

# **The Roman Bridge between Dolni Vadin (Bulgaria) and Grojdibodu (Romania)**

**Dorel Bondoc**

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## Foreword

To effectively rule a territory as large as the Roman Empire, the Roman state required efficient routes of communication that allowed large distances and waterways to be traversed relatively quickly. Alongside roads, aqueducts, amphitheaters, forts and other structures, Roman bridges represent another great achievement of Roman architecture and logistical organization.

Since the time of Caesar, it was believed to be below the dignity of the Romans to cross water courses by ships (Caesar, *Belum Gallicum*, IV, 17), since their technical acumen allowed them to build bridges quickly in various regions. This acumen was developed by ingenious engineers such as Gaius Julius Lacer, Apollodoros from Damascus, Teophillus Patricius and others.

Of the three stone and wooden bridges erected by Romans on the lower course of the Danube (Drobeta - Pontes, Sucidava - Oescus and Dolni Vadin - Grojdibodu), the least known is the last. This lack of information is the result of the lack of sources regarding this particular bridge.

There is no doubt that the bridge Dolni Vadin-Grojdibodu is of Roman origin. On numerous occasions I have had the opportunity to study its ruins on the southern bank of the Danube and the surrounding area. During the course of my research I examined several strands of evidence. The construction techniques, the bridge's dimensions, material culture from the adjacent area, the circulation of Roman coinage in the Grojdibodu area and other archaeological finds all point to the Roman period as the time of the bridge's erection. Most telling, there are no further constructive interventions (medieval or modern) which may have been superposed on the ruins of the bridge.

The Roman bridge at Dolni Vadin-Grojdibodu has been ignored for centuries primarily due to the absence of any mention of it in any ancient sources, literary or otherwise. Moreover, the image of the bridge was not used on any coinage or commemorative medallion and it was never referenced to by medieval or Renaissance chroniclers. The bridge Dolni Vadin-Grojdibodu was probably eclipsed by the fame of the bridge at Drobeta (the bibliography of this bridge, at Tudor 1971: 53- 153, passim; Galliazzo 2003, the footnote no. 1), which was constructed by Emperor Trajan between the two Dacian wars, and by the bridge at Sucidava-Oescus which was built later, in the time of Emperor Constantine the Great (Tudor 1971: 155-192). It should be noted from the beginning that the Roman bridge at Dolni Vadin- Grojdibodu did not have the size or the monumentality of the two bridges at Drobeta and Sucidava. Additionally, it was placed in a somewhat obscure place, hardly accessible in the modern era.

So far, the bridge has not been investigated archaeologically in the true sense of the word. Neither the Bulgarian or Romanian governments have embarked on any underwater archaeological study of the bridge's wooden pillars. The construction of the fairway of the Danube were made 'quietly' by inland navigation services, without paying attention to this very important historical monument. As a result the bridge underwent aggressive interventions which led to its destruction and disappearance in almost its entirety (like in the case of the Roman bridge at Maastricht, acc. to Vos 2014, 5). In addition the ignorance of the authorities and indifference towards the fate of the Roman monuments in our region contributed to the bridge's destruction. This demolition prevents any possible assertion of how and when the bridge was built.

The only data available for this purpose are the modest studies published by Count Luigi Ferdinando Marsigli (1726) and the preliminary conclusions reached by Prof. D. Tudor (1961) and Nicu Vintilă (Vintilă 2004: 21-40). In all the cases mentioned here, no archaeological excavations were conducted. Instead, only cursory observations were made that were later connected with images on coins or information from literary sources. Moreover, from a regrettable error, the northern head of the bridge was placed at Orlea incorrectly.

