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***ADVOCATUS DIABOLI* — WHAT IF IT WAS NOT THE EIGHTH LEGION THAT BUILT NOVAE?**

In memoriam
Tadeusz Sarnowski
(1945–2019)

(...) one is tempted to infer that the chief justification for allowing it [*legio V Alaudae*] to survive and for allotting it to Moesia is the convenience of having a legion that can be made to disappear, if the evidence demands the disappearance of a legion (...).¹

Abstract: Ever since the discovery of a funerary stele of a soldier of the *legio VIII Augusta* in Novae in 1912, it has been suggested that the legion in question was stationed there at one point. Over time it became the canon to assume that the *Octava* had built Novae around the time of the Thracian surge in AD 45/46 and was the principal garrison until being replaced by the *I Italica* following Vespasian's succession to the throne. The present contribution evaluates the epigraphic and archaeological evidence anew, highlighting the weak points in the argument that have given rise to much speculation, being centred mainly on the imprecise information of ancient authors. It is argued that the comment of Josephus on the procedure of strengthening the frontiers under Rubrius Gallus (*BJ* 7.4.89–95) should be considered as a clue to when Novae was actually built (after AD 69), but by the *I Italica*, not the *VIII Augusta*.

Key words: Novae, Lower Danube limes, Moesia, *legio VIII Augusta*, *legio I Italica*

Looking at the “early” Roman finds (in this case, from the mid-first century AD more or less) from the various fieldwork sectors at Novae,² it may be wise to put them in context with the current knowledge of the army camp's history, reviewing critically the established sequence of development and considering the extent to which the material record bears them out. Was the early fortification really constructed by another unit than the camp's principal garrison, the *legio I Italica*? Or is the suggested *legio VIII Augusta* just another *Phantomtruppe* (with regard to Novae)?

¹ SYME 1928, p. 45. Karl Strobel would later label the unit in question a “Phantomtruppe” (STROBEL 1988).

² The present contribution was initially meant to appear in the collective volume, *Novae. The Moesian Base of the*

Eighth Augustan Legion, edited by Tadeusz Sarnowski. Not at all convinced after a thorough reading of the first draft, but in line with his legendary scientific objectivism, “demanding on himself” (TOMAS 2018, p. 155),

A significant issue to be addressed, archaeologically as well as historically, is the somewhat short period of time in question, a mere two decades (based on the general narrative of the *VIII Augusta* being stationed at Novae between about AD 45/46 and the *legio I Italica* arriving sometime in AD 67–70). Moreover, there are no ancient sources to confirm the identity of the first unit (if there was one) stationed at Novae before the *I Italica*. And as far as archaeology is concerned, the earliest layers of any site are naturally the deepest and hardest to reach, a problem augmented by the fact that the early fortification appears to have been a timber-and-earth camp. When the legionaries of *I Italica* set their foundations in stone, they disturbed the remains of the early phase that another army unit may have left (if not they themselves). This early phase has been postulated with some authority and remains have been identified in the archaeological record that can be interpreted as a timber-and-earth camp.³ The small finds, coins included, are somewhat inconclusive for a debate hinging on a short time span. Inscriptions perhaps are the sole exception, although sometimes they generate more questions than they bring answers.

Incidentally, there is a historical and an archaeological starting point for the idea that the *VIII Augusta* built Novae. It was after all a famous legion⁴ that had been created under the Republic by Pompey, a legion which had crossed the Rubicon with Caesar and much later would form the principal garrison of Argentoratum in Germania Superior. It would be, that is, were we to accept the notion of a general continuity of identity for Roman army units over the ages.⁵

The historical starting point and context covers Rome's management of three conflicts: the one in the Bosphoran kingdom between the brothers Mithridates III and Cotys I during the reign of Claudius, with the subsequent development of the provinces of Thracia and Moesia towards the mid-first century, the Parthian campaigns of Claudius and Nero, and lastly the internal war of 68/69. In all three cases, there was considerable troop movement throughout the empire, which was reported by several ancient writers (Tacitus, Suetonius, Josephus Flavius) and which generated epigraphic sources on the whereabouts of the Moesian legions in general and the *VIII Augusta* in particular. The sources were interpreted by nineteenth and early twentieth century scholars, who were marvelously knowledgeable but also prone to elaborating complex theories based on inductive reasoning and logic rather than actual evidence. The dangers of such an approach were pointed out by Ronald Syme in the statement quoted above.

