

Old data and new results

revaluating excavation materials from the Civil Town of Aquincum

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Abstract: Even though the more than 120 years of archaeological excavations at the Aquincum Civil Town have brought to light nearly half of the antique town, thorough publishing of the excavated remains and finds has only rarely been carried out. Thus, theories concerning the functions of buildings and building history were created without the benefit of proper analysis of data.

Different standards of evaluation were used to document the excavations from the 19th century onwards ranging from short reports and traditional layer-description methods to objectively numbered archaeological features and proper established stratigraphic sequences. More recently, an attempt has been made to re-evaluate these old data for the so-called North – East quarter of the town in order to obtain more information about the building history of the Civil Town. During this work it was necessary to deal with all site observation data and finds from the variously documented excavations within a single integrated system. Thus, it seemed most appropriate to use the Harris matrix system. In most cases, all archaeological features described in the diaries were numbered, including all handwritten and typed documentation. These features were afterwards placed into a matrix based on the site drawings and photos.

The method described above permitted the creation of an “internal”, relative chronology, for each excavation so they could be compared to each other and finally set up in a kind of “concordance table”, i.e. the relative chronological sequence of the North-East quarter itself. The find material could afterwards then be connected to the identified building phases to help create absolute dates for the phases.

In spite of the problems that arose during the work, converting the various excavation-documentations into an integrated system proved successful in the case of the North-East zone of the Civil Town: based on the identified building phases and the finds connected to them the building history of this quarter could be reconstructed and ultimately provided new data on the activities that took place in this zone in the settlement.

Keywords: Aquincum, North – Eastern quarter, documentation, excavation, revaluation

Research history: 120 years of excavation in Aquincum

Continuous excavations concerning the settlement parts of Aquincum (legionary fortress, Military Town, Civil Town and the villas) have produced a large amount of excavation documentation (of varying quality)¹ over the more than 120 years of research. Nearly 1 million objects were brought in this manner to the stores of the Aquincum Museum². However, as most excavations were connected to building activities and

¹ Kept in the Archaeological Repository of the Budapest History Museum.

² Based on the data of the Collections of the Aquincum Museum.

concentrated on rescuing sites and finds, systematic evaluations have rarely been carried out. Thorough publishing of the excavated remains and finds was only possible before World War II. Due to the growing number of investment-led excavations, in the last decades, archaeologists have only been able to publish the preliminary results of their work³. Thus, theories concerning the functions of buildings and building history were created at a time when separation of building periods or evaluation of the finds was rarely carried out.

This situation is particularly true in case of the Civil Town, where excavations brought to light nearly half of the antique town and research is still going on in other parts of the settlement⁴.

Here, research was mainly connected to the conservation of ruins and even though attempts were made to unearth complete houses, the ground plans of most of the buildings remain rather confusing due to the lack of proper evaluation. Construction phases have rarely been distinguished either⁵. These problems lead to debates about the settlement history and structure⁶, the earliest phase (military use?) of the settlement⁷ and functions of buildings⁸. One of the biggest problems was caused by the fact that most excavations (even the control excavations) were limited to relatively small areas so that no contiguous areas could be examined.

The North – Eastern zone: a promising area

However, there is a relatively contiguous area available for studying phases of the town. This is the North-Eastern zone of the Civil Town. Several excavations have been carried out here in the past although for various reasons (see above) only the preliminary results were published. Thus, separation of building periods or evaluation of the finds has not yet been carried out.

³ For instance: construction of the Gas factory's housing estate at the beginning of the 20th c. or the era of the 'revitalisation' of Óbuda between 1969 and 1989, when a large number of preventive excavations were carried out connected to construction works.

⁴ Zsidi 2002: 8.

⁵ Also pointing to these problems: Lányi – Mócsy 1990: 215.

⁶ For a summary, see: Zsidi 2003:127.

⁷ For a summary of the hypothesis on the earliest phase: Láng 2013: in print.

⁸ The function of several buildings is highly questionable, for example the that of the so-called basilica, or the House of the Butcher or the Fullonica: Láng 2012.

