

UC Berkeley

Archaeological Research Facility Stahl Reports

Title

Isolation or Integration? A Spatial-Analytic Approach to the Local Impact of the Roman Army on the Northern Frontier

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5mw3x4cb>

Journal

Stahl Field Reports, 2014

Author

Weaverdyck, Eli

Publication Date

2014

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

ISOLATION OR INTEGRATION? A SPATIAL-ANALYTIC APPROACH TO THE LOCAL IMPACT OF THE ROMAN ARMY ON THE NORTHERN FRONTIER

Stahl Field Report 2014

Archaeological Research Facility, UC Berkeley
www.escholarship.org/uc/item/5mw3x4cb

Eli James Sheldon Weaverdyck

Ancient History and Mediterranean Archaeology, UC Berkeley
eweaverdyck@berkeley.edu

The subject of my research is the local economic impact of the Roman army on the northern frontier. In the late first and early second centuries CE, the armies of Rome were, almost without exception, moved to the edges of the empire. In Europe, they were stationed in a long chain of fortified bases stretching from the mouth of the Rhine to the mouth of the Danube. In contrast to the East, where the military was stationed in cities, the northern frontier armies were generally stationed in un-urbanized areas. The army bases were inhabited not only by the soldiers, but by numerous camp-followers, family members, craftsmen and merchants who made their living providing goods and services for the soldiers. They were, therefore, population centers. Whether or not these bases were also market centers for the people living in the countryside around them is the question I am trying to answer.

There are three conceivable possibilities for the nature of the relationship between the army and the rural population: the military bases, being populated by specialists who did not produce their own food and who had access to a regular supply of money in the form of soldiers' salaries, could have stimulated the local economy, spurring increased production and commercial exchange; alternatively, they could have been exploitative, acquiring their supplies through coercion and taking advantage of their privileged position within the imperial system to abuse the locals; finally, they could have had little impact at all. They were plugged in to long-distance networks and were culturally distinct from their neighbors outside the military community.

In order to choose between these different hypotheses, I have decided to analyze the locations of rural settlements in the frontier zone. The logic of this strategy rests on the idea that people live their lives moving through a landscape, but their motion is anchored by the settlement to which they return almost every night. The location of the settlement relative to other elements in the landscape can tell us which elements were easily accessible by the inhabitants. By examining a group of settlements and comparing their locations to randomly chosen locations in the landscape, we can understand which affordances were more accessible than random chance would predict, providing evidence for the behaviors and logic underlying the settlement distribution.

This approach requires a large database containing not only rural settlements and army bases, but also other important places in the landscape like cities, market places, and sanctuaries, as well as information on the natural environment so that the entire suite of variables affecting rural settlement locations can be taken in to account. The database must also include as many settlements as possible so that the general trends affecting the majority of the population can be elucidated. It is not enough to focus on the well

excavated or intensively surveyed sites because these constitute a tiny minority of the places that existed in the ancient world. In order to understand the impact of the Roman army on rural populations in the frontier zone, the underlying database must incorporate all available data from a given region.

With the support of the Stahl foundation and the American Research Center in Sofia I have been able to spend nine months in Bulgaria building such a database. After meeting with the director of the National Archaeological Institute with Museum, professor Lyudmil Vagalinski, I was given access to the Archaeological Map of Bulgaria, an online database of the archaeological heritage of the country normally only available to Bulgarian archaeologists. This formed the foundation of the database, but it was necessary to supplement this data with other published information. In Bulgaria, archaeological data is often published only in the periodicals of regional museums, the annual proceedings of the National Archaeological Institute, or other venues that are inaccessible outside the country. Having access to the libraries of the American Research Center in Sofia, the National Archaeological Institute, the central library of the Bulgarian Academy of Science and the National Library of Bulgaria was vital to the completion of this database.

I was also able to meet and consult with various Bulgarian archaeologists who provided me with important personal insights, often into sites which have not yet been published. Varbin Varbanov, of the Regional Historical Museum in Ruse was particularly generous in showing me the ongoing excavations of the late Roman military base at Sexaginta Prista and taking me to numerous sites in the area around Ruse at which he had worked. Professor Ivan Tsarov, director of the Regional Historical Museum in Veliko Tarnovo discussed with me the sites he had surveyed in Veliko Tarnovo province whose publication is still forthcoming and doctor Pavlina Vladkova, also of the Regional Historical Museum in Veliko Tarnovo, discussed her work on the creation of the Archaeological Map of Bulgaria and shared with me unpublished documents from that project. These invaluable personal connections would have been impossible to make without living in Bulgaria.