Sarnowski showered the author with constructive criticism and advice, agreeing to include the text — *diversis sentiis* — in a book devoted to precisely the premise that was being contended. The Professor's passing in the summer of 2019 deprived me of the opportunity to discuss the revised version of the text with him. Following some modifications, it now stands alone, but I have retained references to my other contributions in the said monograph, which comment on the earliest finds from Novae fieldwork sectors 4 and 12 (the volume has new editors and will be published eventually). Sarnowski would not have liked the text even now, but it seems only right to dedicate it to his memory, as testimony of our scientific exchanges from which I certainly benefited much more than he did and also because the Late Professor had no scruples himself in calling out a phan-

tom squadron of the Roman army (SARNOWSKI 2006a), and finally because I might be wrong and he might be right after all.

³ SARNOWSKI 1991, p. 348; GENČEVA 2002, *passim*; GENČEVA 2003. Here is not the place to call into question the existence of an early camp as such, even if the notion of the different estimated dates of the construction of the earliest fortifications and the earliest *principia* is suspect.

⁴ For a history of the legion, see FILOW 1906, pp. 16–19; RITTERLING 1925, pp. 1642–1646; OLDENSTEIN-PFERDEHIRT 1984; REDDÉ 2000.

⁵ As suggested by Ritterling (RITTERLING 1925, p. 1643); cf. OLDENSTEIN-PFERDEHIRT 1984, p. 397.

Tacitus can be understood as saying that the *legio VIII Augusta* was in Pannonia in AD 14 (*Ann.* 1.23; 1.30) and in Moesia in 46 (*Hist.* 1.79; 2.85).⁶ The legion's presence in Pannonia is well documented by epigraphic evidence: Poetovio has been identified as the main base, while a detachment might have been active in Virunum as well.⁷ The time of the transfer to Moesia is less clear, particularly because it could have participated in the invasion of Britannia in AD 43; in an aside, this can be quoted as a fine example of how murky the epigraphic evidence can be.⁸ A lost inscription from Castulo in Hispania (*CIL* II 3272) was interpreted by nineteenth-century scholars, spearheaded by Theodor Mommsen, as stating that the *VIII Augusta* had been stationed in Moesia in 46 or even earlier for the express purpose of dealing with the Thracian uprising,⁹ a theory that was dismissed by Bogdan Filow in 1906,¹⁰ but happily repeated by Emil Ritterling in 1925.¹¹ Filow presented a number of logic-based arguments regarding the number of legions that the governor of Moesia had to have at his disposal at the time to prove that the *VIII Augusta* indeed was stationed, somewhere, in Moesia when the province was founded alongside Thracia.¹² The interesting suggestion that the *VIII Augusta* received the distinction *bis Augusta* for its conduct during the Moesian campaigns of Plautius Silvanus in the time of Nero's reign¹³ is an educated guess but, overall, there seems good cause to believe that the *VIII Augusta* was stationed in Moesia around the middle of the first century. It should be kept in mind though that the exact borders of the province and their development have been questioned (just like the exact date when the province was formally established).¹⁴

Circumstantial archaeological evidence for the *VIII Augusta* led scholars working at Novae to agree, enthusiastically, on a general consensus, first voiced by Gavril Kacarov,¹⁵ that it was this particular legionary unit that had built the first camp in Novae.¹⁶ However, one is well advised to exercise caution when considering this idea: a grave stele of a *cornicen*¹⁷ (devoid of inherent chronological markers), which has been dated for "historic-epigraphic reasons" (i.e., the assumed presence of the eighth legion at Novae) to AD 45–69,¹⁸ is considered simultaneously proof for the presence of this legion at Novae — a textbook example of circular reasoning. The grave stele of a *miles*¹⁹ also offers no substantial information on the circumstances in which it was made.²⁰ No other pieces bearing the name of the *VIII Augusta* have ever surfaced at Novae.

⁶ Cf. the reasoning of Filow (FILOW 1906, pp. 11–19).

⁷ OLDENSTEIN-PFERDEHIRT 1984, pp. 397–398.

⁸ KEPPIE 1971, *passim*; OLDENSTEIN-PFERDEHIRT 1984, pp. 398–399.

⁹ MOMMSEN 1875, p. 259, note 2. For context, see also: *CIL* II 2079 = *ILS* 2713. I am grateful to Florian Matei-Popescu for his comments on these two inscriptions as well as for discussing the entire paper with me.

¹⁰ FILOW 1906, p. 11. Filow argues against the interpretation proposed for this particular inscription, but comes up with a similar date. Cf. *supra*, note 6.

¹¹ RITTERLING 1925, p. 1648. Oldenstein-Pferdehirt also regards this information as being "eindeutig" (OLDENSTEIN-PFERDEHIRT 1984, p. 400). For a more reserved view: MIRKOVIĆ 1998, pp. 93–94. Cf. SARNOWSKI 1988, p. 26.

¹² FILOW 1906, p. 18.

¹³ FILOW 1906, p. 26.

¹⁴ On the beginnings of the province, see MATEI-POPESCU forthcoming.

¹⁵ KACAROV 1912–1913, p. 194.