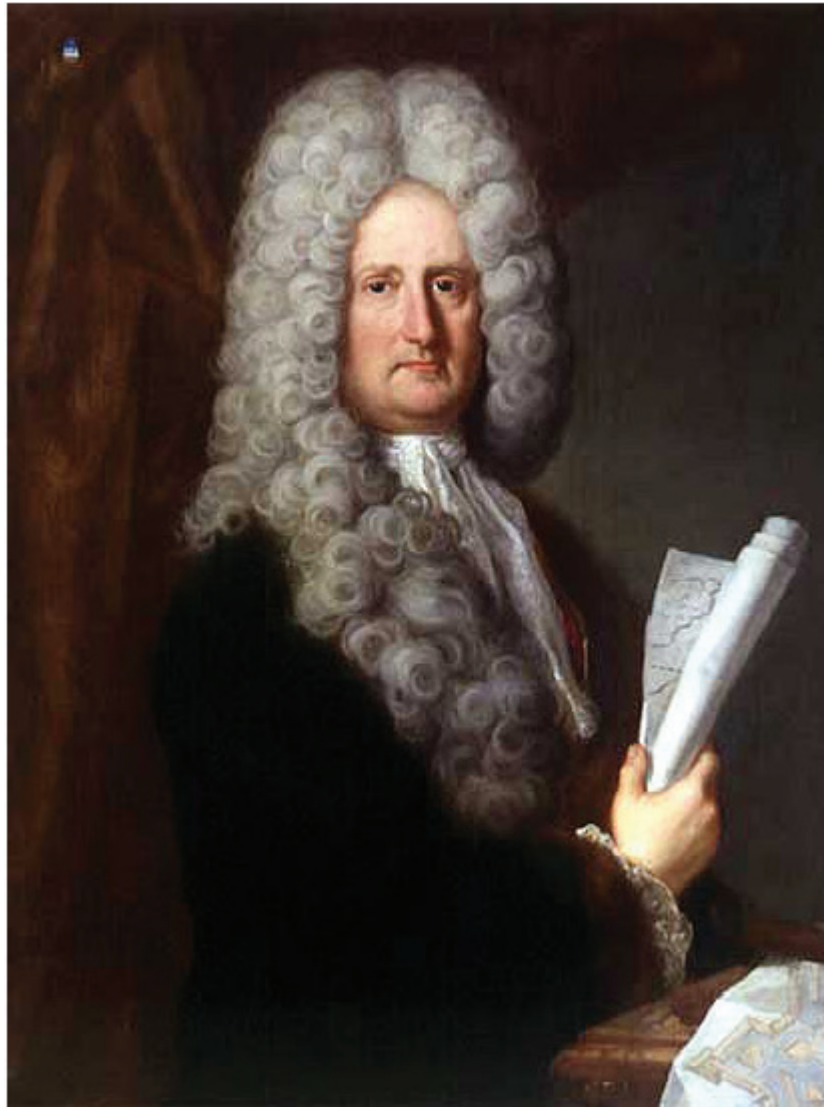


Figure 1: The Count Luigi Ferdinando Marsigli. The Library Universitaria di Bologna (after D. Măndescu 2012: 93, fig. 1).

The approach presented here is a way to repair these shortcomings. In 2009, I met Mr Nicu Vintilă, who drew my attention to the erroneous localization at Orlea of the northern head of the bridge. We had the opportunity to travel together to Dolni Vadin, Bulgaria. There I could see, that on the beach, there are still some important and eloquent ruins from the southern end of the bridge.

In 2012, due to the friendship and assistance of Mr Adrian Gheorghe, I made a new trip to Dolni Vadin. On this occasion, Mayor Ivan Rusinov Spasov assured me of his support, which allowed me to take measurements of the bridge and survey the surrounding area.

In 2013, I went again to Dolni Vadin for final observations, GPS measurements, photographs and surveys. Moreover, on several occasions, I have gone to Grojdibodu for information checking on archaeological findings or surveys. I recorded all collected data on paper with the hope that I did something not only useful for the scholars of today, but above all for generations to come who study the history of the Roman Empire on the Lower Danube.

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The present work contains all the data about the Roman bridge Dolni Vadin-Grojdibodu which I have been able to access given the fact that there have been no archaeological excavations at the feet of the bridge. I consulted old and modern maps, aerial photos and studied ortophotoplans of the area in question. I also turned to GPS technology. For a clearer picture of the importance of the two localities at the ends of the bridge in Roman times, I put together the archaeological finds from Dolni Vadin (Annexe III) and Grojdibodu (Annexe IV).

With the intention to make it easier for the reader to understand the data published by Count Marsigli three centuries ago, I first obtained the presentation of his text published in Latin, along with which I found the translation made by Prof Tudor in 1971. Also found was another variant translation made recently by Senior Lecturer Dr Dana Dinu from the University of Craiova. In addition, for a more accurate chronological and typological classification of the amphorae found at Dolni Vadin, I relied on the expertise of Dr Andrei Opaïț. The coins were studied by Dr Delia Moisil (Annexe V).

For the explanation of some technical details, we received useful assistance from Mr Cornel Rădulescu, an engineer specialist in roads and bridges. This work it is being translated by Dr Mihaela Pena and in order to obtain better illustrations, we were assisted by Gabriela Filip, who created drawings of excellent quality.

To all, sincere thanks.