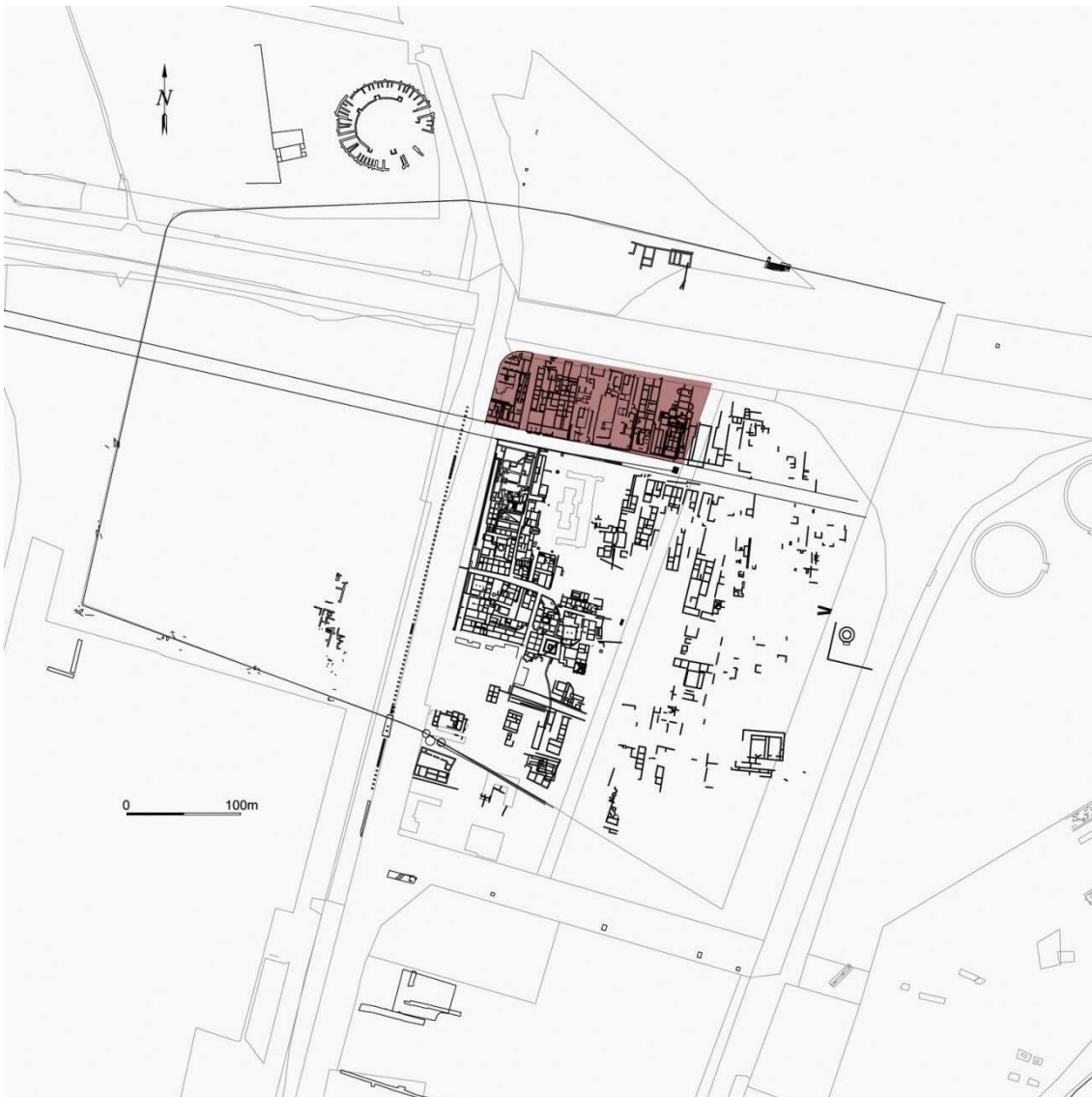


Fig. 1 – Plan of the Aquincum Civil Town (drawing by K. Kolozsvári)

The North-Eastern zone of the town is bordered by Road “A” (the continuation of the *cardo*, Road “C”) on the West and the *decumanus* running down to the river (Road “D”) on the South. Its Northern border may have been the East-West Roman road running below a modern street or it may also have stretched to the Northern town wall⁹. Its Eastern border is hard to determine because the modern North-South street runs here as well as a housing estate below which only small-scale excavations were carried out at the beginning of the 20th century¹⁰. This zone has traditionally been associated with industrial and commercial activities related to the busy road that ran through here. The remains of the strip buildings constructed in this part of the town are still visible on the surface¹¹.

