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**Fragment of a Latin inscription from the headquarters building (*principia*) in the Apsaros fort
(Gonio, Georgia)**

აბსტრაქტი

ლათინური წარწერის ფრაგმენტი აღმოაჩინეს რომაული ციხესიმაგრის — აფსაროსის (გონიო, საქართველო) არქეოლოგიური გათხრებისას, შტაბის შენობაში (პრინციპია). ნაშრომი წარმოადგენს ამ უნიკალური აღმოჩენის პირველ გამოცემასა და ანალიზს.

საკვანძო სიტყვები: აფსაროსი, გონიო-აფსაროსი, რომაული არმია, რომაული ციხესიმაგრე, ლათინური წარწერა.

Abstract

A fragment of a Latin inscription was found during the excavation of a headquarters building (*principia*) at the Roman fort of Apsaros (Gonio, Georgia). This paper presents and discusses this unique find.

Keywords: Apsaros, Gonio-Apsaros, Roman army, Roman fort, Latin inscription

Since 2014, the joint Polish-Georgian Gonio-Apsaros Expedition has been conducting excavations in the central part of the Roman fort of Apsaros, located in Gonio²¹. The research is headed by the author of this text on the Polish side. For the past 10 years, the Georgian side has been headed by Professor Shota Mamuladze, director of the Gonio-Apsaros Archaeological and Architectural Site. Part of the

²¹ For more on the research results, see, among others: Breeze, Karasiewicz-Szczypiorski, Mamuladze 2024 and Karasiewicz-Szczypiorski 2025.

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The joint excavations have contributed, among other things, to the identification and more accurate dating of the three earliest phases of the Roman military presence in Apsaros. The oldest fort (**Fig. 1**) was built here in the time of Nero (Phase 1). However, it was abandoned after only a few years. The withdrawal of the Roman army was almost certainly related to the revolt of Anicetus in Pontus (68-69 AD) and the events of the so-called "year of the four emperors" in the entire Empire (69 AD).

The Roman army returned to Apsaros only during the reign of Trajan, in connection with the preparations for the Parthian war (114 AD). Then a new fort (**Fig. 2**) was built on the plan of a playing card (Phase 2). The fortifications and internal buildings were modernized during the reign of Hadrian (Phase 3). It was during this period that the inspection of Roman garrisons on the Colchian coast took place, which was carried out by the governor of the province of Cappadocia - Flavius Arrian (132 AD). Arrian left information that 5 cohorts were stationed in Apsaros during his stay, but he does not mention what units they were²². Thanks to the discoveries of the Polish-Georgian expedition, it was possible to establish that the mentioned garrison consisted of 4 cohorts detached from the *legio V Macedonica* and most likely *cohors III (Syrorum) sagittariorum*²³.

The fort from Phase 2 and 3 was destroyed around 140 AD as a result of an earthquake.

The Polish-Georgian expedition conducted excavations in the central part of this early fort. Thanks to joint research, the remains of buildings belonging to the aforementioned construction phases were discovered. From the Neronian period (Phase 1) come the remains of a double garrison granary (*horreum*) (**Fig. 3**) and the presumed earliest baths (*balneum*).

In the time of Trajan (Phase 2), new garrison baths (*balneum*) (**Fig. 4**) were built on the site of the granary, and to the north of them, the headquarters building (*principia*).

These buildings were rebuilt during the reign of Hadrian (Phase 3). On the site of the garrison baths, a commander's house (*praetorium*) with an area of at least 1200 m² was built (**Fig. 5**). It was equipped with private baths and the floors in some rooms were decorated with mosaics (**Fig. 6**). It was a villa with a peristyle, a comfortable residence for the commander, his family and servants. The headquarters building located north of the *praetorium* was being renovated at the same time (including new floors made of ceramic tiles) but retained its previous function.

In the area of the headquarters building (**Fig. 7**), during several research seasons, a collection of oil lamps and miniature ceramic vessels was found, the form of which indicates that they may have functioned as inkwells. Moreover, several architectural details, mainly column bases made of local stone, come from various contexts. The rock obtained from a nearby quarry is andesite-basalt, which is very difficult to work with. For this reason, the architectural details found in the fort were made very

²² Arr. Peripl. 6

²³ Speidel 2009: 604-606; Karasiewicz-Szczypiorski and others 2021: 275-278

schematically and almost without decorations. The researchers were surprised by the complete lack of inscriptions. Inscriptions carved in stone (Latin and Greek) are usually found during research in similar Roman garrisons.

