

ANNUAL REPORT: THE DJANAVARA HILL PROJECT: EXCAVATIONS OF AN EARLY BYZANTINE MONASTERY AT VARNA, BULGARIA 2018 FIELD SCHOOL

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At the end of a very successful archaeological season and field school

The Djanavara monastery archaeological field school 2018 took place in Varna, Bulgaria (ancient Odessos) on the Black Sea coast from July 23rd to August 20th. The excavation project was hosted by the Varna Regional Museum of History, Department of Archaeology, and for a fifth season was conducted in successful partnership with the Balkan Heritage foundation: 2009, 2010, 2011, 2017 and 2018.

The Early Christian monastic complex is located on the Djanavara hill 7 km south from the old town of Varna. It consists of a monumental single-nave church with four additional premises, presumably with towers on top of them. The building differs from the traditional Early Christian church architecture in the Balkan provinces of the Roman Empire, and some of the characteristics could be explained by near eastern influence. The church was excavated for the first time in the early 20th C. Then it was re-excavated in the late 90's, and on a larger scale since 2007, in order to collect additional and more precise archaeological information about the site.

In the last 10 years, a large complex around the church has been partly uncovered. An atrium with colonnades, a back yard and buildings with several different construction periods have also been discovered. The complex dates from the mid-5th C. and existed until the early 7th C. With its size, monumentality and luxurious decoration with marble and mosaics, the Djanavara monastery is one of the most representative of its kind in the Balkans. The monastery is also famous for the set of three reliquaries made of marble, silver and gold found in a crypt under the altar.

The scientific tasks during the 2018 excavation and field school were a logical continuation of the discoveries from the previous archaeological season. The efforts of the team this year were focused in two specific areas – both in the southwestern sector of the monastery. The first working area covered the southwestern part of the two-story building adjacent to the southern wall of the atrium. The debris of the floor and the roof have been preserved intact through the centuries as a closed context and gave a wonderful opportunity to study the stratigraphy and respectively the chronology of the site. After the completion of digging in the area, it became clear that the building was larger, and had a more sophisticated ground plan than was expected. This archaeological situation together with the pottery and the coins found near gave new and important information about the building history of the complex.

The second area was in the southern portico of the atrium, eastward from the area excavated in 2017. There the foundation wall of the colonnade was unearthed along with three of the bases preserved in situ. In the debris nearby were found two large fragments of ionic impost capitals from the portico – a clear evidence that the colonnade was crowned by an arcade. All this was an important and unexpected discovery that makes possible a very accurate virtual reconstruction of the portico.

The excavation in the second area provided us with a lot of information about the numerous reconstructions of the portico and the complex in general between the second half of the 5th and the first half of the 7th C. The stratigraphy is extremely rich with more than five floor levels, burnt layers, etc.

A lot of pottery and small artifacts (coins, clay and glass lamps, iron objects, etc.) were found during the field school thus giving the students an idea about the everyday life in the complex.

A very special find this year was a fragment of a terracotta figurine – a face of a man with a wreath. The style is typical for the late 5th and 6th C. but the type of the object – a ceramic sculpture is extremely unusual for the period. The interpretation is uncertain: a portrait of an emperor or an image of a saint (?). The find remains without a close analogue.

The 2018 excavation and field school season provided all of the participants with valuable fieldwork and finds processing experience. Under the guidance and supervision of their instructors, the students took part in all activities on the field: digging, measuring, field documentation (photography, graphic documentation, context sheets, bag labels, etc.), and initial finds processing (sorting and cleaning).

After the intensive fieldwork in season 2018 a lot of archaeological material and documentation was collected. It will be processed in the forthcoming months by the Djanavara excavation team and affiliated specialists. The results of the excavations will be presented to the public during the annual archaeological reports of the Bulgarian National Institute of Archaeology in February/March 2019, and an article will be published in the annual edition of the Institute – Archaeological Discoveries and Excavations (in 2018).