

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH PROJECT AT DOBRI DYAL, BULGARIA

August 3, 2011 Kevin Wooldridge Archaeological Prospection, Day of Archaeology, Day of Archaeology 2011, Education, Roman, Survey 3-D, 3D, Andrew Poulter, Anthropology, Archaeology, author, Balkans, Black Sea, Black Sea coast, Bulgaria, Cardiff, Dobri Dyal, Edinburgh, emperor, environmental processing, Europe, Excavation, Facebook, Facebook Inc, field archaeologist, finds processing, food, GBP, Hannah, Italy, Jade, Kevin Wooldridge, Metropolitan Police, Nature, North Africa, Norway, Nottingham, occasional allergy, open source software, pence, professor, project director, Qatar, Roman fortress, Science, site surveyor, site surveyor at Dobri Dyal, Sofia, Sofia City Province, surveyor, Turnovo museum, type site, United Kingdom, University of Nottingham

On Friday 29th July 2011 I was working as site surveyor on a site at Dobri Dyal, a Roman fortified hilltop camp believed to date from the early 6th century AD and located in the central region of Bulgaria approximately 200km east of the capital Sofia. The Dobri Dyal project has about 50 participants mostly students from Nottingham and Cardiff universities but also with a smattering of students from Edinburgh, UCL a couple from Oxbridge and some from other places. There are a dozen or so supervisors, mainly professional archaeologists, covering all the main field functions, finds and environmental management, surveying and digital documentation, under the direction of Professor Andrew Poulter of the University of Nottingham. The British part of the project works in co-operation with a Bulgarian team organised through the regional museum at nearby Veiko Turnovo.



The Dobri Dyal team....

Project Background*

From northern Italy to the Black Sea coast, the only identified human impact upon the landscape during the early Byzantine period is the appearance of countless hill-top fortifications; only a few have been partially excavated, and none has been subjected to systematic archaeological research, employing the full range or modern techniques. The function of these sites and the character of the countryside during the final years of Byzantine rule, central as they are for understanding the period, remain unknown.

*It is generally accepted that the early Byzantine Empire was at its height during the 6th century: Justinian retook North Africa and Italy and the emperor Maurice campaigned on and beyond the Danubian frontier. The lower Danube was of fundamental importance; it represented the economic hinterland and frontier, supporting and protecting the Byzantine capital of Constantinople. Literary sources for the region, describing the second half of the century, have generated opposing interpretations; on the one hand, that this period witnessed a revival in Byzantine military strength or, on the other, that this century saw the progressive collapse of the empire's economic and military power (Whitby and Liebeschuetz in Poulter 2007a). In particular, there is no agreement as to the veracity of *The Buildings* written by Procopius: a key reference point for any discussion of the period. However, book 4 (which covers the eastern Balkans) is unique in that the text was never completed and, in its rough form, it can be demonstrated that the author relied upon a variety of different sources, including itineraries (Poulter 2007a, 9-11). Although this conclusion does not necessarily discredit Procopius' narrative, it raises suspicions about the authenticity of his detailed descriptions which can only be tested by targeted archaeological research.*

The project requires the total excavation of the well-preserved 6th- century fortress of 'Dobri Dyal' in north central Bulgaria. The objective is to discover the economic role of the type site during the 6th century. Essential projects will include zooarchaeological, archaeobotanical, small-finds and ceramic research, providing datasets which can be directly compared with the substantial results from the first two programmes (cf. 24,000 bone fragments from Nicopolis and 10,000 from the late Roman fortress). The excavations will explore the function of the site during the 6th to 7th centuries.

* written by project director Professor Andrew Poulter and cribbed from the project handbook

5am.....I leave the farm in Nicup and walk the kilometre or so into the middle of the village We have commandeered a restaurant in the middle of the village to provide us with food, starting with coffee and a snack at 5.30 each morning, before we leave for site at 6am. The site at Dobri Dyal is about 45 mins drive south of Nicup, so today like most days we are standing at the bottom of the hill at about 6.45am. The Nottingham team opened 5 excavation areas on the top of the mound last season. Three of these areas (A, B and E) are being dug again this year and two new areas (J and K) have been opened in locations

where the 2010 geophysical survey indicated areas of high resistivity. A Bulgarian team from Turnovo museum are opening a trench on the southern downslope of the hill where they think the main gatehouse and approach road to the hillfort are located.



7am....The actual change in level from the bottom to the top of the hill is only about 30 metres, but some days it seems much much higher. Especially when you are carrying tools from the caravan to the top, or in my case two tripods, a total station, a prism pole and a box of assorted grid pegs, tapes, club hammer and nails. I am the site surveyor at Dobri Dyal. Most of my recent archaeological work has been in Norway and Qatar although I have been involved in a couple of English Heritage projects back in the UK in the past 3 years. Today I am assisted by two student volunteers (Hannah and Jade) and the main task for the survey team is to locate grid pegs around trench E to enable the students to practice their planning skills.