Equally important was my personal experience of the Bulgarian landscape. I spent more than a week driving around the countryside photographing the topography and hydrography of my study area. This resulted in over 500 pictures and a much deeper appreciation for the great diversity of landforms that exist in the central section of the Danube Plain. While the western part of my study area is characterized by steadily sloping hills and broad valleys, the eastern part is higher and flatter, but incised by deep river gorges and the southern part, while more mountainous also has more larger rivers in sometimes very broad valleys. The topography is much more complex than I had anticipated even after studying topographic maps and digital elevation models.

With the knowledge gained from my time in Bulgaria I have created a database that includes all known ancient places from a study area of almost 3,500 square kilometers and laid the groundwork for its analysis in pursuit of new evidence on the local impact of the Roman frontier.

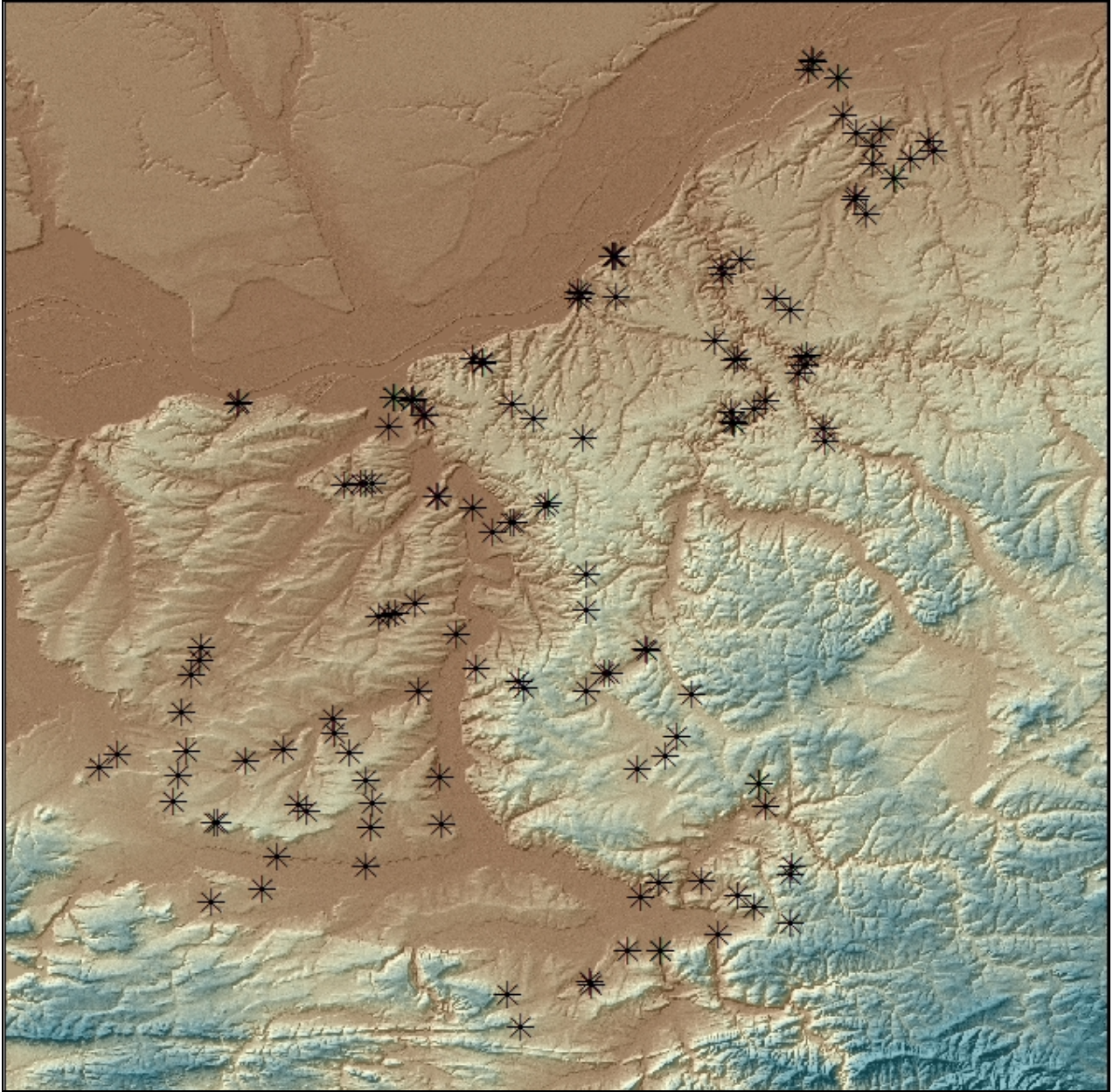


Figure 1: Locations of landscape photographs.

