

**PROPOSAL FOR A FACULTY DEVELOPMENT GRANT FOR RESEARCH: “The Porolissum Forum Project: an archaeological excavation of a Roman and Gothic city in northwestern Romania”**

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The Porolissum Forum Project is a joint American-Romanian excavation of the forum (civic center) of a Roman city located in northwestern Romania. Archaeological research is conducted for 6 weeks each summer under the direction of Dr. Eric C. De Sena (*Saint Mary's College*) and Dr. Alexandru V. Matei (*Museum of History and Art, Zalau, Romania*) with a team of about 15 graduate and undergraduate students, primarily from the United States. The principle objectives of the project are to understand the urban topography of the city in the Roman and immediate post-Roman periods (respectively, AD 106-271 and AD 271-376), to elucidate patterns of daily life throughout this period, to determine the relationship between Romans and native European cultures and to promote educational and cultural exchange between Romanian and Western students and scholars. A Saint Mary's College Faculty Development Grant would assist tremendously with our 2008 summer field season.

**Background.** Porolissum is one of the largest and best-preserved archaeological sites in all of Romania. Located in Salăj County, this Roman military center was established on the border of the Roman Empire in AD 106 by the emperor Trajan to defend the main passageway through the Carpathian Mountains into the province of Dacia Porolissensis. After just a few decades, Porolissum evolved into an important commercial center that facilitated trade between the Romans and native European populations. In AD 271, the Emperor Aurelian withdrew Roman administration from Dacia in order to defend weaker frontiers. Porolissum was immediately resettled by native European cultures, primarily the Goths, and thrived for a century until the beginning of the Hunnic migrations.

Romanian and Austrian archaeologists rediscovered the city in the 19th century, although systematic excavations within Porolissum did not begin until 1977. Since the 1970's researchers have focused upon a large Roman fortress that dominates the highest part of the site, a 5000-seat amphitheater, a pair of pagan temples, one of which was converted into a Christian church, a customs house and a number of residences. In 1998, Dr. Matei identified the location of the city's forum through a program of magnetometry (i.e., a geophysical technique that allows researchers to determine the presence of artificial features lying below ground).

**Objectives of the Porolissum Forum Project.** Following a pilot season in 2004, the Porolissum Forum Project is planned as a 7-year mission (2006-2012) whose primary objectives are: 1) to understand the plan, construction history and function of spaces within Porolissum's forum as well as any pre-Roman usage of the land or post-Roman re-utilization; 2) to study the daily life in the city of Porolissum during the Roman and post-Roman periods; and, 3) to promote cultural and educational exchange between North Americans, western Europeans and Romanians.

1) The most immediate intention of the Porolissum Forum Project is to investigate the construction history and use of the Forum in the Roman and post-Roman periods as well as any pre-Roman features that may underlie it. According to the results of the magnetometry survey, the Forum extends over an area of about two acres with what appears to be a *basilica* (legal/political tribunal) on the north side of a large central courtyard and colonnades, shops and other public buildings along the west, south and east sides.

Our excavation campaigns in 2006 and 2007 revealed evidence of large-scale wooden structures dating to the initial phase of Roman occupation (from AD 106). Since Porolissum served only a military function in its earliest phase, the wooden structures likely represent the components of a fortress. The earliest stone buildings of the Forum were built over the course of the mid to late

second century AD with a campaign that witnessed the complete rebuilding of the Forum around AD 200. We are still several years away from a complete understanding of the function and chronology of the Forum and its components. The Roman buildings were modified in the Gothic period and the Forum was transformed into a residential area; portions of what was previously the Forum were used as a cemetery, as the discovery of human remains in the 2007 field season suggests.

2) Another important component of our research program is to understand aspects of daily life and the ancient economy in Porolissum during the Roman and post-Roman period. Where did the civilian and military population procure their nutritional and material supplies? How important were regionally produced goods vs. imported goods? What was the commercial relationship between Roman Dacia and the “barbarians” between AD 106 and 271? What was the social and economic relationship of Gothic Dacia and the Roman Empire, AD 271-376? What were the mechanisms of production and trade (i.e., who were the producers? How did merchandise arrive to Porolissum?). These questions are being addressed through the study of the archaeological materials (pottery, coins, animal bone, glass, etc.) unearthed through the excavations, documentary research and the application of a Geographic Information System (i.e., a sophisticated mapping system that merges topographic, environmental and cultural information).