¹⁶ The assumption is widespread in the publications of all teams working at Novae, notably: GEROV 1964, p. 113 (reprint); SARNOWSKI 1988, p. 26; SARNOWSKI 1991,

p. 348; GENČEVA 2002; GENČEVA 2003; CIOLEK, DYCZEK 2011, pp. 17–18; SARNOWSKI *et alii* 2012, p. 35; SARNOWSKI 2015; RÓŻYCKI 2016, p. 459; DYCZEK 2019. I have myself contributed to spreading this theory (e.g. LEMKE 2011, p. 193), repeated also in the most recent volume on the *VIII Augusta*: KUHNLE 2018, p. 75. See also MATEI-POPESCU 2010, p. 79. Cf. *supra*, note 4.

¹⁷ Discovered at Novae in 1912, reused together with a second inscription for the construction of a late Roman grave: KACAROV 1912–1913, p. 193; *AE* 1914, 93; KOLENDO *et alii* 1997, no. 81, p. 117; GEROV 1989, no. 300; CUBAYNES 2018, pp. 438–440, no. 119.

¹⁸ CONRAD 2004, p. 227, no. 376. Interestingly, but without any further explanation, Mirković claims that the inscription "dates to the time of Nero" (MIRKOVIĆ 1998, p. 94).

¹⁹ KOLENDO 1999, pp. 20–22. See also CONRAD 2004, p. 234, no. 401.

²⁰ The words in question have been reconstructed as follows: [---]VE mil(es) leg(ionis) [VIII A]ug(ustae) (...) by Jerzy Kolendo (KOLENDO 1999, pp. 20–22). See also CONRAD 2004, p. 234, no. 401.

The small finds from the different sectors of fieldwork recovered in almost 60 years of investigations are inconclusive with regard to this dispute. On the contrary, they seem to draw attention away from the said circular reasoning and are often presented in a way to fit the established narrative.

These finds include the famous glass *phalera*,²¹ which might well have come to Novae “as a personal award of a high-ranking officer of the *legio VIII Augusta* when he was relocated from Poetovio in Pannonia to the Lower Danube”.²² But then again it might have not. The dating of other finds is simply not precise enough to convincingly resolve the question of the contended two decades at the most. Renata Ciołek used the coin finds from sector IV to suggest that “in the first-century group of coins, those of Claudius were the most common, despite the fact that this emperor actually struck very few ‘bronzes’. With regard to Novae this is not surprising, considering that in AD 45 Novae was incorporated into the Roman Empire and was garrisoned by the *legio VIII Augusta*, which had to build a fort. For this purpose, it was furnished with considerable sums of money, an event reflected in the pool of coins discovered in sector IV at Novae”.²³ Ciołek admitted, however, that “nonetheless, the majority of coins from this period was associated with the functioning of the *thermae legionis*, built by the emperor Vespasian at the very start of his reign”.²⁴ By “majority” she actually meant “all”, because the remaining “minority” also did not come from contexts pre-dating the undoubtedly Flavian *thermae*, the first stone structure in this sector of the site.²⁵ Whether or not “considerable sums of money” represented by 11 coins are proof of building a fort and whether this money should be found on the premises of the fort in question as a result is another issue. But the obvious catch is the archaeological context of the coins, namely the operation of the Flavian bath, which already negates the proposed historical context, because this money would have been brought in by soldiers from a different unit, the *legio I Italica*.²⁶

Evgeni Paunov’s approach is similar to that of Ciołek, although he looks at the numismatic record coming from the entire camp. Highlighting the relatively high number of coins minted by Claudius, he says that this “perfectly fits the aforementioned historical situation” (i.e., the presence of the *VIII Augusta*) even though he does admit that “the coins are not in a stratigraphic context”,²⁷ offering the interesting explanation that “the majority of coins derive from multi-layer archaeological sites, inhabited for millennia, where the early Roman strata were not always reached and excavated. Thus, the coin issues of the Early Principate period are not abundant before Trajan in principle”. He also concedes: “finally, it still remains uncertain whether all the pre-46 AD coins at Novae were brought by the soldiers of *legio VIII Augusta* when they arrived, or they were already residual. What is certain from the current numismatic analysis is that Roman mainstream coinage began to appear on the site during the late reign of Tiberius and under Caligula, ca. AD 26/30–41”.²⁸

If anything, the numismatic record contradicts the theory of a legion stationing at Novae from around AD 45: coins were found in some refuse pits in the area of the *principia* (Sector XI), which are among the earliest archaeological features on site. Coins of an earlier date included two *dupondii* of Nero of AD 64 and 64–68, and a *denarius* of Vespasian of AD 71–72 (for Titus), the latter in “mint condition”.²⁹ Tadeusz Sarnowski concluded: “... while the best part of the finds

²¹ KOLENDO *et alii* 1997, p. 13; PAUNOV 2015.