In recent years, in another section of the research, a block of andesite-basalt was discovered in which faint traces of an inscription surrounded by a convex frame were preserved. The Latin inscription consists of three lines, but the stone substrate did not allow for precise reproduction of individual letters. On the destroyed surface there are almost illegible remains of single uneven graphic signs.

The mentioned monument is a clear confirmation of the fact that the local stone was not suitable for precise stonework. This was an argument confirming the working hypothesis that official inscriptions were made in marble or limestone, which had to be imported to Apsaros. However, there was a lack of finds of inscriptions (or architectural details) made on stone imported to the fort.

The first trace was the discovery of a marble ballista projectile, which showed clear signs of high temperature. The lack of carbonate rock in the Apsaros area must have been the reason for the sporadic use of lime mortar during the Roman period (both in the fortifications and in the buildings inside the fort). In the Byzantine and Ottoman periods, however, lime mortar was in common use. The mentioned marble projectile indicated that other objects made earlier from imported stone became the raw material for lime burning. It could therefore be assumed that the monumental inscriptions, which were absent in Apsaros, were broken in later centuries and burned in lime kilns.

The most important confirmation of this hypothesis was the find of a fragment of a slab made of limestone or sandstone with a carbonate binder (**Fig. 8**). On its smoothed surface, parts of two Latin letters M and F or E, belonging to two different lines of the inscription, as well as a dividing sign in the form of a characteristic ivy leaf (often found in inscriptions, called *hederae distinguentes*) have been preserved. On the surface of the slab, there are also delicate traces of lines that the stonemason drew before starting to carve the letters. The slab with the inscription was about 1 cm thick, so it was most likely set in a large block of local stone. It may have been a statue base, although these are only guesses. The discovery of this fragment in the headquarters area may, however, indicate that the inscription was originally an element of the equipment of this building.

On the basis of the described examples of epigraphic monuments from Apsaros, it can therefore be assumed that official inscriptions were carved on slabs of imported stone. Perhaps all the statues and architectural details present in the public space of the garrison were also made of a similar raw material. The lack of finds of such objects can be explained by the mass production of lime for the needs of builders working in the fort in the Byzantine and Ottoman periods. Later garrisons collected all the fragments of carbonate rocks found, which were used as raw material for lime production.

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Figures captions

Fig. 1. Apsaros – Neronian fort (Phase 1). An attempt to reconstruct the extent of the fortification: 1 – *porta praetoria*, probable location; 2 – headquarters building (*principia*), probable location; 3 – double granary (*horreum*); 4 – hypocaust cellar of unidentified building; 5 – extent of Late Roman and Byzantine walls (O. Kubrak).

Fig. 2. Apsaros – Trajanic fort (Phase 2). An attempt to reconstruct the extent of fortifications and internal buildings: 1 – *porta praetoria*; 2 – headquarters building (*principia*); 3 – *porta principalis sinistra* – probable location; 4 – garrison baths (*balneum*); 5 – course of moat; 6 – extent of Late Roman and Byzantine walls (O. Kubrak).

Fig. 3. Apsaros. Reconstruction of a granary (*horreum*) from Phase 1 (R. Karasiewicz-Szczypiorski, M. Osiadacz).

Fig. 4. Apsaros. Garrison baths (*balneum*) from Phase 2 – reconstruction (R. Karasiewicz-Szczypiorski, J. Kaniszewski).

Fig. 5. Apsaros. Reconstruction of the commander's house (*praetorium*) built in the 130s (R. Karasiewicz-Szczypiorski, M. Osiadacz).

Fig. 6. Apsaros. Reconstruction of one of the mosaic floor rooms in the commander's house (R. Karasiewicz-Szczypiorski, M. Osiadacz).

Fig. 7. Apsaros. Plan of the headquarters building (*principia*) (M. Marciniak).

Fig. 8. Fragment of a Latin inscription found in a headquarters building at the Roman fort of Apsaros (O. Kubrak).