A cursory study of the finds indicates that in the first phase of Roman occupation there was a small but steady chain of supplies deriving from other areas of the Empire. For the remainder of the Roman period, most supplies were procured from a catchment zone of about 250 square miles lying on both sides of the border of the Roman Empire. An interesting observation amongst the pottery unearthed through our excavations is that despite the fact that the Romans were replaced by a group of Goths beginning in AD 271, the post-Roman pottery is actually quite “Roman”. This can be explained in two ways. First, the Romans and Goths were neighbors for several generations prior to AD 271 and, in fact, engaged in trade; therefore, the Goths learned the benefits of Roman way of life. Second,

when the Romans withdrew from Dacia, the Goths remained in close contact with the Roman Empire and, thus, many aspects of daily life in Gothic Porolissum, had a Roman flair. Roman coins dating as late as AD 375/76 have been discovered at Porolissum, indicating continued trade contacts for a century after the Roman withdrawal.

3) The Porolissum Forum Project is currently one of a very small number of archaeological missions in Romania with a Western component. Because of the socio-economic oppression of the Ceaușescu dictatorship, which ended in December 1989, Romanian archaeologists lacked financial resources and did not have access to western archaeological methods and theory. Western researchers did not have easy access to the historical and archaeological record of ancient Dacia. Thus, the current project merges the various sets of expertise possessed by Romanian and Western archaeologists. Moreover, each year we recruit 12-15 undergraduate and graduate students to work with us on the project. To date, two Saint Mary's College students have participated on the Project and in the 2008 season two more SMC students will join the excavation team. In addition to a solid archaeological training at Porolissum, we lead students on field trips to archaeological and historical sites, museums and cities located in northwestern Romania. The students gain an excellent appreciation for the ancient, medieval and modern history and culture of Romania.

**The 2008 field season.** The 2008 field season will take place between June 12 and July 19 with a team of 16: De Sena, Matei, Prof. Michael MacKinnon (a zooarchaeologist from University of Winnipeg), three returning graduate students and 12 undergraduate students. We will excavate 4-5 trenches in key areas of the forum, including an area of the basilica and an unusual brick structure on the south side of the forum, a portion of which was revealed in the final days of the 2007 season. We will continue the study of the archaeological materials revealed in past seasons and from the 2008 season in order to gain knowledge of the site's chronology and of daily life at Porolissum across time.

Dr. MacKinnon, an internationally known expert in the study of faunal remains, will join us for the first time; his expertise will allow us to understand the variety of domesticated and wild animals used at Porolissum for nutritional reasons and/or agricultural or industrial activities (e.g., plowing, hauling carts, etc.).

The results of the 2008 season will be presented at a series of lectures and conferences in Europe and the United States and will be included in publications. In addition to articles and book chapters that we expect to publish over the next few years, we will prepare a series of volumes containing the final excavation reports of the Project. Not only do the Project Directors present lectures and write articles/book chapters, but we encourage our graduate and undergraduate students to give presentations at their universities and, in the case of the graduate students, to publish papers. Finally, we are planning to establish a permanent exhibition in the Zalau Museum of History and Art.

**Budget summary.** The base budget for the 2008 field season at Porolissum is \$37,500. This sum is required to cover the following expenses: lodging and food for our staff and students, travel expenses for staff and graduate students, didactic field trips in northwestern Romania, car and van rental, the purchase of excavation and drawing supplies and other miscellaneous expenses. Of this sum, \$8,000 are used to hire 15 local workers who are otherwise unemployed during the summer months; thus, our project contributes in a modest way towards the local community.

The \$8,000 for our paid workers is provided by the Romanian Ministry of Culture. Most of the remaining expenses are covered by a participation fee paid by the undergraduate students; in return, they are fully trained in modern archaeological techniques and gain significant knowledge about the archaeology, history and culture of Romania. Some expenses, however, can only be met through the generosity of foundations and institutions willing to support us. In this regard, a Saint Mary's College Faculty Development Grant would be of great help to the Porolissum Forum Project.