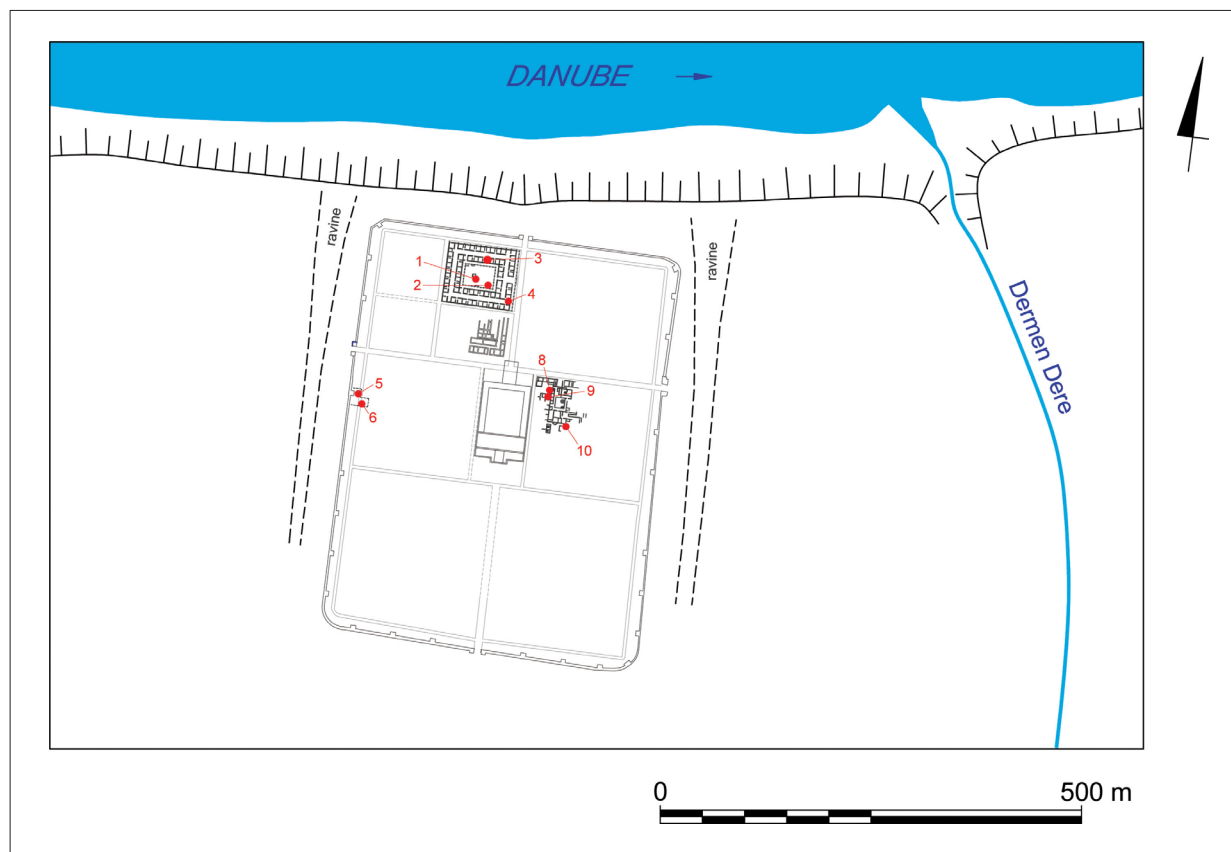


Fig. 4. Flint finds from the area of Novae: 1–4 Sector IV; 5–6 – Sector II; 8–10 – Sector XII, compiled by P. Dyczek, B. Wojciechowski.