⁹ Street “D1”: Kuzsinszky 1891: 125; Zsidi 2002: 64 (with incorrect reference!).

¹⁰ Nagy 1942: 376. Later research was mainly connected to the earthworks of public utilities here (South-East part of the Civil Town): Németh 1973: 115-120.

¹¹ Zsidi 2002: 77-78.



Fig. 2 – Aerial photo of the North-Eastern zone with location of the excavations and the early Roman archaeological features (photo: G. Rákóczi, O. Láng)

The first excavation - that is important in terms of early Roman remains (pit features and layers) - was carried out in the Western and central parts of Building no. I. (the so-called basilica) by T. Nagy in 1961-62. Only he has distinguished building phases and functions in the North-Eastern zone of the town so far and also published them¹². In the following years, several - partly overlapping - excavations were carried out in the Eastern wing of Building no. I, also revealing early layers and pits. J. Szilágyi worked here in 1966-67¹³ and K. Póczy in 1972 – this latter work was related to the construction of a new (at that time) entrance building and cashier's office¹⁴. This excavation was later continued by P. Zsidi in 1990¹⁵. A new control excavation related to the reconstruction of this part of the park was carried out at the beginning of the 1990s, when E. Mártly excavated the Eastern wing of Building no. I, again over two seasons (1991-1992)¹⁶ and the Northern part of Building no. XXVI. where she also found Roman features from an

¹² Nagy 1964a: 9-54; Nagy 1964: 301-302.

¹³ Szilágyi 1967: 32-33; Szilágyi 1968: 23.

¹⁴ Póczy-Hajnóczy 197: 34-35.

¹⁵ Póczy - Zsidi 1992: no. 47/14, 2. 32.

¹⁶ Mártly 1993: 34; Mártly 1994: 34; Mártly 1996: 36.

early occupation in 1993¹⁷. The Northern and Southern ends of Building no. XXVI. were only excavated in 1966-67 by J. Szilágyi¹⁸.

The next building where early layer and finds were found in this area is Building no. XXIX, first researched by B. Kuzsinszky. He unearthed the Northern part of the house in 1890-91¹⁹. This work was continued some 50 years later by J. Szilágyi (1944-1947) although he concentrated on the Southern part of the house²⁰. The author of this article next carried out excavations here from 2004 onwards as part of conservations of the standing ruins. Digging began in the southernmost rooms and continued to the north in 2006 and 2007²¹.

The method: converting – connecting – defining - dating

In spite of the relatively incomplete picture available for this settlement zone and the areas that have been re-excavated several times, it seemed useful to try and evaluate the unpublished or only partially published (from preliminary reports) known excavations²². Different standards of evaluation were used to document the excavations carried out over the last 120 years in the North-East zone of the town²³. As no documentation is available and no control excavations were ever carried out in the three buildings located here (Buildings nos. XXVII., XXX., XXXI.), first excavated in the 19th and around the middle of the 20th centuries, only a summary could be made of them. The “wings” of Building no. I. (the so-called basilica) were also excavated several times during the course of the 19th-20th c. Only in the case of T. Nagy’s excavation documentation of the Western and central wing of the same building do we find objectively numbered archaeological features and proper stratigraphy. More recent research carried out in Building no. XXIX. were documented using the Harris matrix system (US numbers, matrix).

Due to the heterogeneous character of the data, it was necessary to deal with all site observation data and finds within a single integrated system. Thus, it seemed most appropriate to use the Harris matrix system. In all cases, the archaeological features described in the diaries were numbered, employing all handwritten and typed documentation. These features were afterwards placed into a matrix based on the site drawings and photos.