²² PAUNOV 2015, p. 198.

²³ CIOLEK 2011, p. 236.

²⁴ CIOLEK 2011, p. 248. Cf. PAUNOV 2014, p. 153.

²⁵ On the *thermae*: LEMKE 2011; DYCZEK 2009.

²⁶ It is theoretically conceivable that a coin brought to Novae by soldiers of the *VIII Augusta* would be found and lost again by a soldier of *I Italica* or moved to a Fla-

vian layer by some freak accident of stratigraphy. Let us not indulge however in such random musings here.

²⁷ PAUNOV 2014, p. 151.

²⁸ *Ibidem*.

²⁹ SARNOWSKI *et alii* 2011–2012, p. 82.

from the pits in the eastern portico is to be related to the *legio VIII Augusta*, digging pits, collecting the waste material and dumping it in the pits was done only by the legionaries who came to Novae in the early 70s³⁰. The obvious inconvenience of having dozens of stinking pits (animal remains!) around the headquarters building can best be explained by assuming that these pits were dug, filled and immediately sealed during the transformation process from wood to stone, before the stone phase was built on top. After all, the presence of late antique pits in the courtyard of the *principia* is perceived as proof that the headquarters were no longer in use at that time.³¹ But allocating finds from a single pit to both the *VIII Augusta* as proof of the legion's presence and the *I Italica* to overcome the pretty pickle of having coins that are "too late" (from the AD 60s and 70s) in this context, is pushing the speculation quite far. While the general scenario of one legion tidying up after another is quite conceivable, it raises the question why soldiers setting up camp at Novae would dump waste, whether old or new, in the middle of the fortress in the first place.³² It is imaginable, however, that the pits in question were left behind by the *legio I Italica* upon building both the temporary earth-and-timber as well as the subsequent stone fort, sometime between AD 66 and 72, a dating to be explained below.

Backtracking a bit and assuming that Novae was built not under Claudius, but rather at some point during Nero's reign,³³ the time left for the garrisoning of a hypothetical unit preceding the *legio I Italica* shrinks from about 20 to no more than 14 years. Interestingly, Sarnowski had wanted to fill the arising chronological gap of 3–4 years between the garrisoning of the *VIII Augusta* and the *I Italica* around AD 68–72 with the presence of none other than the infamous phantom legion *V Alaudae*.³⁴ Legions could have been stationed at given camps for far less than 14 years, but this was not the rule in the region. In Moesia Inferior, the *V Macedonica* stayed at Oescus for perhaps almost a century, was deployed to Troesmis for 150 years when the Danube no longer constituted the frontier of the Empire across Dacia, and returned to Oescus again for the rest of its existence. The *I Italica* stayed at Novae without moving for about 300 years.³⁵ The *XI Claudia* came to Durostorum during Trajan's reign and remained there until the fifth century. Also, the *VIII Augusta*, which ended up at Argentoratum for a continuous 300 years, left a distinct mark on other places where it had been deployed earlier, for instance Poetovio (Pannonia)³⁶ and Burnum (Dalmatia).³⁷

³⁰ *Ibidem*. Szymon Modzelewski suggested that the pits were linked in their entirety with the *VIII Augusta* (MODZELEWSKI 2009, pp. 226–229).

³¹ "... the site was used as a convenient rubbish tip" (POLTER 1994, p. 145).

³² On waste dumps outside the main area of Roman army camps, see HOSS 2018; TRUMM 2018.

³³ Interestingly, Sarnowski at one point suggested as much, but regarding merely the *principia* of the camp (SARNOWSKI *et alii* 2008, p. 158): "The remains of the first headquarters building, consisting merely of shallow foundations made of loess bonded stones, came to light only within the courtyard and porticoes of the stone *principia* of the *legio I Italica*. A worn *as* of Nero found among the stones in the western external wall of the earliest *principia* (*legio VIII Augusta*) suggests that they had not been erected before the late 50s of the 1st century AD. ... Nowhere have yet been found any tiles bearing

stamps of the Eighth Legion. It is possible that the walls were made of mud bricks or of timber and wattle-and-daub, in a technique resembling the *Fachwerk* which left no traces in the stratigraphy of the site". Unswayed, he still concluded that: "The first *principia* were much smaller than their Flavian/Trajanic successor and probably occupied an area and site comparable to those of the temporary headquarters building at Pinnata (Inchtuthil) in Scotland".

³⁴ SARNOWSKI 1988, p. 41. Strobel argues that the legion did not exist after AD 70 (STROBEL 1988, pp. 506–507).

³⁵ With the caveat that it is not certain whether the newly established legion had another headquarters before its arrival in Novae (Scupi has been suggested in this context: SARNOWSKI 1988, p. 41).

