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THE RECEPTION HALL OF THE ROMAN *DOMUS* AT THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE OF STAKINA ČEŠMA – VALANDOVO

Abstract: The site of Stakina Češma is located on the southern outskirts of Valandovo, a small town in the southern part of the Republic of North Macedonia. It was registered as an archaeological site for the first time in 1972 when the Archaeological Museum of Macedonia from Skopje conducted a survey during the preparation of the Archaeological Atlas of the Republic of Macedonia. In 1987, the Archaeological Department at the Museum of Macedonia began systematic archaeological excavations at Stakina Češma, continued until today.

The results so far have clearly shows that in Stakina Češma the archaeologists discovered an extremely luxurious Roman *domus* with more than ten rooms. All the floor surfaces in the building, ca. 500 m², were rendered in various mosaic techniques, while the walls were decorated with marble revetment or *al secco* painted decoration. All this luxury of the highest level documented at Stakina Češma indicates that this villa belonged to a very wealthy individual.

In this paper the results from the systematic archaeological excavations of the site from 2015 to 2023 would be presented.

Keywords: Late Roman, Roman *domus*, mosaics, reception hall, luxurious villa.

Introduction. The site and the history of research

The site of Stakina Češma is located on the southern outskirts of Valandovo, a small town in the southern part of the Republic of North Macedonia. The fertile basin that surrounds it and its wider vicinity stretching south once belonged to the Roman province of *Macedonia Prima* [Fig. 1]. It was registered as an archaeological site for the first time in 1972 when the Archaeological Museum of Macedonia from Skopje conducted a survey during the preparation of the Archaeological Atlas of the Republic of Macedonia. In 1973/74, the Republic Institute for the Protection of Monuments of Culture (RIPM) in Skopje conducted short-term excavations at the site, during which an ancient building was discovered. Several rooms with floor mosaics in *opus tessellatum* were partially explored. In 1987, the Archaeological Department at the Museum of Macedonia began systematic archaeological excavations at Stakina Češma, which are continued constantly every year until today.

The archaeological excavations that began in 1987 revealed a magnificent building with floor mosaics and walls lavishly covered with white marble and fresco decoration. A part of a large building called the Roman *domus* was explored and documented. Until the excavations in 2013,



Fig. 1. Position of Valandovo within the Late Roman province of Macedonia I (map: LILČIK' 2002)

eight rooms with floor mosaics made in *opus sectile*, *opus tessellatum* and *opus segmentatum* were registered, including a small room closed with an apse, lined on both sides with marble slabs, a small marble tub on the outside of the room, as well as a marble *impluvium* in the central room. Due to unresolved property-related issues, two of the rooms were not fully explored.

In 2013, within our current activities, during a survey of the western side of the until-then-known building, a new part of the building was documented, i.e., a floor in *opus sectile*, visible in a segment approximately 1×1.2 m. In 2015, more extensive excavations were conducted at this location.

At the very beginning of the excavations, the existence of a representative building was immediately confirmed. A floor in *opus sectile* and a semicircular wall of the apse were discovered [Fig. 2a]. The apsidal wall is oriented to the west and has a width of 80 cm; it is preserved 36-40 cm above the floor level. The diameter of the semicircle is 6 m, measured in the north-south direction. In the surface layer of the central part of the trench, on the apsidal wall, radially placed bricks were documented. They served as the levelling surface of the wall, which confirms the masonry, alternately made with a course of stone in lime mortar, above which there is a precisely made course of bricks in lime mortar. The inner surface of the apsidal wall was lined with a thin layer of lime plaster as a base for a 7-8 cm thick layer of hydrostatic mortar [Fig. 2b]. On the southern part of the apsidal wall, a vertical revetment of fragmented marble slabs on mortar was found, which suggests that the entire internal apsidal surface had a similar marble revetment [Fig. 2c]. The same marble slabs pave the eastern side of the floor area [Fig. 2d]. On the southern part of the outer surface of the apsidal wall, there is a precisely applied coating of lime plaster decorated with grooves [Fig. 2e].



Fig. 2. Results of the investigations from 2015 to 2019 (photo: M. Šurbanovska, 2019).