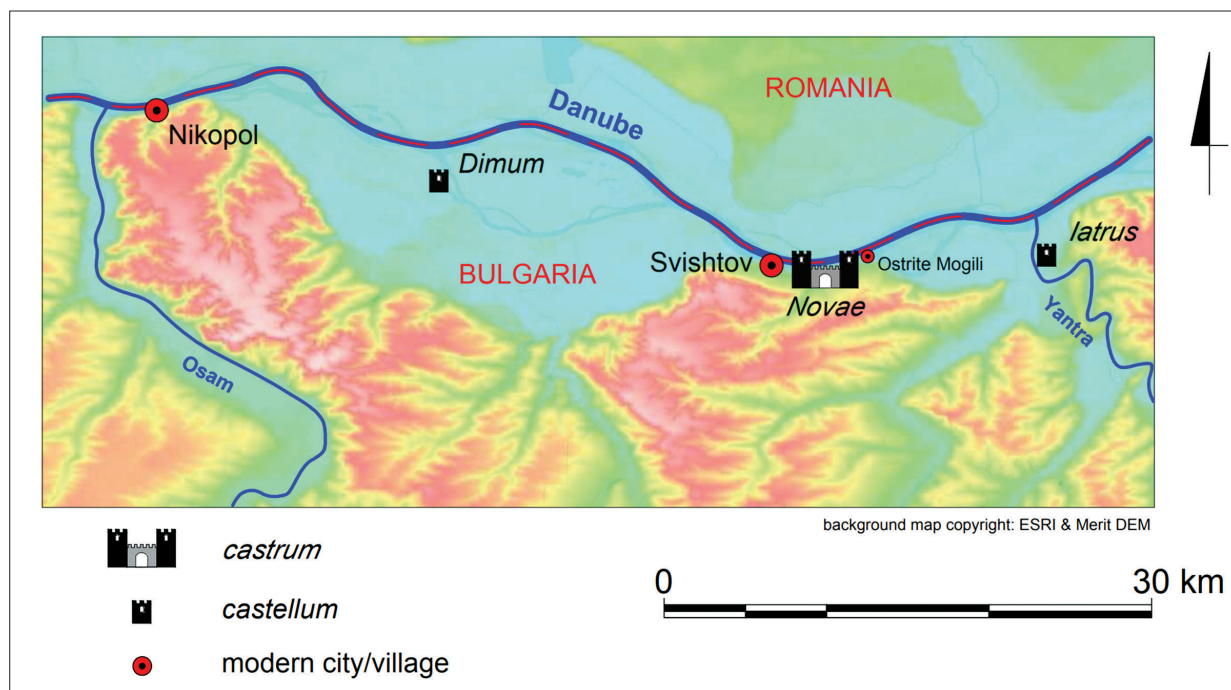


Fig. 5. Flint finds from the area around Novae, compiled by P. Dyczek, B. Wojciechowski.

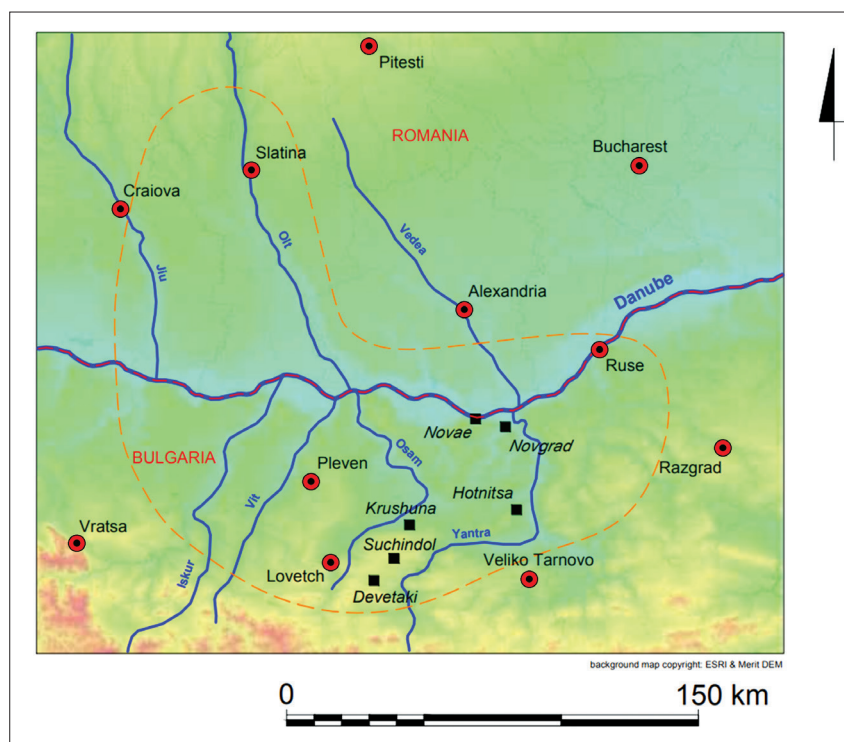


Fig. 6. Major settlements of the Vădastra culture discovered around Novae, compiled by B. Wojciechowski.