³⁶ ŠAŠEL KOS 2014, pp. 139–165; OLDENSTEIN-PFERDEHIRT 1984, pp. 398–400.

³⁷ GLAVAŠ 2012, pp. 93–94; BOJANOVSKI 1990.

Moving troops from all over the Empire to conflict areas was an expensive procedure that contradicted the idea of distributing forces evenly to better manage supply lines and reduce the overall costs.³⁸ It was common procedure under the Republic, when the nature of warfare and the organization of the Roman army were altogether different. During the Principate, legions would still be moved around, for instance in AD 69 and afterward, during Vespasian's succession, but with regard to the *limes*, a reverse tendency to keep units in one place won the day (naturally, this does not apply to small detachments from the legions or campaigns of war).³⁹ Moreover, any army operates best in an environment it is accustomed to and any dislocation requires acclimatization and training.⁴⁰ It has also been suggested that all Roman strategies basically derived from looming state bankruptcy, which in turn resulted from the high costs of having a standing army,⁴¹ or as Mann noted: "Roman history is essentially the virtually unique story of a nation trying to catch up with the situations produced by the incredible success of its army".⁴² When Nero had the *legio I Italica* recruited, under the somewhat romantic name *Alexandri magni phalanx*,⁴³ he actually had tangible economic interests in mind, looking at the Black Sea region and beyond with great financial hopes.⁴⁴ However, while moving troops around was expensive, keeping them in one place required a plan to keep them busy.⁴⁵ This is obviously not a binding argument in the discussion, rather a study in logic à la Ritterling *et consortes*. A short stay of an army unit before *I Italica* is by all means technically conceivable.⁴⁶

Let us now consider the nature of the earth-and-timber camp at Novae. Given the scarce remains, it could have been no more than a temporary or marching camp, built in some haste, maybe as a response to an immediate threat, such as the Sarmatian raids of AD 62–67. In that case, the grave stele of a *cornicen* from the *VIII Augusta* should be assigned a later date, given that the fairly elaborate appearance of this marker seems to be in contradiction with a temporary camp constructed in the wilderness. It should also be kept in mind that Novae has yielded inscriptions related to soldiers from legions other than the *I Italica* (or *VIII Augusta* for that matter), namely *I Minervia* and *XI Claudia*.⁴⁷

However, should the first camp have been built indeed as a strong point on the *limes* for years to come, a tendency developing on the Lower Danube under Nero but gaining momentum only under Vespasian, we would expect substantial remains of a fortress that existed at least 15 or 20 years.⁴⁸

³⁸ "Diese Verlegungsintensität trieb das Imperium seinem Ruin entgegen: Die an ihren Heimatstandorten liegenden Einheiten konnten über eingespielte Versorgungswege relativ kostengünstig verproviantiert werden. Diese gewachsenen Versorgungsnetze wurden zerrissen, wenn die — aus Vexillationen improvisierten — großen Bewegungsheere in Marsch gesetzt wurden und durch Zwangsankäufe der Zentrale versorgt werden mussten" (EICH 2009, p. 607).

³⁹ Or, as Syme put it (SYME 1928, p. 41): "Whole legions were not displaced for purposes trivial or temporary; it might almost be said that in Flavian times, when a legion leaves a province, it leaves it for good".

⁴⁰ COLLINS 1998, p. 6. On loss of mobility as a result of stable frontiers, cf. MANN 1974, p. 517.

⁴¹ EICH 2009, *passim*.

⁴² MANN 1974, p. 509.

⁴³ Tac. *Hist.* 1.6; Suet. *Nero* 19.2.

⁴⁴ ÂRCEV, BUTOVSKIJ 2018; EICH 2009, p. 592.

⁴⁵ BISHOP 1999, p. 118: "The need for garrisoning first arose when a Roman army was kept in the field in win-

ter quarters; from that point onwards, the distinction between *aestiva* (campaign bases) and *hiberna* (winter quarters) was fixed in Roman thinking. From this need for a permanent or semi-permanent base during the months when campaigning was not feasible there arose a whole host of by-products, by virtue of the fact that nature abhors an idle army".

⁴⁶ A counterexample being the camp of none other than the *legio VIII Augusta* at Mirebeau, dated AD 70–90: DELENCRE, GARCIA 2011, p. 554.

⁴⁷ KOLENDO *et alii* 1997, p. 76 (*I Minervia*) and pp. 28, 117 (*XI Claudia*).

⁴⁸ Unless we perceive the legion as being somewhat illiterate overall, a general characteristic formulated more diplomatically by Oldenstein-Pferdehirt as "konturlos", commenting on the fact that more epigraphic material is known from the 26-year-long stay of *legio II Augusta* in Argentoratum than from about 300 years of the presence of the *VIII Augusta* (OLDENSTEIN-PFERDEHIRT 1984, p. 397).