STAKINA ČEŠMA - VALANDOVO ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATIONS IN 2015

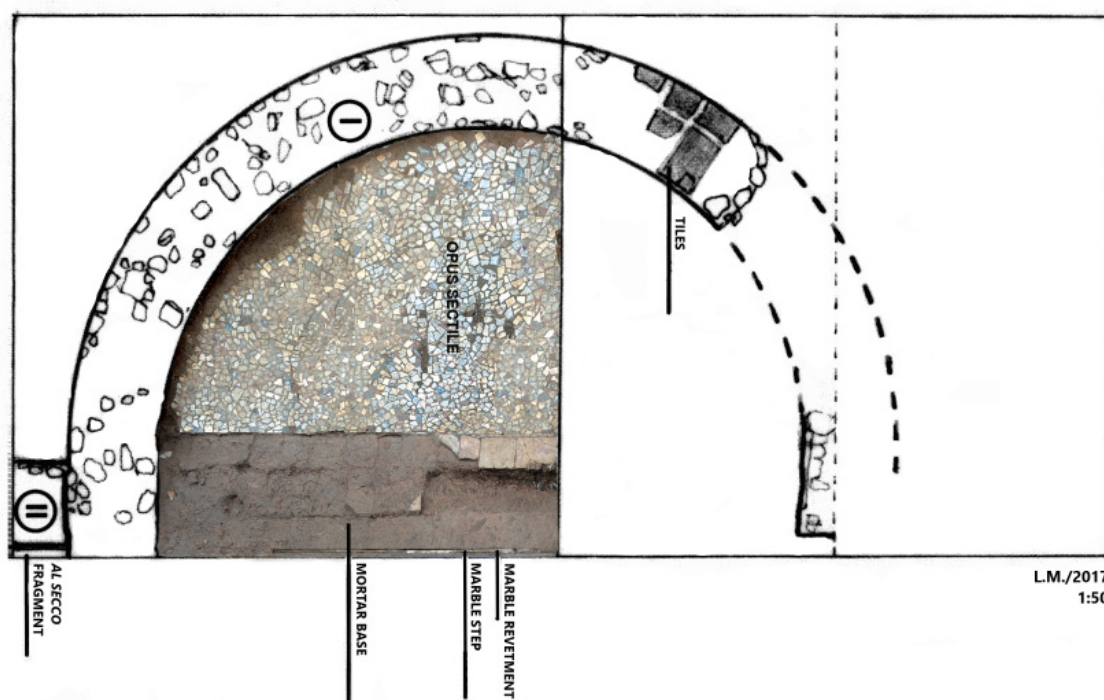


Fig. 3. Technical drawing from the investigation in 2015 (plan: L. Mangarova, 2015).

The interior was lavishly decorated in *opus sectile*, composed of marble tiles in white and partly grey and brown colour, with inlays of semi-precious materials [Fig. 2f, 2g]. This room has been interpreted as an exedra.

At both ends of the apsidal wall, other walls continue to north and south. They have a width of 76 cm and were built of stone in lime mortar [Fig. 3]. The east face of these walls preserves remains of decorative plaster with a light-yellow base and decoration in red colour [Fig. 2h]. The walls separate the exedra from a room on a lower level to its east. The *opus tessellatum* floor in this room was made of polychrome tesserae, forming horizontal fields, filled with various motifs. Between this room and the exedra, vertically placed white marble slabs served as a facing on the stairs leading to the exedra.¹

In 2021, the mission of the Archaeological museum was to excavate the space between the two buildings, at the place where a dirt road was passing.² Until then, the excavations had taken place west and east of this road, which crossed the site. The municipality of Valandovo supported the project that aimed to completely investigate the site by solving the decade-long problem of the road. Its dislocation created a new area on which the archaeologists can work in the coming years. In the same year, a trench with dimensions of 3.5 × 7 m and a north-

¹ The present article is an expanded and updated version of ŠURBANOVSKA, IVANOVIC' 2023.

² Until 2021 the excavations were conducted under the alternating leadership of Mila Šurbanovska, Antonio Jakimovski, PhD, and Radomir Ivanovik', MA – as co-leader; since 2022 project manager of the excavations

is Radomir Ivanovik', MA. The expert team members are Pero Sinadinovski, MA, Igor Širtovski, Penče Krale, Hristijan Talevski, PhD, Filip Adievski, Blagoja Kitanovski, Aleksandar Nikolovski, Vane P. Sekulov and Mitko Arsov.

south orientation was placed to the west of the room with an *impluvium*, in the area of the dislocated road, in order to determine whether the villa extended to the west of the already known rooms.