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From the beginning, we have to recognise that Romanian historiography does not specialise in the study of Roman bridges. Almost all of the previous studies in this regard have focused on analysis of stone bridges, as follows:

- Alexander Bărcăcilă, for Drobeta-Pontes bridge (Bărcăcilă 1966: 645-663);
- Cezar Bolliac, for Sucidava – Oescus bridge (*non vidi*, apud Tudor 1971: 164-165);
- Gr. Tocilescu and P. Polonic, for the bridges Drobeta-Pontes (unpublished research) and Sucidava-Oescus (Tocilescu 1902-1908 : 239-242);
- Octavian Toropu, Sucidava-Oescus bridge (Toropu 1972: 20-33; Toropu 1976: 26-29);
- C. Crăciun and A. Sion, the bridge at Drobeta (Crăciun, Sion 2006: 359-409);
- M. Bărbulescu and F. Fodorean, for the bridge over the Arieș River, at Potaissa (Bărbulescu 1994: 32; Fodorean 2006: 327);
- I. Marțian, D. Ursuț, D. Isac and F. Fodorean, for the bridge in the Dej locality (Marțian 1920: 17; Ursuț, Isac 1993: 189-193; Fodorean 2006: 327-328, with bibliography).

There are some publications not made by archaeologists such as Ionescu, A. Decei, and M. Popescu, etc. (for all of them, see Tudor 1971, *passim*). Nevertheless this does not make their efforts less important. Further authors include N. Vintilă, studying the bridge over the Dunăre at Grojdibodu (Vintilă 2004: 21-40) and G. Mânzatu and R. Cerghizan, for the bridge over the Arieș river, at Potaissa (Mânzatu 1926); (<http://istoriaturzii.wordpress.com/2010/11/07/drumul-si-podul-roman-din-potaissa-radu-cerghizan-2010>).

However, except for the notable achievements of Prof D. Tudor (Tudor 1958: 53-64 and 338-343; Tudor 1961: 501-509; Tudor 1968: 60-72 and 425-431; Tudor, 1971; Tudor, 1978: 56-68 and 416-423, etc.), there are no major contributions in this subject. Some bridges, about whose existence we know only from the literary sources of the time, remain entirely unknown. Examples include *Pons Vetus* (Tabula Peutingeriana, VIII, 1; the Geographer of Ravenna, IV, 7), *Pons Augusti* (about the location of this bridge, see Tudor 1968b: 44-45; TIR, L 34, 91), *Pons Aluti* (Tabula Peutingeriana, VII, 4; the Geographer of Ravenna, IV, 7). The same situation is true for the bridges that must have existed across the Jiu River, possibly across the Mureș River, the Timiș River, the bridge over the Teslui River in the center of Romula colony and others.

However, there are circumstances which explain this situation. Archaeological traces of these bridges may have disappeared altogether under the impact of the passage of time, the effects of climate change and anthropogenic interventions (a similar situation is recorded in England and Germany, acc. to Fodorean 2006: 48). If these bridges had been made of wood, then this would become even more plausible.

This study completes the research done so far and our knowledge in this field. Possibly, this approach will be a wake-up call for all to get involved in the preservation of Romania's ancient monuments.

## Introduction

It is difficult to provide a geographic description of the ford at Dolni Vadin-Grojdibodu. This is because the Danube has separated the two completely different regions. On the one hand, to the north by the river, there is a low, overflow meadow (Potelu Lake), whose origin and formation must have been also the Danube. This is followed by a region of fertile plain. On the other hand, to the south of the river, the bank is higher and more robust in terms of structure, with large limestone deposits.

The Danube waters are quiet at this point, the riverbed shrinks considerably and its width (measured on a Google Earth type application) is about 700m. The effect of the currents is minimal and around the Romanian bank there was at one time an island called 'Prundu Vădinului', which separated the waters of the Danube in two branches (Vintilă 2004a: 43-46). The width of the river and the existence of this island allowed for this place to act as a crossing point. Moreover, the toponyms Vadin and Grojdibodu themselves mean 'ford', a crossing over water, in our case over the Danube.

Furthermore, in the Middle Ages, at Grojdibodu, there was in function a 'border customs' (*Istoria comerțului...*, 80, 107). This is possibly supported by an interesting hypothesis (Vintilă 2003a: 141). The toponym Grojdibodu could be translated as the 'Ford of the Cows', in connection with the use of this ford by the locals in this respect. A customer using the ford, named 'Stoica the steward', was mentioned in documents in the year 1605 (*Istoria comerțului...*, 80). One thing is certain: in all aspects, the place is proper for crossing the river, and Dolni Vadin-Grojdibodu was a major ford for centuries (Figure 1).

