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Kontaktná adresa (príspevky, ďalšie informácie)/Contact address (contributions, further information):

✉ Katedra klasickej archeológie, Trnavská univerzita v Trnave, Hornopotočná 23, SK – 918 43 Trnava

☎ +421-33-593 93 71

✉ klasarch@truni.sk

📖 <http://ff.truni.sk/katedra-klasickej-archeologie>

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Motif of the „Miracle rain“ from the column of Marcus Aurelius in Rome. In the window: Detail of a gold headband from Mycenae (Photo: B. Ramé).

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FROM THE BRONZE AGE TO LATE ANTIQUITY**

(Central Europe – Mediterranean – Black Sea)

PART II

**Dedicated to the 25th anniversary of the re-established
Trnava University in Trnava
and the 20th anniversary of Department of Classical Archaeology**

Trnava, 6th–8th October 2017

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The *villae* of Thalerhof and Löffelbach: Residences for the elite of Roman Noricum¹

Patrick Marko

Keywords: Noricum, villae, Roman architecture.

Abstract: Two of the most luxurious Roman villae known in Austria/Noricum were found in Thalerhof and Löffelbach. In the paper the two (residential) buildings are analyzed, and both are placed within the context of the Roman villeggiatura on the one hand, and the settlement and administrative structure of the province Noricum and the municipal area of Flavia Solva on the other hand. While the villa of Thalerhof, by its architectural form and material finds, can be inserted virtually seamlessly into the regional context of the High Roman Empire, the villa of Löffelbach shows a close relation to various late Roman representative buildings, which supports the assumption of a construction date in the 4th century CE.

Introduction: The territory of Flavia Solva

The territory of the *municipium flavium solvense* was situated in South-East Noricum. While the Roman military (and therefore economic) focus was on the Danube *ripa*, which represented the empire's Northern border, Flavia Solva was situated at the opposite end of the province. It was divided from the *limes* area by the main chain of the Alps, while to the West the Koralm mountain range separated it from the territory of the Norican capital, Virunum. As a Flavian foundation (*Plin. NH* 3,24,146; *Hudeczek* 2002, 203), it was inserted later into the administrative landscape of Southern Noricum as established in Claudian times (*Hinker* 2006, 20). Extraalpine Styria, by common opinion roughly equivalent to the territory of Flavia Solva (*Hudeczek* 1977, 418), covers 3500 km². Research has shown the typical Roman provincial settlement structure of the *municipium* as administrative center, surrounded by a network of smaller *vici* and agricultural *villae*, in this case focused on the river valleys of the Mur and its tributaries (Fig. 1).

The streets and waypoints of the Solvensian territory were not recorded in any map or itinerary we know of; thus, historical knowledge on the infrastructure of Flavia Solva is scarce, as is archaeological data: unfortunately, in the whole territory only 36 *villa* find spots are confirmed (cf. the catalogue in *Zöhrer* 2007), though this picture might change with more detailed research, as recent findings in the Lassnitz valley indicate (*Fuchs* 2006).

In spite of this seemingly extremely low population density, the territory of Flavia Solva contained several extrarurban sites exhibiting a considerably higher degree of luxury than can be expected in such a remote corner of the empire; structures that show their owners' intimate knowledge of high level imperial representative architecture.²

The villa of Forst-Thalerhof

The doubtlessly most luxurious Roman dwelling known in the territory of Flavia Solva was discovered in 1937 and subsequently excavated until 1939, 25 km North of Flavia Solva, in the center of the Grazer Feld. At the time, the site was located in the hamlet of Forst (cadastral

¹ This paper represents an excerpt from the doctoral thesis *Marko* 2017.

² Apart from the two examples described in the present paper, luxurious extrarurban settlements were also confirmed in Hirnsdorf (*Kramer* 1983), Grünau (*Lamm* 2011), Obergralla (*Groh et al.* 2007), Retznei (*Schrettle* 2012), or Södingberg (*Groh et al.* 2008).