In this context, one is faced with a very trivial point: when exactly did the eighth legion start to stamp its bricks?⁴⁹ It is certainly peculiar that, having built the fortress, the *VIII Augusta* failed to have its name stamped all over it (not to mention the lack of any other epigraphic material beyond the two aforementioned inscriptions). It was regular practice among the legions in the second half of the first century and the absence of any stamps whatsoever from a period of more than a decade is all the more astonishing when one considers that the legion must have produced its own bricks, unless it had been housed exclusively in wooden structures without any bricks or tiles used for the entire span of its existence. Brick stamps of the *VIII Augusta* dated to AD 69/70 are known from several sites,⁵⁰ while the practice of marking bricks has been attested for the first half of the first century AD for some other units.⁵¹ The *legio I Italica* on the other hand enthusiastically stamped its bricks already from Flavian times.⁵²

The apparent absence of aqueducts and sewage channels⁵³ for the earth-and-timber phase, infrastructure to be expected in a legionary camp operating this long, is another serious issue to consider. Again, the nonexistent infrastructure from this period stands in stark contrast with the elaborate grave stele of Publius Farfinias.

If however under Nero the freshly “hatched” *legio I Italica* in its entirety or in the form of a construction unit was sent to Novae to build a headquarters fort, the soldiers would have quickly erected an entrenchment, in line with Roman military *habitus*,⁵⁴ and then proceeded to construct the fortress in stone step by step, which obviously would take some time.

Having discounted the presence of the eighth legion at Novae in the mid-first century, one has to consider the alternatives. These are basically two:

1. Novae was built during the reign of Claudius or Nero (before AD 66), but by an entirely different unit, neither the *VIII Augusta* nor (obviously) the *I Italica*.
2. Novae was built in its entirety by the *legio I Italica* and the attested earth-and-timber phase should be linked with the first years of its presence there, under Nero or after the accession of Vespasian.

As heretic as this seems at first glance, it should be kept in mind that the whereabouts of the Italic legion after its recruitment in AD 66 are somewhat murky⁵⁵ and there is no convincing proposition for an alternative first headquarters,⁵⁶ while Cassius Dio may have implied the stationing of the newly-founded legion in Moesia already during the reign of Nero.⁵⁷ To be fair, however, any

⁴⁹ This question is obviously connected to the broader issue of when the Roman army started stamping bricks. The mid-first century AD is proposed on the whole, but note Renate Kurzmann’s remark on circular reasoning with regard to the dating of brick stamps (KURZMANN 2006, pp. 201–208).

⁵⁰ DODIG 2007, pp. 145–146; DELENCRE, GARCIA 2011, pp. 554–555. However, the Dalmatian stamps of *VIII Augusta* are “a riddle” to Kurzmann (KURZMANN 2006, p. 207).

⁵¹ TONČINIĆ 2009, p. 1449; DELENCRE, GARCIA 2011, p. 554.

⁵² As demonstrated by Tadeusz Sarnowski, who was the first to propose a typology of the brick stamps from Novae (SARNOWSKI 1983a; 1997; 2005). See also DUCH 2017.

⁵³ Sarnowski suggests the existence of at least one channel, albeit uncharacteristically without any covering of stones or bricks: SARNOWSKI 1983b, p. 151.

⁵⁴ On fort construction: JONES 2005; JONES 2014. Cf. also comments by Sarnowski (SARNOWSKI *et alii* 2011–2012, p. 82).

⁵⁵ Just like the history of several other legions that had supported Vitellius: FILOW 1906, pp. 26–27; SARNOWSKI 1988, p. 39. Cf. PAUNOV, DONCHEVA 2013; MATEI-POPESCU 2010, p. 77.

⁵⁶ Sarnowski did not exclude an early headquarters at Scupi (SARNOWSKI 1988, p. 41).

⁵⁷ Cass. Dio 55.24.2 (Boissevain, vol. II, pp. 508–509): ὁ τε γὰρ Νέρων τὸ πρῶτον τὸ καὶ Ἰταλικὸν ὀνομαζόμενον καὶ ἐν τῇ κάτω Μυσία χειμάζον ... (συνέταξεν).

direct evidence for the *VIII Augusta* stationing somewhere else, when it was assigned to Moesia under Nero or even Claudius, is also far from compelling. It boils down essentially to a single, dubiously dated brick from Singidunum, bearing the mark LEG VII[,⁵⁸ which in all likelihood belonged to the seventh legion. The advocate of this theory, Miroslava Mirković, suggests however that the legion in question was garrisoned in Dalmatia before AD 69, where its brick stamps are quite frequent, although their dating remains controversial.⁵⁹