the bank of the Danube facilitated river transportation, whereas the karstic layout of the southern bank of the river created favourable conditions for land travel – the opportunity later exploited by the Romans building the Danubian road.

But there is another important reason. A glimpse at the map of Neolithic sites reveals that they are grouped in several areas (Fig. 6). I believe that these groupings relate to easily accessible sources of flint identical to that used to make the aforementioned excavated stone tools. The deposits easiest to exploit are located near the present-day town of Nikopol, where flint outcrops are visible in the embankment by the Danube. Other rich deposits of this mineral, albeit covered by several layers of earth and thus harder to exploit, are located in Pleven (Fig. 7). Found on the bank of the Danube, likely relocated somewhat by the river, the ceramic fragment is characteristic enough to be not only easy to link to a particular place of origin but also, thanks to a convex motif preserved on it, to specify the kind of item it used to be a part of. The fragment was made of clay fired to grey and decorated with an intricate geometric pattern carved into the form of a zigzag arranged into parallel lines, sometimes cross-

ing over each other and sometimes intersecting at right angles (Fig. 8). The spaces between the lines – narrow channels or grooves – were filled with white paste (lime or chalk). This manner of decoration is unique, raising questions regarding its origin.⁹ The characteristic features of the motif strongly suggest that, as mentioned earlier, its makers hailed from the Vădastra Culture (Fig. 9).

This cultural formation is associated with Oltenia, related to the River Olt (*Alutanus* for the Romans), south-eastern Romania. It flows into the Danube near the town of Nikopol. Its range stretched from south-eastern Muntenia and north-western Bulgaria. This culture is counted among the cultural cycles of the Middle and Late Neolithic. It evolved in many states whose precise definition remains problematic.¹⁰ There are two competing points of view. According to the first, represented by C. Mateescu¹¹ and M. Nicara, the Vădastra Culture can be divided into two phases. On the other hand, D. Berciu¹² and M. Nica¹³ believe that there were four or five phases.¹⁴ Certain controversies are also related to absolute dating. Some argue that the culture developed from 5400 to 4900 BC,¹⁵ others that from 5500 to 4700 BC,¹⁶ and yet others that from 5500 to 5000 BC.¹⁷

⁹ Dragoman 2009, 96–98.

¹⁰ Chapman 2010, 85.

¹¹ Mateescu 1959, 61–73.

¹² Berciu 1939, 37–49; 1966, 97–98.

¹³ Nica, 1968, 5–15.

¹⁴ Popovici, Lazăr 2020, 88–105; Mirea 2008, 283–284.

¹⁵ Dragoman 2009, 95.

¹⁶ Găță, Dragoman 2007, 8.

¹⁷ Popovici 2010, 91.