The vicinity of the Danube provided opportunities for large-scale fishing, and the rich vegetation of Potelu Lake sheltered a rich and diverse fauna (birds and wild animals). Wood could easily be procured from the meadow of the river and the upper terraces of the river had very fertile soils, favoring the practice of agriculture and livestock. A special economic importance was and still is vine culture.



Figure 1: Territorium Sucidavense and the Roman bridge over the Danube, at Dolni Vadin- Grojdibodu, after D. Tudor, 1965: 10, fig. 1.

## Dolni Vadin:

This locality lies on the high terrace to the south of the Danube River, at about 40km east of the city of Oreahovo. The word 'Dolni' (Dolni Vadin means the Lower Vadin) is necessary to differentiate the place from another area. About 2.5 km west of Dolni Vadin there is another locality called Gorni Vadin (the Higher Vadin). By this bank of the Danube, there was built a fortification of quadrangular shape (Figure 16.1), now almost entirely destroyed by the erosion of the river waters. The entire region is rich in limestone rocks, a building material which can still be found in the structures and homesteads in the village of Dolni Vadin. The foundations of the modern houses and fences were made of limestone. Also used were partly used Roman bricks recovered from within the walls of the fortification.

At Dolni Vadin, there is located the late Roman fortress *Valeriana* (Škorpil 1905: 469; Latinski izvori 1958: 31, the footnote no. 4, with the bibliography; Tudor 1971: 25-26; Velkov 1980: 201; Lubanska 1982: 226, no. 4; Dimitrova 1985, no. 24; Ivanov 1999: 279; Torbatov 2015: 35). The association of this fortress with the name *Valeriana* is certified by two literary sources (*Itinerarium Antonini*, 220, 5 and Procopius of Caesarea, *De Aedificiis*, IV, 6) and also by a few stamps, found elsewhere (Tudor 1960: 343, no. 28). Unfortunately, at Dolni Vadin, no inscriptions or stamped bricks have been found due to the lack of archaeological excavations. The fact that the fortification has a quadrangular shape, with protruding corner towers outside the enclosure (Škorpil 1905: 469) indicates a late period construction. The toponym *Valeriana* reflects a certain situation from the time of the tetrarchy (Tudor 1960: 349), and it is possible that in the previous 2nd-3rd centuries, the locality had another name (*Pedonianis* ?) (Madzharov 2009: 148). Regardless, the presence of this fortification on the Roman road on the southern bank of the Danube (*Itinerarium Antonini*, 220, 5) proves that it belongs to this sector of the limes (Beschewliew 1955: 281; Vlădescu 1971-1972: 56).

The Roman archaeological findings from Dolni Vadin began significantly with a treasure of Republican denars from 2nd-1st centuries BC (T. Gherasimov, in *Известия*, XVII, 1950: 320). Finds for the 2nd-3rd centuries AD include, bronze statuettes (V. Velkov, in *Известия*, XIV: 273), pieces of idols dedicated to the god Mithras (V. Velkov, in *Известия*, XIV: 273-274), coins (Tudor 1971: 25, the footnote no. 11) and Roman pottery (*Известия* 2000: 216).

My research is presented here in addition to the archaeological information about Dolni Vadin allows us to come to several conclusions. An important number of amphorae of the type Late Roman 2 (see below, the Annexe III of this paper) proves that significant trade took place on the line of the Danube and by this point in time in particular. Other random findings have not been published for objective reasons and they have not been made accessible to me either.

In the Late Roman period, a treasure of 20 coins was hidden (buried) near to the Danube riverbed in this area (*Известия*, XVIII, Sofia 1952: 400). Moreover, the stamped bricks with the legend of PR(aefectus) L(egionis) V M(acedonicae) VAL(eriana) discovered as I said elsewhere, could indicate a *praefectura* belonging to Legio V Macedonica, camped in the fortress of Dolni Vadin (Morfova 1959: 646; Vlădescu 1971-1972: 57).

Later, the writings of Procopius of Caesarea (*De Aedificiis*, IV, 6) and many fragments of amphorae certify a 6th century occupation on the high plateau on which the fortress was built (Beschewliew 1955: 285; Wilkes 2005: 212, no. 9).