¹⁷ Mártly 1996: 36.

¹⁸ Szilágyi 1967: 32-33; Szilágyi 1968: 23.

¹⁹ Kuzsinszky 1891: 134-140.

²⁰ Szilágyi 1950: 312-317.

²¹ T. Láng 2005: 68-80; T. Láng 2007: 117-128; T. Láng 2008: 71-80.

²² The first attempt to re-evaluate old excavation documentation was when the find material from the 1965 excavations at the Aquincum macellum was connected to field observations: Láng 2001 and T. Láng 2003: 165-204. The revaluation of the material of the North-Eastern zone of Aquincum was carried out in the framework of the author’s PhD dissertation: Láng 2012.

²³ Most of the excavations listed in the previous chapter were documented using a traditional layer-description method. More recent research carried out in Building no. XXIX. were documented using the Harris matrix system.

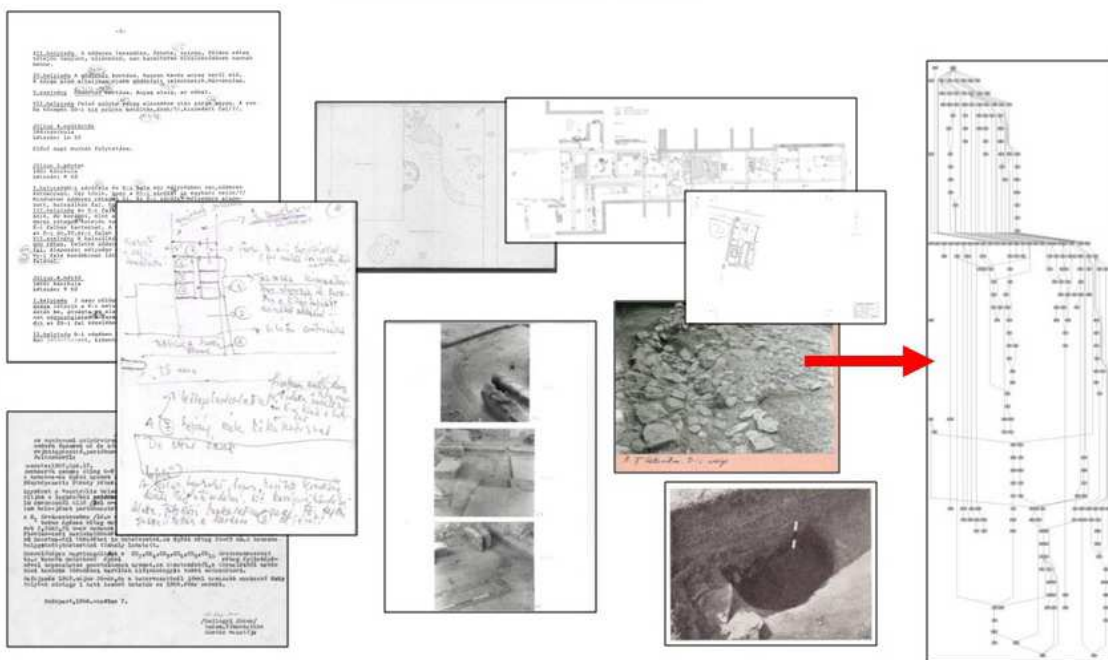


Fig. 3 – Converting the different excavation documentations into the Harris matrix (O. Láng)

This method was not used for evaluating T. Nagy's excavation results as he had already separated the various building phases. These phases could be used as comparative material. The method described above permitted the creation of an “internal”, relative chronology for each excavation so they could be compared to each other and finally set up in a kind of “concordance table”, i.e. the relative chronological sequence of the North-East quarter itself. The find material from these excavations - mainly objects with primary dating power such as Samian Ware, Pannonian Stamped Pottery, coins, amphorae, oil lamps and individual finds - could afterwards be connected to the identified building phases to help create absolute dates for the phases.