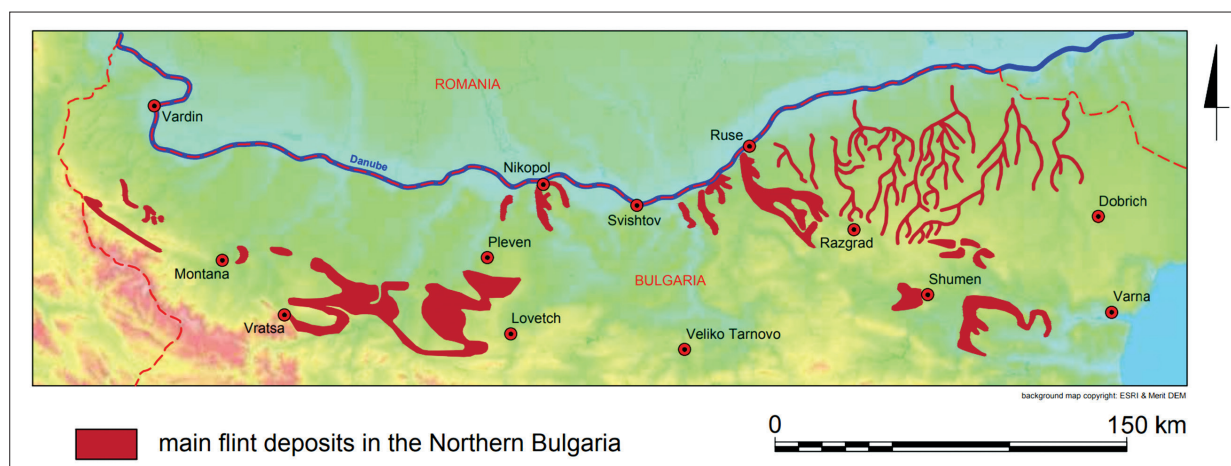


Fig. 7. Flint deposits in northern Bulgaria, compiled by B. Wojciechowski.

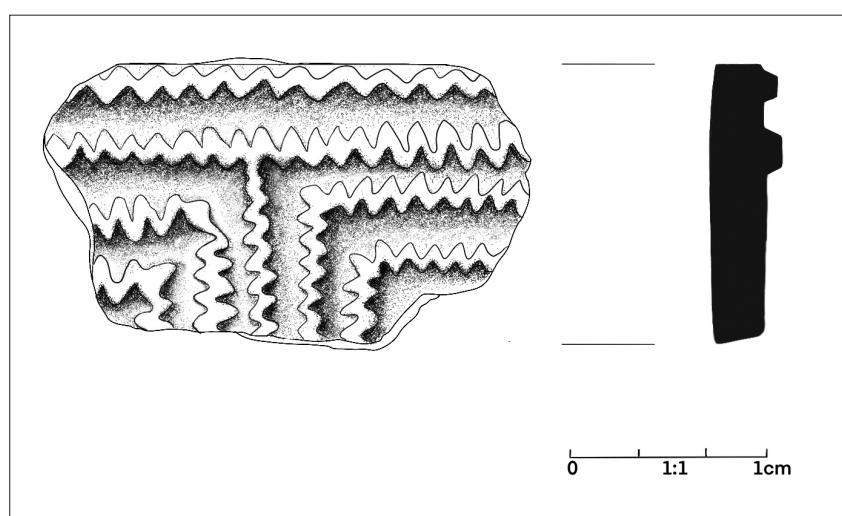


Fig. 8. Figurine fragment found in Novae, compiled by W. Maszewska.

The Vădastra Culture is considered synchronous with the phases A3, B1–B2–C of the Vinča Culture and phases II–III of the Karanovo Culture.¹⁸ However, the earliest phase of the Vădastra Culture matches the first phase of the Boiana Culture,¹⁹ since the cultural strata of the Vădastra site – Măgura Fetelor – contained fragments of pottery of the Bolintineanu type.²⁰ The Vădastra Culture was first mentioned in the literature in 1932.²¹ However, it had been excavated already in the years 1871 and 1873 by C. Bollia, at the site of Măgura Fetelor.

The small ceramic fragment discussed above is characteristic enough to suggest that it may have been a part

of a figurine. The clay which it was made of was worked well and its surface polished.²² The intricate motif, characteristic technological features, and form – all these aspects suggest that the potters paid considerable attention to the quality of their figurines. Some scholars suppose it may have been a joint effort,²³ as indicated by traces found on hand-built vessels showing the hands of more than one person.²⁴ Three types of figurines have been distinguished for the Vădastra Culture.²⁵ The discovered fragment comes from a type known as “violin-like” (Fig. 10). They measure between 20 and 50 centimetres in height and are shaped to resemble a flattened cylinder

¹⁸ Mantu 2000, 85.

¹⁹ Petrescu-Dâmbovița 1978, 53.

²⁰ Gâță Dragoman, 2015, 9–20.

²¹ Nestor 1932, 56–57.