This raises the question of whether Tacitus may have simply been wrong in calling the *Octava* a legion from Moesia when describing the events of the civil war in AD 69 (*Hist.* 2. 85). Speculation on this subject seems somewhat desperate and in line with the said method of reasoning and second guessing employed by the scholars who built the original narrative under discussion here. However, the fleeting borders of the Balkan provinces at the time may have played a role here. Filow accuses Tacitus of having confused Germania and Moesia,⁶⁰ while Domaszewski claims that when Josephus wrote Ἰλλυριοί he actually had Moesia in mind.⁶¹

The soldier of the eighth legion from the grave stele that started all the trouble had been a *cornicen*, a specialist expected to travel along with his legion and not as a lone wolf on a special errand (such as the *frumentarius* of the *I Italica* in Delphi⁶²). However, this does not automatically imply that the legion was stationed where one of its hornblowers had been buried, although the second inscription obviously makes this claim a little bit more likely. An alternative explanation would be a scenario according to which the *VIII Augusta* (or a considerable detachment of this legion) had been traveling through Novae to a different destination and the deceased soldiers were buried in the cemetery of the *legio I Italica*.⁶³ The veterans of the *VIII Augusta* moving south to the Colonia Flavia Pacis Deultensium, where Vespasian had built a colony specifically for them,⁶⁴ constitute another possible scenario explaining dead soldiers of the legion. Publius Farfinias Severus, the *cornicen* in question, “lived 50 years and served 30 years”,⁶⁵ which certainly qualified him for a trip to the newly founded colony close to the modern-day tourist-trap of Burgas on the Black Sea, even though his inscription does not describe him as a veteran, as Kacarov already pointed out in his original edition of the text.⁶⁶

The construction of the fortress at Novae, postulated in AD 45/46, should be looked at in context with the big picture, that is, the overall military situation on the Lower Danube and the economic state of the Empire. Unfortunately, we know “next to nothing”⁶⁷ about the Thracian surge of that year or the details of the conflict with the Bosphoran Kingdom of Mithridates III in the same year, for that matter.⁶⁸ The legions in the Lower Danube region at the time were engaged mostly in suppressing internal conflicts,⁶⁹ hence their headquarters would have been located inland and that is where the camp of the *VIII Augusta* should be expected in my opinion.

⁵⁸ MIRKOVIĆ 1998, pp. 94–95. Having seen the object in question, I see no reason why it could not be a product of the seventh legion.

⁵⁹ MIRKOVIĆ 1998, pp. 90–93.

⁶⁰ FILOW 1906, p. 19.

⁶¹ DOMASZEWSKI 1892, p. 212.

⁶² MITCHELL 1987, p. 339; *ILS* 9473. Or, interestingly, the *optio* or *cornicularius* C. Valerius Valens of the *VIII Augusta*, whose epitaph dated to the mid-first century was found not far from Corinth (ŠAŠEL KOS 1978).

⁶³ I am grateful to Michael Speidel for his comments on the attachment of the *cornicen* to his legion as well as for discussing the entire paper with me.

⁶⁴ SHARANKOV 2017; RITTERLING 1925, pp. 1651–1652.

⁶⁵ KOLENDO *et alii* 1997, no. 118.

⁶⁶ KACAROV 1912–1913, p. 194.

⁶⁷ SARNOWSKI 1988, p. 27.

⁶⁸ KOLENDO 1998; MROZEWICZ 2002; SARNOWSKI 1988, p. 39.

⁶⁹ SYME 1999, p. 218; LUTTWAK 1976, p. 86.

We do know, however, that the area close to the big river became a major hotspot during Nero's reign. The Sarmatian attacks in AD 62–67, followed by other raids, not only caused immediate destruction, but also resulted in major population shifts, like the attested (and forced) migration of 100,000 *Transdanuviani* into Moesia, managed by governor T. Plautius Silvanus.⁷⁰ The first measure taken at this time was creating some sort of peripheral zone on the Danube, keeping intruders away from the heartland of the Empire.⁷¹ The invasion of the Roxolani in AD 67–70 accelerated this process. Obviously, the civil war in AD 69, which drew forces away from the region, created a situation in which the Dacians “took a shot” as well at Moesia. They were stopped somewhat by chance by the transiting army of C. Licinius Mucianus headed for Rome.⁷² Then the Sarmatians attacked again, defeating the Roman garrison in the winter of AD 69–70 and killing the governor Gaius Fonteius Agrippa.⁷³ The invaders were driven back by his successor Rubrius Gallus, who arrived with the *legio VII Claudia*.⁷⁴