Phases	Periodization of K. Póczy	K. Póczy . <i>Peacock house 1.</i>	P. Zsidi <i>Peacock house 2.</i>	E. Mártly <i>Building XXVI. „Diana sanctuary”</i>	T. Nagy <i>Building nr. I. (Basilica)</i>	J. Szilágyi <i>Buildings nr. XXVI.-XXVII. „Diana sanctuary”</i>	O. Láng <i>Building nr. XXIX.</i>
1. pits	-	-	-	1.	1. (Prebasilical I.)	-	-
2. (pits,houses)	-	-	-	2.		1.	1.
3. (adobe walls)	<i>„clay-brick ensemble”</i>	1.	1.	3.	2. (Prebasilical II).	2.	2.
4. (first stone buildings.)	-	2.	2.,3.	4.	3. (Basilica I.)	3.	3.
5. („wall-pushing”)	<i>„limestone system”</i>	3.	4.	5.	4. (Basilica II.)	4.	4.
6.	<i>„ashlar, strongly built wall, after Marcus Aurelius”</i>	4.	5.	6.	-	-	5.
7.	<i>„moulded walls, macellum-period”</i>	5.	6.	7.	-	-	6.
8.	<i>„4th c., stone-in- clay walls”</i>	6.	7.	8.	-	-	7.

Tab. 1a – Relative chronological sequence of the building phases from each excavations (O. Láng)

	Periodization of K. Póczy	Terra sigillata	Amphora	coin	Pannonian stamped pottery	oil-lamps	Individual finds, special contexts: filling of the horse-shoe shaped construction	Individual finds, special contexts: gem	Individual finds, special contexts: terracotte statuette	Individual finds, special contexts: glass cup	Individual finds, special contexts: rigid heddle	Σ
1.	-	-	middle of 1st – first quarter of 2nd c.?	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	last quarter - end of 1st c.
2.	-	end of 1st – beginning of 2nd c.	first quarter – middle of 2nd c.	-	end of 1st – beginning of 2nd c.	-	end of 1st c.	-	-	-	-	end of 1st – beginning of 2nd c.?
3.	„clay-brick ensemble”=first decades of 2nd c.	first decade - middle of 2nd c.	middle – end of 2nd c.	first decade – middle of 2nd c.	end of 1st – beginning of 2nd c.	beginning of 2nd c.	-	beginning of 2nd c.	first decades of 2nd c.	end of 1st – beginning of 2nd c.	-	beginning – middle of 2nd c.?
4.	-	middle – last third of 2nd c.	third quarter of 2nd – 3rd c.	-	cannot be valuated!	beginning – third quarter of 2nd c.	-	-	-	-	-	middle – third quarter of 2nd c.
5.	„limestone system”=second part of 2nd c.	last third of 2nd – beginning of 3rd c.	turn of 2nd – 3rd and 3rd c.	middle – second half of 2nd c.	cannot be valuated!	-	-	-	-	-	middle – end of 2nd c.	last third of 2nd – beginning of 3rd c.
6.	„ashlar, strongly built wall, after Marcus Aureleius”=3rd c.	beginning – first half of 3rd c.	3rd c.	first third of 3rd c.	cannot be valuated!	from the 2nd c.	-	-	-	-	-	beginning – first half of 3rd c.
7.	„moulded walls, macellum-period”=middle of 3rd c.?	after first half of 3rd c.?	3rd c.	first third of 3rd c.	cannot be valuated!	-	-	-	-	-	-	first half of 3rd c.?
8.	„4th c., stone-in-clay walls”=end of 3rd c.?	after first half of 3rd c.?	3rd c.	-	cannot be valuated!	-	-	-	-	-	-	end of 3rd – beginning of 4th c.?

Tab. 1b – Absolute chronological sequence of the building phases with the dating material (O. Láng)

The method: problems

In spite of the above-mentioned promising nature of the method, some problems were encountered during this work. One problem was the fact that certain buildings were not excavated in a regular manner (from North to South or East to West) so that it could happen that a single area was re-dug several times by subsequent generations of archaeologists, resulting in overlapping trenches and scientific results at variance with each other. This is why almost nothing is known about the Southern part of Building no. I. despite the fact that the central part of the Eastern wing is relatively well known. The diaries of the different excavators sometimes contained conflicting data about the same feature causing problems with interpretations. There were some important archaeological features (such as pit-houses or ovens) situated in unknown locations and with no geodesic or levelling data. Unfortunately, these data had to be ignored during this present work. No photos or drawings were available in some cases, making interpretation rather difficult. Differently described features and inconsistently named layers also caused difficulties (in the diary and on the find bags).