²² Mirea 2008, 288–289.

²³ Dragoman 2009, 99.

²⁴ Mateescu 1965, 260.

²⁵ Neagoe 2001, 13–20.

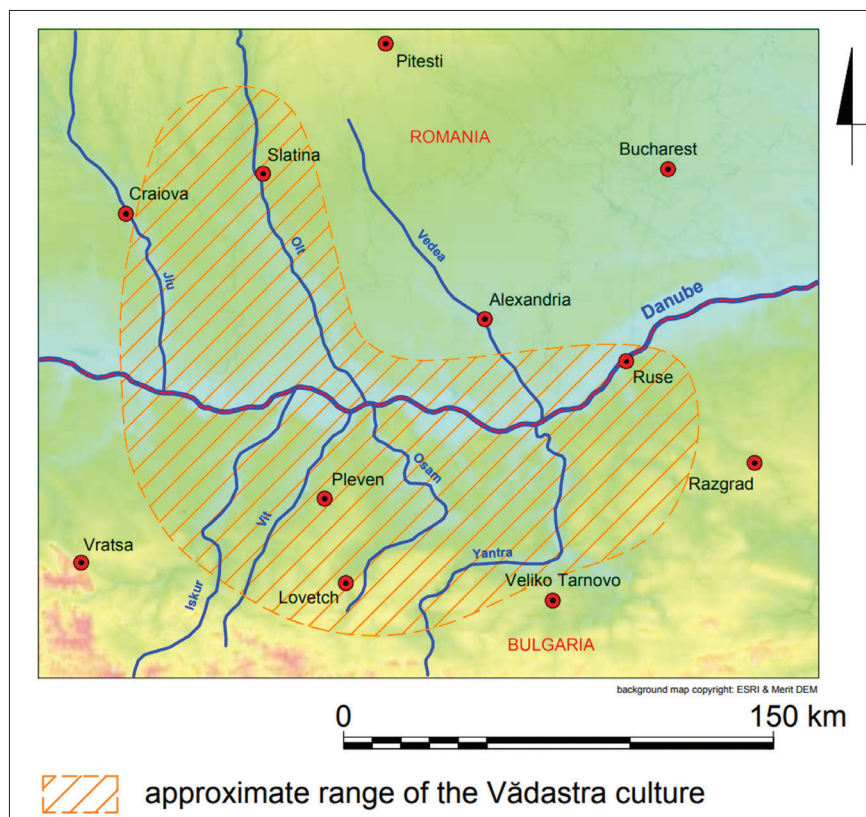


Fig. 9. Range of the Vădastra culture, compiled by B. Wojciechowski.



Fig. 10. Flint tools and flakes from Sector XII, compiled by W. Maszewska, J. Reclaw.

and hollow inside. Many scholars believe that their form was anthropomorphic. For this reason, they are sometimes referred to as 'curled' – their upper end is shaped schematically to resemble either a head or opulent curly hair with parting.²⁶ Depending on the accepted assumptions, the figurine is dated to either Phase II or IV of the discussed culture.

The anthropomorphic interpretation of the shapes of the figurines suggests their potential function. According to the traditional view, introduced by M. Gimbutas, they are material relics of a cult, revolving around the idea of fertility and a feminine deity.²⁷ Other scholars proposed to see them as offerings, toys, urns, or portraits.²⁸ Of course, these considerations are nothing but speculative. However, it remains a fact that although the figurines resemble human silhouettes, elements of the human body are not clearly shown on them. Their anthropomorphism can be inferred only from their general form and upper endings – the supposed heads or curly hair. In my view, another hypothesis can be proposed, if we take into account that the figurines are hollow and rest on square bases. They look more like models of houses, certain examples of which are known Vădastra Culture.²⁹ One feature of their structure is especially worth noting. Along the main axis on the base, there is an undecorated square resembling an entrance. This hypothesis seems to be corroborated by the fact that excavations at some sites unearthed ruins of houses which enabled their preliminary reconstruction.³⁰ In this context, the supposed head or curls may be interpreted as decorative rafters. Similar iconographic patterns are known from many other cultures. This is just a supposition in need of further research.