In this part of the site, an illegal dump had operated for decades, creating a garbage mound more than 2 m in height. After several days of removing garbage, we reached a level where a layer of sand and nylon could be observed in the eastern part of the trench, while the western part was intact. We eventually concluded that the eastern part of the trench had been excavated as early as 1974 during the salvage excavations executed by RIPM; unfortunately, we did not have any documentation for this part of the site. The excavations made by RIPM included only 1 m² of the room, i.e., the part next to the eastern wall. In some parts of this room, where the floor mosaic was damaged, preventive conservation with cement had been carried out. Investigation of this room continued in 2022, when the trench from 2021 was extended to the south and west [Fig. 4].

Recent discoveries

The excavations of the last two seasons have uncovered the northern, eastern and western walls of the new room, i.e., walls no. 13, 14 and 15 respectively. Next to walls 13 and 15, a large number of fragments of decorative plaster, painted in different colours (turquoise blue, red, green, brown and ochre), were found. On part of wall no. 15, a plaster coating with a thickness of 6 cm was documented, which was renewed at least twice [Fig. 5].

Due to objective reasons, i.e. the existence of modern infrastructure such as sewage shafts and a high-voltage power pole, the room was not completely excavated. Only 8.5 m along the southern side and 7 m along the northern side were investigated; the eastern side, 8.5 m wide, is fully open. The area discovered so far inside the room measures ca. 80 m²; the walls are 55 cm wide [Fig. 6].

Over the entire surface of the room, except in the center, a floor mosaic made of *opus tessellatum* was discovered. During the cleaning of the floor, at an equal distance from the southern and northern walls, a square structure with dimensions of 238 × 238 cm appeared [Fig. 6 marked red]; initially assumed to be part of a destroyed mosaic, it was identified as a centrally placed fountain. A tile found in the southeast corner of the structure appeared to be in situ, giving indications that the floor of the fountain was probably paved with this type of ceramic tiles. The interior of the fountain was filled with rubble containing more destructed tiles of the same dimensions. The upper level of the fountain was ca. 2–2.5 cm lower than the mosaic floor, and it is 60 cm deep, while the inner diameter is 1 m. The whole structure was made of hydrostatic mortar beside the bottom level of the fountain. Two ceramic tiles, preserved in situ, were attached to the walls of the fountain, and negatives of the same tiles were also observed on the walls. The interior was filled with rubble composed of hydrostatic mortar, stones, tile fragments and a small number of mosaic fragments. At the bottom of the fountain, in the middle, there is a recess, i.e., a negative impression in which a lead pipe, which supplied water for the fountain, was placed.

After the fountain ceased to function, the pipe was almost entirely removed. The removal of the pipe is the reason why in the area from the northeast corner of the fountain to the northern wall the mosaic was destroyed for a width of 40–50 cm [Fig. 7]. In the southwest corner of the fountain, there is a rectangular opening where a vertical negative of the pipe was observed, where the water was diverted upwards. We assume that water flowed out through a sculpture standing at this very place.