The other major problem was the usability of the find material, since if an archaeological feature was described inaccurately the finds coming from it became suspect from the point of view of dating and could only be used for artefact counts or providing information on the function of the features. Due to the above-mentioned problem, only part of the total find material could be used for dating building phases.

Despite these problems, converting the various excavation-documentation into an integrated system proved successful for the North-East zone in the Civil Town as well. Based on the identified building phases and the finds connected to them, the building history of this quarter could be reasonably well reconstructed and yield new data on the activities that took place in this settlement zone²⁴.

The North-Eastern zone: results

In spite of the above problems, eight construction phases could be distinguished in the North-Eastern zone of the Aquincum Civil Town, dating from the last quarter of the 1st century to the last quarter – end of the 3rd century, also shedding light on the history of the whole settlement²⁵.

²⁴ The complete evaluation of the find material of these several times re-dug buildings - where available – has just recently been finished in the framework of the author's PhD dissertation: Láng 2012.

²⁵ For detailed results: Láng 2012.

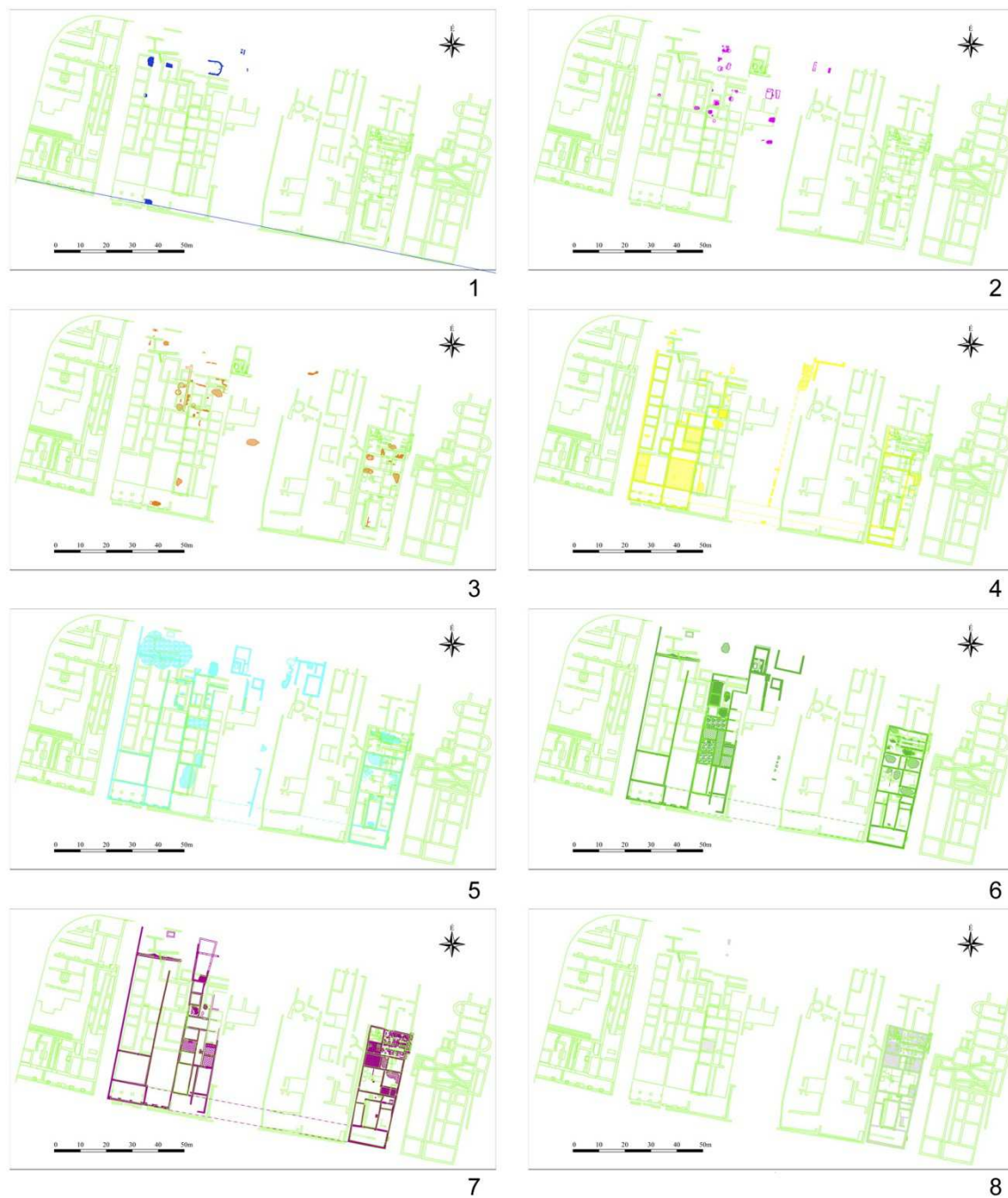


Fig. 5 – Construction phases in the North-Eastern zone of the Civil Town (O. Láng)

For the first time in the research history of the town, even the earliest phases could be distinguished and mapped. These features belonged to a civilian vicus that developed along the main East-West road. Semi-subterranean pit houses already seemed to display some regularity and data was obtained on plot-divisions in this zone from the last quarter of the 1st century AD. The next phase - dated between the beginning – third quarter of the 2nd century - was a time of urbanization and the foundation of the municipium. It was characterized by the finalization of the insulae and plot borders, streets were laid out and the origin of the strip buildings - later typical for this zone – also date to this period. The colonia-period was the heyday of life