The repertoire of flint tools discovered in Novae and its vicinity indicates that the area may have been settled already in the Palaeolithic.³¹ People inhabiting it benefitted from the proximity of deposits of high-quality flint stone. The oldest tool – arched beaked point from the Upper Palaeolithic – is characteristic of the Gravettian Culture.

Although the tool discovered in Novae (Sector II and XII) was made of flint coming from around Nikopol (Fig. 11), it should be noted that deposits of this material appear in four places in present-day Bulgaria: north-western Bulgaria, north Bulgaria, Dobruja, and the Rhodope Mountains to the south.³² Outcrops of only two deposits reach the Danube: Nikopol and the western section of the Dobruja deposit. Such geological situation facilitated the exploitation of these deposits and distribution of flint

stone, first by the Danube and then also through the basins of its tributaries.

A separate question is the technique used to work the stones. Those coming from Novae show visible influence of the technocomplex characteristic for the Karanovo Culture I and II.³³ Such impact of the Karanovo Culture on toolmaking in distant areas in present-day Bulgaria has already been noted.³⁴ However, it reached also to territories occupied by other cultures, as far away as the Aegean Islands.³⁵

Despite the said technological connections with the Karanovo Culture, the assemblage of tools from Novae finds analogies in the repertoire of tools known from the Vădastra Culture, for instance, Magura Buduiasca. Therefore, all the currently available data indicate that these tools originated from the latter culture but were modelled on artefacts from the Karanovo Culture. Similarly, to Novae, the assemblage from the aforementioned archaeological site is also dominated by blades and scrapers.³⁶ Another feature shared by both sites is the presence of large numbers of flakes attesting that the tools were made locally from imported flint cores. Moreover, in Novae these flakes are concentrated in the south-eastern part of the area where flint items have been discovered so far. This would indicate that the flint-knapping workshops were confined to a single and relatively small area within the settlement. The above conclusion is additionally supported by chronology.

As of today, due to the lack of publications from Bulgaria and the ongoing methodological debates, we cannot determine precisely the chronological frame when the interactions between the two cultures occurred or their intensity. Nevertheless, the process itself is already traceable in the currently known archaeological record.

Based on the spatial distribution of the flint artefacts, it may be stated that at the outskirts of Novae there existed a Neolithic settlement of the Vădastra Culture. It covered ca. 3 hectares on the embankment on the Danube, near the delta of the Dermendere River and between two natural ravines. It may also be presumed that flint-knapping workshops were located in its south-eastern part. Since Novae lies closest to the flint deposit in Nikopol, it should be assumed that the settlement could have been an important centre of flint processing, perhaps of more than local significance. The above hypothesis may be verified only by future studies, especially new discoveries of flint artefacts.

²⁶ Nica 1980, 27–57.

²⁷ Gimbutas 1982; 1991; Gimbutas, Dexter 2001.

²⁸ Bailey 2010, 122–123.

²⁹ Anthony 2010, 31.

³⁰ Ștefan 2015, 128, fig. 8,1; cf. Gheorghiu 2008, 172–173, fig. 5–6.

³¹ Kowal, Kozłowski 2011, 7–13.

³² Guilbeau, Erdoqu 2011, fig. 1; Gurova, 2008, fig 11.

³³ Gurova 2008, 7–8, fig 9.

³⁴ Tsonev 2000, 29–35.

³⁵ Guilbeau, Erdoqu 2011, 6.

³⁶ Mirea 2008, 286; Kowal, Kozłowski 2011, fig 5, 6.