## Grojdibodu:

Grojdibodu was and still is a modest village in the plain of Oltenia, in the meadow of the Danube by the northern bank of this river (Figure 1). Its coordinates are: latitude-43° 45' 29" North; longitude- 24° 16' 0" East. Related to the present course of the river, the village lies at a distance of about 6 km north of its course, on a higher terrace (6-7 m), with a very fertile soil. In Medieval documents, it was registered as:

‘Găvojdibrodul’, ‘Găbăjdibrod’, ‘Grăjdibăd’, ‘Gojdibrod’, etc. (Dicționar toponimic 2002: 172). A.T. Laurian believed that the name of this village should be read ‘Gros-di-pod’ (after Odobescu 1989: 150).

Between the present course of the Danube and Grojdibodu, there is interposed a space where the former Potelu Lake was once, drained during the time of the Communist regime. We can not know for sure if this was also the landscape in ancient times. It seems to be so, since all known *tumulii* in the area (Odobescu 1989: 105-107, the footnote no. 11; Tudor 1968: 235; Tudor 1968b: 335; Tudor 1978: 229) are on the high terrace, at the east, west and north of the current locality. Moreover, except for a few grinds that contain prehistoric (pottery), Roman and medieval archaeological remains, the space occupied by the former Potelu Lake shows no traces of habitation in the area. In homesteads of the locals from Grojdibodu, there can be seen remains of buildings, masonrywork and mortar, pottery, fragments of tiles and bricks. Thus, the modern village is likely situated right over the former Roman settlement.

Roman pottery was discovered at the southern boundary of the village and also in eastern and south-eastern areas of the village (Tudor 1968: 235). A fortuitous discovery made by Mr Nicu Vintilă (Vintilă 2003a: 141-143) shows that Grojdibodu would have been located in the *Sykibida* mentioned by Procopius (*De aedificiis*, IV, 6, 34-35). This hypothesis has not had any supporters, because *Sykibida* is in fact *Sucidava-Celei*.

In the Roman times, the settlement here was part of the *territorium Sucidavense* along with other *vici* or *pagi* as Islaz, Gârcov, Orlea, Hotaru, Dăbuleni, Ianca, Vădastra, Crușov, Vădăstrița, Vișina, Vârtop, Traian, Jieni, Rusănești, Brezuica, Brastavăț, Potelu, Tia, Scărișoara, Gura Padinii, Cilieni, Dăbuleni, Dobrotești, Amărăștii de Sus, Amărăștii de Jos and Zvorska (Tudor 1968: 211).

About the antique Roman discoveries in Grojdibodu (TIR, K 35, I a), Al. Odobescu wrote a few words (Odobescu 1989: 105-107, the footnotes 11 and 14) as did D. Tudor (Tudor 1965: 58; Tudor 1974: 51-52; Tudor 1978: 229). The ancient name of the locality is unknown.

The earliest Roman ‘document’ discovered in Grojdibodu is a military diploma from AD 129, belonging to the veteran Eupator, son of Eumenius from Sebastopol (Odobescu 1989: 107, the footnote no. 14; CIL, XVI: 75; IDR, I: 99-103, diploma DX). Eupator had fought in *Vexillatio Equitum Illyricorum* (the auxiliary army of Dacia Inferior). The military diploma certifies the fact that the population of the locality was founded also from veterans and their families. During the reign of Emperor Hadrian, they received properties on the northern bank of the Danube.

In addition to the *tumuli* examined by D. Papazoglu, which I mentioned above, a funeral lion (Trohani 1983: 205-208) proves the existence of a (some) necropolis of the settlement. Many Roman vessels were collected in the private collection of Georgescu and others gathered by D. Papazoglu were given to the National Museum of Antiquities.

An amphora found at Grojdibodu (Popilian 1976: 171, no. 195) belongs to the Zeest type 90 (Ardeț 2006: 108), and an one-handled pitcher dates back to the 2nd century (Popilian 1976: 190, no. 477). In specialised literature, there are published studies of coins and bronze fibulae (Tudor 1958: 188; Tudor 1968b: 335; Toropu, Tătulea 1987: 189-190).

The surveys I made in the area of the village, along with N. Vintilă, revealed pots, bowls, plates, tiles, roofing tiles, bricks, and pieces of metal slag (see below, Annexe IV).

Though not having a direct connection with the subject of this paper, there should be mentioned here the surface surveys and the archaeological excavations in 1978 in the area of Grojdibodu (Drăguș 1981: 76-89). These revealed some houses from the 9th century, belonging to the Dridu archaeological culture. However, the home hearth no. 1 was arranged on a bed of stones and bricks, a Roman-Byzantine, fragmentation (Drăguș 1981: 79).