in this zone from the end of 2nd until the middle of 3rd century AD. At this time, densely located strip houses dominated the North-East quarter, possibly as a result of the economic boom and growing population following the Marcomann wars. Based on the evaluated excavation data, the industrial and commercial character (with workshops and tabernae) of this zone amplified sharply in this period. The last examined phase dates between the middle of the 3rd – beginning (?) of the 4th century AD and was still marked by industrial and commercial activity here. The reason for the lack of later features and finds probably lies in the abandonment of the North-East quarter connected to increasingly frequent Barbarian attacks over the Danube River. Based on the archaeological features and finds, even the building history of the public utilities in this zone could be reconstructed as well the function of some of the buildings (mainly buildings from the municipium- and the colonia-period) including the metal-working, horn and glue-manufacturing that went on in some of the strip buildings. A possible mansio could also be identified.

As seen above - despite the problems that were encountered during the work - important new information has been gained on the history of the North-Eastern zone of the Aquincum Civil Town.

Conclusions

Altogether 120 years of archaeological research at Aquincum - particularly the Civil Town – produced lots of documentation and finds although as complete evaluations were rarely carried out and due to continuous excavation campaigns, the research history of the Aquincum Civil Town was based on continuously repeated and old hypotheses concerning the history of the settlement, the functions of buildings or dating of certain phases. Problems were further exacerbated by the fact that even control excavations were carried out in small, isolated areas, excluding the possibility that construction phases be properly reconstructed. Revaluation of the old excavation documentation was thus urgently needed and the North-Eastern zone of the Civil Town seemed to be a promising area as several pieces of research were carried out over a relatively contiguous area although none had been completely worked up. Here, the varying quality of documentation caused problems during the present work (several times re-dug areas yielding conflicting results, missing drawings and geodesic data, only partially usable finds etc.). This work has made it possible to finally determine a relative chronological sequence for the phases which could then be connected to the find material yielding absolute dating data. Eight construction phases could be identified in this quarter of the settlement including concrete data on the earliest settlement phases, functions of certain rooms and buildings, and the plot divisions in this zone. This work revealed how important such re-evaluations will be for a future understanding of the settlement history of the Aquincum Civil Town.

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