Technical drawing
Roman Domus - Stakina Češma

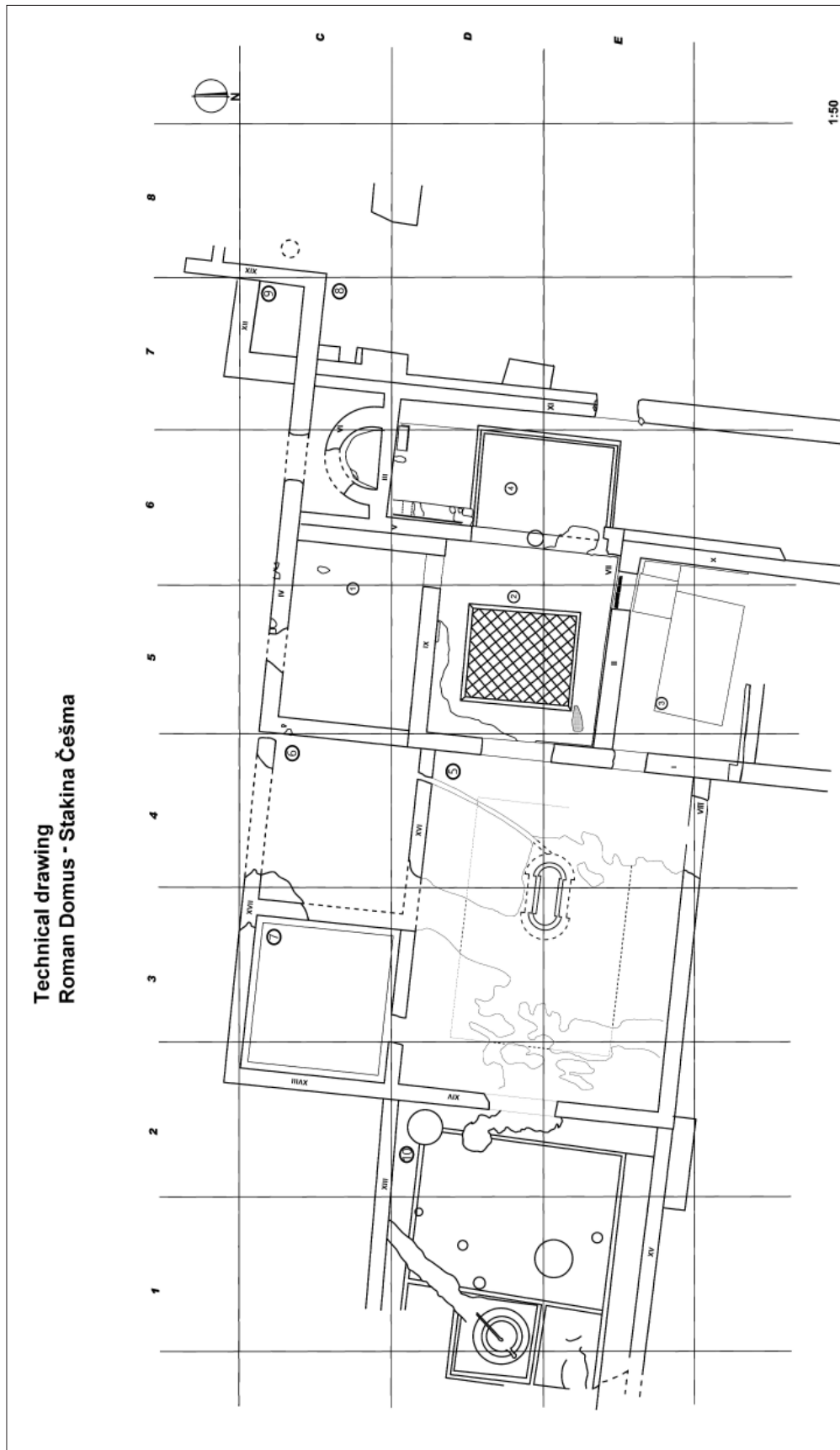


Fig. 4. Technical drawing of the entire building (plan: RIPM, L. Mangarova, R. Ivanovik', processing in AutoCAD: A. Nikolovski)



Fig. 5. Plaster lining along the southern wall no. 15 (photo: R. Ivanovik', 2022).



Fig. 6. The area of investigation in 2021 and 2022 (photo: H. Talevski, 2021–2022).



Fig. 7. The field of investigation in 2022 from the northwest (photo: R. Ivanovik', 2022).

The mosaic is divided into several zones. Zones 1 and 3: 1 m from the southern and northern walls; zones 2 and 4: 1 m from the east and west (?) walls; zone 5: central part; zones 6 and 7: south and north of the fountain. A 19 cm wide bordiure, filled with white *tesserae* and edged with blue ones, separates all the zones.

Zones 1 and 3, i.e., the southern and northern frames, are identical. Within these frames, the design is conceived as a grid of octagonal fields composed of four hourglasses.³ Rhomboid motifs are inscribed in the octagons, which are decorated with concentric squares in the middle. The arrangement of the octagons creates squares on both sides of the composition in which smaller squares in different colours are placed concentrically. This composition uses red, blue, white and yellow *tesserae*.

Zones 2 and 4 make up the eastern and western frames (the western frame is not yet fully excavated). The eastern frame is the only one completely revealed; the composition consists of a series of eighteen intersecting octagons made up of four hexagons and double squares in the middle.⁴ If the mosaic discovered in 2019 to the east of the exedra is part of this room, then the western frame is identical to the eastern one, but this one has not been fully revealed and is composed of 10 intersecting octagons. This composition also uses red, blue, white and yellow *tesserae*.

Zone 5 constitutes the central zone. The composition is made up of a grid of smaller octagons connected by rectangles that thus form larger octagonal fields, whereas the rectangles are

³ SWEETMAN 2003, pp. 542–543.

⁴ CRNOGLAVAC 2021, p. 20.

filled with a braid. A circle is formed in the octagonal fields in which there are different motifs: Solomon's knot, swastikas, circles, a circle with an inscribed heart leaf and peltae, quatrefoil of curved triangles, Maltese cross surrounded by semicircles, a shield of triangles, a lotus flower, wave pattern, etc.⁵ This composition uses *tesserae* in the same colours: red, blue, white and yellow.