In addition to laying out grids we are 3-D locating small finds, as and when they are discovered and plotting the defensive walls on the south side of the fort currently being uncovered by a Bulgarian archaeological team. We are using two Leica 400 total stations for the day to day survey work. These are fairly straightforward machines to use and so far all of the students I have tutored have learnt to set up the machines and carry out simple survey functions (point location, setting out grid-pegs and trench locations using the stake-out function). I of course miss the robotic Leica 1200 machine that I normally use in Norway, but for training purposes it is probably more useful for the students to get acquainted with the simpler machine.....For some reason I have not been able to work out, we are burning through batteries today and by lunch time have used 4 sets.....hopefully there is just enough left in the last set to see us to the end of the day...(there was – just!!)

10am.....Lunch!! Each day we are supplied lunch by a local supermarket. Like most archaeological projects we have a mix of carnivores and veggies, a smattering of vegans and the occasional allergy sufferer as well as the downright awkward, making the supply of suitable 'off the shelf' sandwiches fraught with difficulty. Today's vegetarian offering is just about inedible, but I have a large jar of pickled chilli peppers in the site hut that disguises the tastlessness of the cheese and peps up the cucumber. And an apple. And a litre and a half bottle of water. The temperature in central Bulgaria gets into the high 30s in July...which is very nice, but does require drinking plenty of water if you are out on site.



10.45am...back to work. We try to make sure that all of the students cover the basic skills needed to work as a field archaeologist (digging, recording, planning, section drawing, surveying) and in the store (finds processing, environmental processing, sieving, sampling etc etc).....but this is a real research excavation and we try and maintain a high standard of work. Our research aims are to establish the plan and phasing of the settlement, its development and demise using all the facilities and methodologies available to us. The Bulgarian team use a more traditional method and are constantly amazed at how slowly we work. Attempts to explain our 'single context – stratigraphic excavation' methodology are met with blank looks by our host archaeologists. It's about time that someone translated 'Principles of Archaeological Stratigraphy' into one or more of the eastern European languages.....

1.45pm....Well that's it for today. We pile back into the minibuses and return to Nicup for lunch. Soup and some baked cheese dish for me, some kind of sausage for the meat eaters. Our restaurant has a bar where drinks are very cheap. A 500ml beer costs 1 lev (45 pence). A double gin and tonic 1.5lev (67 pence). A quadruple gin and tonic 1.9 lev (85 pence), a 330ml glass of local wine 0.60 lev (27 pence)..... the local speciality is 'oblek' a mixture of green mint liquor and ouzo much loved by men of a certain age (described by one non-archaeological acquaintance in the village as a cross between viagra and laxative!!) and rakia, the local plum or apricot brandy. Being sensible abstemious folk we tend to stick to a

small gin and tonic and the occasional beer. Some students sit at the tables outside the bar playing cards, some return to their houses to sleep. Meanwhile....

3.45pm.....A surveyor's work is never done!! I spend a couple of hours most days downloading the site survey data and preparing maps etc. Today a number of students are working extra hours in the finds store to make up time lost on other occasions during the week or as we like to call it 'detention'. I slip along to Ann's digital documentation office to print out a couple of maps. I use Leica Geoforce to download today's site data. Normally I would use ArcGIS to process the data, create the survey database and make the maps, but as this is a 'free' project for me, I am using as far as possible freely available open source software (not least so I can make the site data available to any students who request it). At present that consists of the Quantum GIS (QGIS) and the ProCAD (AutoCAD clone) packages. I am not a great fan of using AutoCAD for archaeological purposes, but find ProCAD useful for converting GIS-based shapefiles to dwg and dxf formats for those that want them. The students in detention seem to be fairly happy with their punishment and are discussing whether universities should 'give up' student protesters to the Metropolitan Police.....No way!!

6pm....back to the house for a cold shower and then down to the Directors house for a pre-dinner gin and tonic. The gin on sale in the local bar is cheap, but it's not Bombay Sapphire unfortunately Andrew is out of tonic so I end up with gin and lemon.. I manage to struggle through two glasses!! The project works on Saturday mornings so Friday nights are not as relaxing as a normal weekend, but we always manage to have a reasonable time. The nearest large town (Veiko Turnovo) has a culture festival on at the moment with ballet and opera performances most weekends. We have been offered cheap tickets (10lev circa £4.50) for all performances and some staff are going tomorrow to see the opera. Weather permitting, as the performance is open air....

12am.....The bars are closed. Some folk drift off to houses, others to sit and chat for a while. Some of us are thinking that we have to be up again in 5 hours...

Field schools are fun, especially when the students are as nice as the bunch we currently have at Dobri Dyal..... Not so sure that many of them will end up with careers in archaeology though. Not through a lack of willingness but just the haphazard way that archaeology is organised in the UK and the failure of the profession to respond in any meaningful way to the current economic and political situation. It may be that in future years, training schools such as Dobri Dyal just won't be available to UK students. One of the current student participants told me that next year, the archaeology department of his university plan to carry out a series of test pitting exercises in the gardens of houses close to the university campus instead of offering a field school through a project like Dobri Dyal. I think that is very sad....but if this is to be an end to a long standing archaeology tradition, we hope that the next 3 weeks at Dobri Dyal will provide long and happy memories for all those taking part...

Kevin Wooldridge, Bulgaria, August 2011