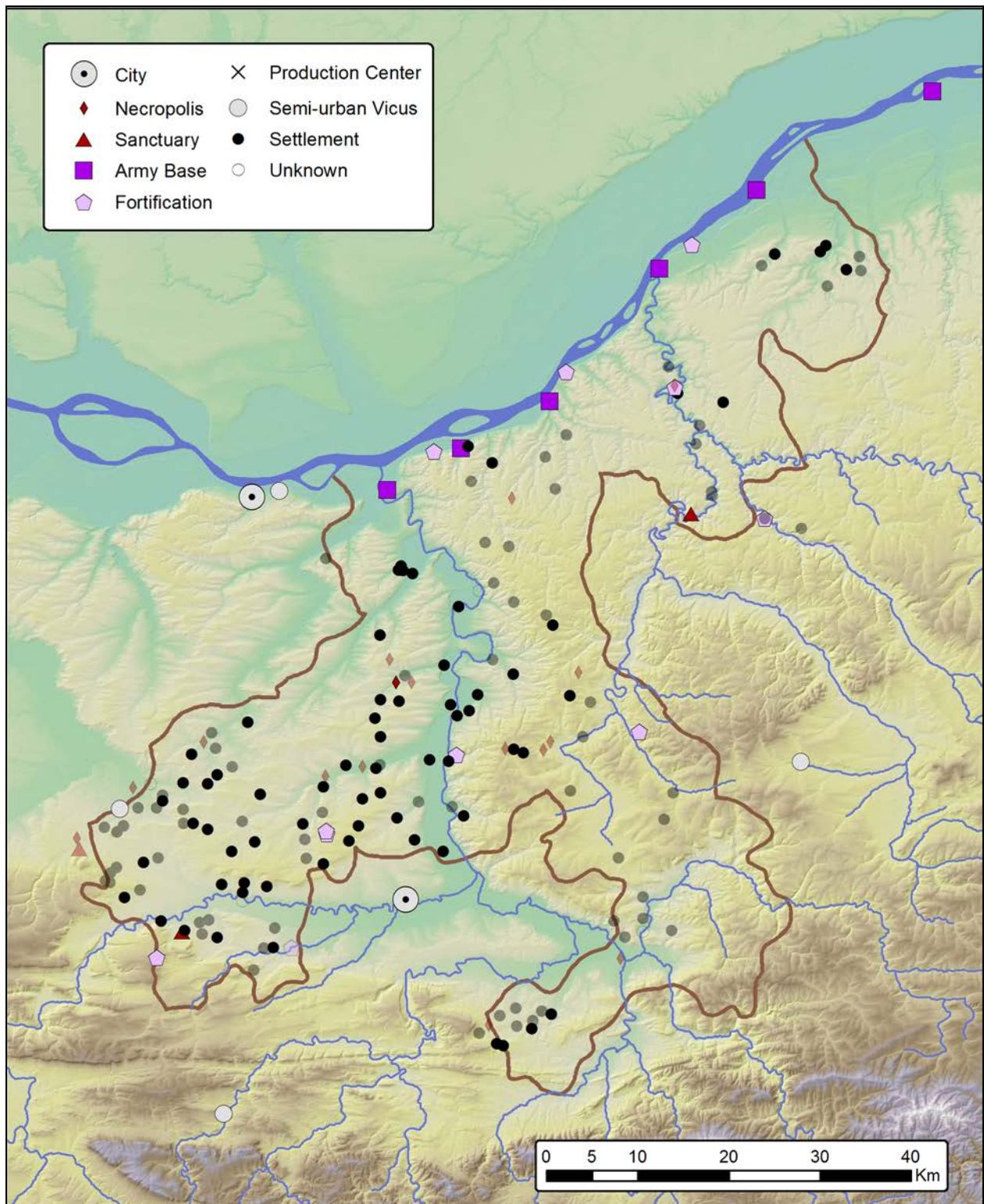


Figure 2: A part of the database. Places dating to the roman period generally (transparent) and the late roman period specifically (opaque).