It was Vespasian who eventually reorganized the frontiers of the Empire, a task he bestowed upon the same Rubrius Gallus for the yet undivided Moesia. Intensive troop movements followed, as well as numerous construction works.⁷⁵ Gallus extended the Moesian fleet,⁷⁶ but he also particularly fortified the river frontier. And perhaps the comment of Josephus regarding this procedure (*BJ* 7.89–95)⁷⁷ of making it altogether impossible for barbarians to cross the river again should be considered as the most evident clue in the ancient sources for the time when Novae was built. It is certainly conceivable that the project was a response to the sudden threat of barbarian attacks in the 60s, regardless of whether this took place under Vespasian or somewhat earlier under Nero. A legion had to be sent there quickly and the *I Italica* was available. Had Novae existed earlier, garrisoned with an entire legion and supported by the *V Macedonica* from Oescus,⁷⁸ how could the Sarmatians have attacked so easily? And *au rebours*, why would a camp be built on the Danube in AD 45 when all the perceptible threats were coming from the interior? What reinforcement under Rubrius Gallus did Josephus have in mind, when two legions were supposedly already stationed on the Danube? And why build a timber-and-earth camp when a stable outpost on a new frontier was being planned?

Paraphrasing Syme, one is tempted to say that the chief justification for claiming that the *VIII Augusta* built Novae is the convenience of having an explanation for the briefly existing wooden camp and the two aforementioned inscriptions.

⁷⁰ SARNOWSKI 2006b; PAUNOV, DONCHEVA 2013, pp. 46–47. On the significance of Silvanus' epitaph, cf. FILOW 1906, pp. 13–14.

⁷¹ KARAVAS 2005, p. 189. Cf. MIRKOVIĆ 1998, p. 95.

⁷² Tac. *Hist.* 2.83, 3.46; FILOW 1906, p. 26; PAUNOV, DONCHEVA 2013.

⁷³ Regarding this event, which is quite often brought up mentioning the *I Italica* and *V Alaudae* (e.g. STROBEL 1988, p. 506), it should be noted that the source of information, Josephus Flavius, does not explicitly name the units engaged in the fighting (Joseph. *BJ* 7.4.3).

⁷⁴ FILOW 1906, p. 33. Cf. PATSCH 1937.

⁷⁵ SCHÖNBERGER 1969, p. 155; LUTTWAK 1976, p. 57; BENES 1978, p. 65; GABLER 1999, p. 75; PAUNOV, DONCHEVA 2013, pp. 48–49; MATEI-POPESCU 2010–2011, p. 225.

⁷⁶ SARNOWSKI 2006b, p. 89.

⁷⁷ [94] τοῦτο δὲ τῷ πολέμῳ τέλος ἐπιθεις ὁ στρατηγὸς καὶ τῆς εἰς τὸ μέλλον ἀσφαλείας προυνόησε· πλείοσι γὰρ καὶ μείζοσι φυλακαῖς τὸν τόπον διέλαβεν, ὡς εἶναι τοῖς βαρβάροις τὴν διάβασιν τελῶς ἀδύνατον. [95] ὁ μὲν οὖν περὶ τὴν Μυσίαν πόλεμος ταχεῖαν οὕτως ἔλαβε τὴν κρίσιν.

⁷⁸ The proposed chronology of Oescus starting as early as AD 6 (e.g. KABAKCHIEVA 2017, p. 79) is rather questionable (cf. LEMKE 2015, pp. 183–184), but this is not the place to go into it.

There are still many “ifs” in the story, perhaps even more than before. Maybe the suggested date for the founding of the first Italic legion (AD 66/67) is wrong and it was actually earlier in Nero’s reign. And why replace the earth-and-timber fort with a stone fortress in a way that must have caused some inconveniences, instead of tearing the whole thing down and building anew or placing the new fortress elsewhere? I am aware that in archaeology it is always easier to say “we cannot be sure something happened” than to come up with a theory and prove it right. While I may have not avoided the trap of inductive reasoning for which I criticized the elders of Moesian history, I have certainly not indulged in the general air of wishful thinking when it comes to the *VIII Augusta*.

In conclusion, there seems to be no reason whatsoever to maintain the widely postulated date of AD 45/46 for the construction of *Novae*, when all the evidence points to the reign of Nero or Vespasian. Furthermore, there is good cause for removing the *VIII Augusta* from the equation altogether. Only a dated inscription can help to resolve the case convincingly in all its aspects when the time span in question is as short as 20 years in the first century — and there is none at present. Perhaps one day we shall have a graffito etched by a *miles VIII Augustae* on a piece of pottery, regretting the transfer of his unit to the Lower Danube when Pannonia would have been closer to Rome.

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Abbreviations

<i>AE</i>	<i>L'Année épigraphique</i> .
<i>CIL</i>	<i>Corpus inscriptionum Latinarum</i> .
<i>ILS</i>	<i>Inscriptiones Latinae selectae</i> , ed. H. DESSAU, Berlin 1892–1916 (3 vols.).

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