Zones 6 and 7 comprised the fields to the north and south of the fountain. The composition is made up of intersecting circles,⁶ four circles on the north-south axis and six circles on the east-west axis. The circles are formed by blue *tesserae*, they are filled with yellow and white *tesserae*, and, in the middle of the circles, there are squares made of red *tesserae*.

The technique, as well as the motifs used in the production of this mosaic floor, is similar to those found in the research of 2019, i.e. the area to the east of the exedra, which points to the opinion that this entire space was part of a larger room ca. 8.5×11.5 m. This room is interpreted as a reception hall, which ended with an exedra on the west side, which was higher than the rest of the room and represented a podium from which the owners of the villa addressed their guests.

Summary

The results achieved so far have clearly shown that at the site of Stakina Češma we are dealing with an extremely luxurious Roman *domus* with more than ten rooms. All the floor surfaces in the building, cca. 500 m², were rendered in various mosaic techniques, while the walls were decorated with marble revetment or *al secco* painted decoration. All this luxury of the highest level documented at Stakina Češma indicates that this villa belonged to a very wealthy individual since few could afford such luxury. The owner could be a member of the imperial family or a retired general.

In order to obtain a complete overview of the site, a three-dimensional geo-referenced model of the villa has been under construction since 2021 [Fig. 8], and is being supplemented by subsequent investigations.⁷

In 2020, due to a limited budget, the wider area of the terrace of the Anska River, to the south of the villa, was surveyed. The researchers have found a large number of pottery fragments from the Late Roman period, as well as a fragment of a marble slab with an inscription in ancient Greek.⁸ On a state-owned plot of land, ca. 100 m south of the villa, two test trenches with dimensions of 1×5 m were placed. The excavations at these locations yielded architectural remains that indicated the existence of another building [Fig. 9]. The numismatic material found at this location confirms the date of the site i.e., the second half of the fourth century AD.⁹

In 2023, after many years of negotiation with the private owners of the land, archaeologists finally had the opportunity to reopen a small part of another villa, in Karata Maala, located approximately one kilometer north of the *domus* in Stakina Češma. In the early 1970's there were some small-scale rescue excavations at this location, but the lack of documentation led us to

⁵ Much gratitude to Miše Tutkovski, PhD, and Ruth Kolarik, PhD, who contributed to the interpretation of some of the motifs used in the compositions of the mosaics in the reception hall.

⁶ TAVANO 1974, pp. 181–182.

⁷ The three-dimensional model of the villa is made by Hristijan Talevski, PhD, from the Paleo Slavic Institute – Prilep.

⁸ All the mentioned material has not been published yet.

⁹ The dating of the coins was done by Sanja Bitrak, MA, National Institution Archaeological Museum of the Republic of North Macedonia.



Fig. 8. Orthophoto image of the villa (photo: H. Talevski, 2021–2022).



Fig. 9. The excavations from 2020 (on the left trench 1, on the right trench 2) (photo: R. Ivanović, 2020).

reopen this site in order to see exactly what lies beneath and to properly document it. We discovered two rooms with mosaic floors in *opus tessellatum*. The larger room has a roughly square base and a complex geometric design consisting of several borders framing a central circular design with geometrical motifs, while the smaller room has a rectangular base that is completely filled with a mosaic with geometric motifs [Fig. 10]. According to the report that derived from these excavations, we know that there are at least two more buildings with floor mosaic in the immediate vicinity of the second site.¹⁰

The geophysical surveys conducted in 2021 and 2022, in the wider surroundings of the site, showed the existence of several linear anomalies that were interpreted as archaeological remains. In addition to the previously mentioned research, these locations, if excavated, would probably confirm the hypothesis that the Stakina Česma site is not just a single building, but an entire Late Roman complex following the example of Mediana in Niš,¹¹ Felix Romuliana (Gamzigrad),¹² Villa Armira in Ivailovgrad,¹³ and Nagyharsány.¹⁴

¹⁰ VINČIĆ 1972, p. 1–2.

¹¹ VASIĆ *et alii* 2016, p. 49.

¹² POPOVIĆ *et alii* 2011, pp. 49–105.

¹³ VALEVA 2012, p. 448.



Fig. 10. Orthophoto image of the mosaic floor in Karata Maala villa (photo: H. Talevski, 2023)

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