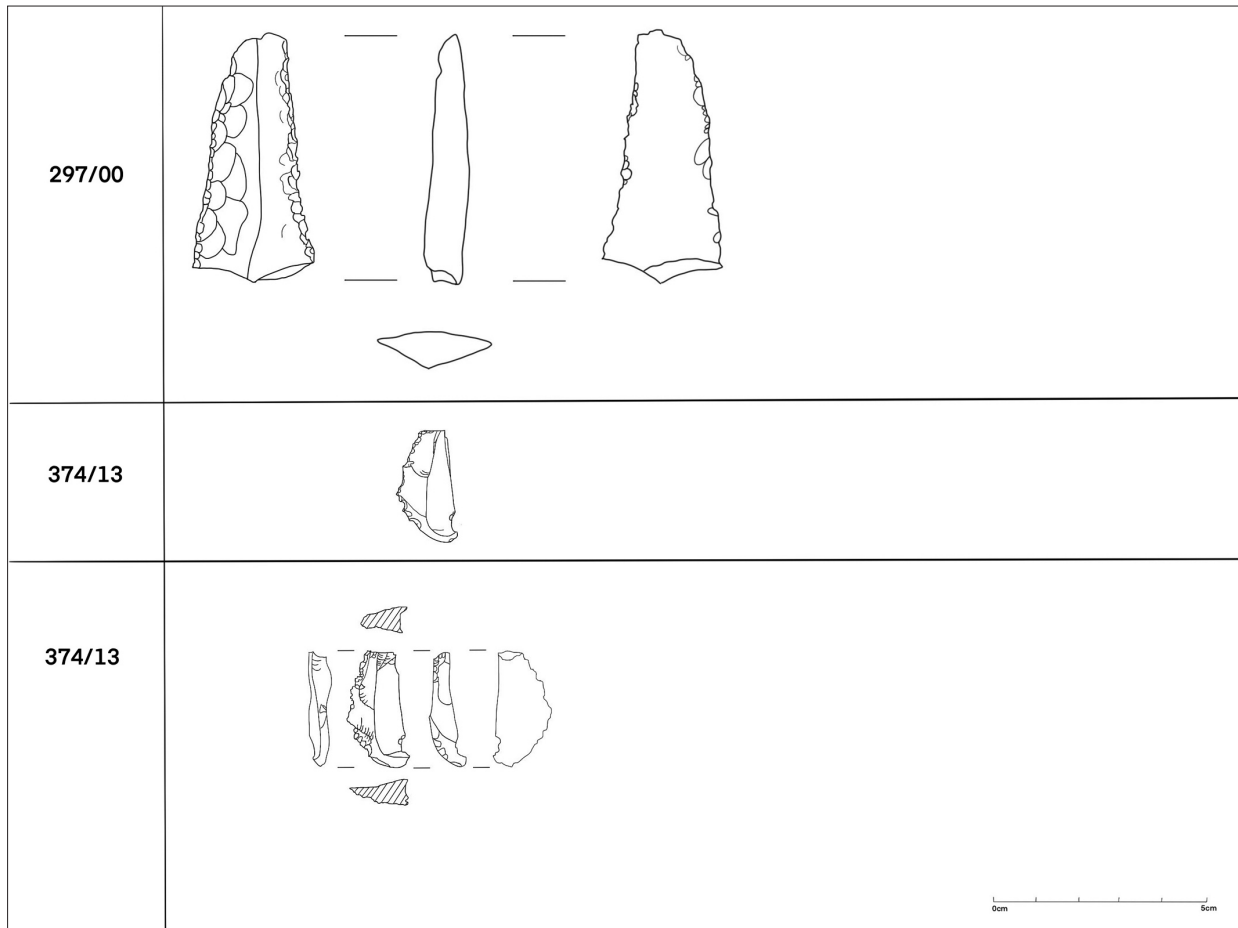


Fig. 11. Flint artefacts from Sector XII in Novae, compiled by P. Dyczek, B. Wojciechowski.

The finds from Novae invite a more general conclusion that the aforementioned items related to the Vădastra Culture seem to indicate that although this culture's birthplace was the Teleorman Valley it would quickly spread into the northern parts of Bulgaria. Such rapid expansion appears to have been driven by the rich deposits of high-quality flint stone located in the region. In the subsequent phases, the Vădastra Culture expanded further eastwards, all the way to the Beli Lom River. It is confirmed also by observations from Romania – the sites located in relative proximity would be found in terraces of river basins. The only difference is that in Bulgaria they lie close to flint deposits. The discoveries from Novae add

to our knowledge of the development and economic base of the Vădastra Culture. They also expand the catalogue of sites with a new and apparently quite significant one – Novae.

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