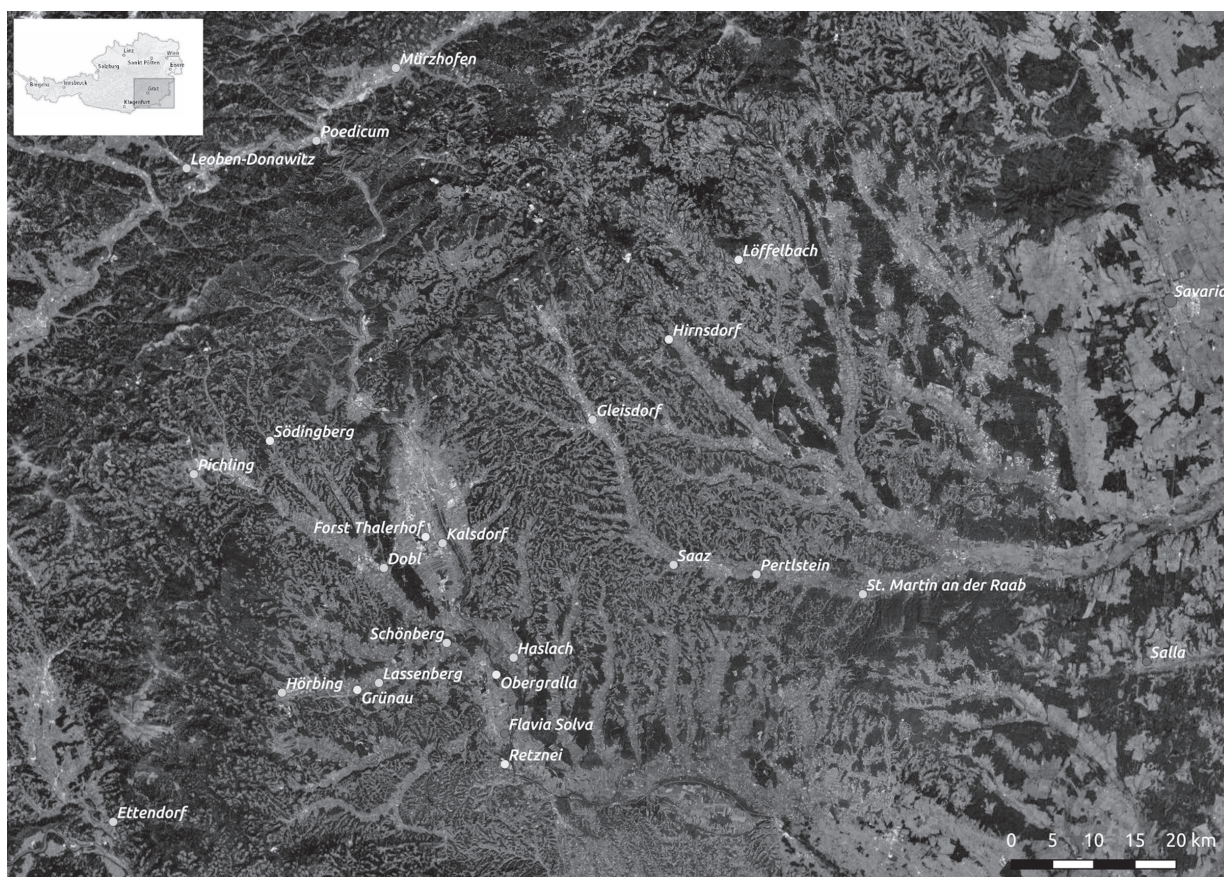


Fig. 1. Flavia Solva and its surroundings, selected settlements (Illustration: P. Marko, background layer: Google).

municipality Thalerhof), which was demolished in the 1970s to make way for the airport of Graz. The excavators dated the complex to the 4th century; doubts about this conclusion were subsequently uttered by various researchers (Grünewald 1974, 187; Schrettle 2007, 262; Heymans – Morawetz 2008, 19). Although the *villa* was mentioned numerous times in various publications (e. g. Modrijan 1969, 14–23; Smith 2001, 191–192), the small finds from the campaign were never analysed in detail. Unfortunately, due to the excavation technique of the 1930s, and unfortunate consequences of decade-long storage of finds and documentation, there is no detailed stratigraphic data that could allow precise conclusions; furthermore, the amount of small finds and in particular of significant pieces among them is small. Nevertheless, the fact that the majority of those pieces can be dated to the 2nd century AD (Marko 2016; Lamm – Marko 2018) confirms that the *villa* was occupied during this period. This also matches the dating of the nearby *vicus* of Kalsdorf, whose major building periods are dated to the first half of the 2nd century (Lohner-Urban 2009, 157–174). Sporadic finds from Thalerhof point to a possible earlier settlement phase in the late 1st century, corresponding to the early municipal period of Flavia Solva.

Dating the *villa* to the 2nd century also correlates well to the architectural style, which illustrates what Marina De Franceschini called a “rivoluzione architettonica in senso monumentale e scenografico” (De Franceschini 1998, 759) originating in Neronian Rome, and from there spreading through the Roman empire: The main building (Fig. 2), the only structure uncovered in the excavations, covers roughly 4000 m², including a *granarium* on the East side (87), an extensive bath complex covering 500 m² in the West (56–69), and representative *aulae* in the central tract (21.25–30), all connected by an 80 m long corridor (16–24). Most of the surface area, including the corridor, was heatable by a hypocaust system.

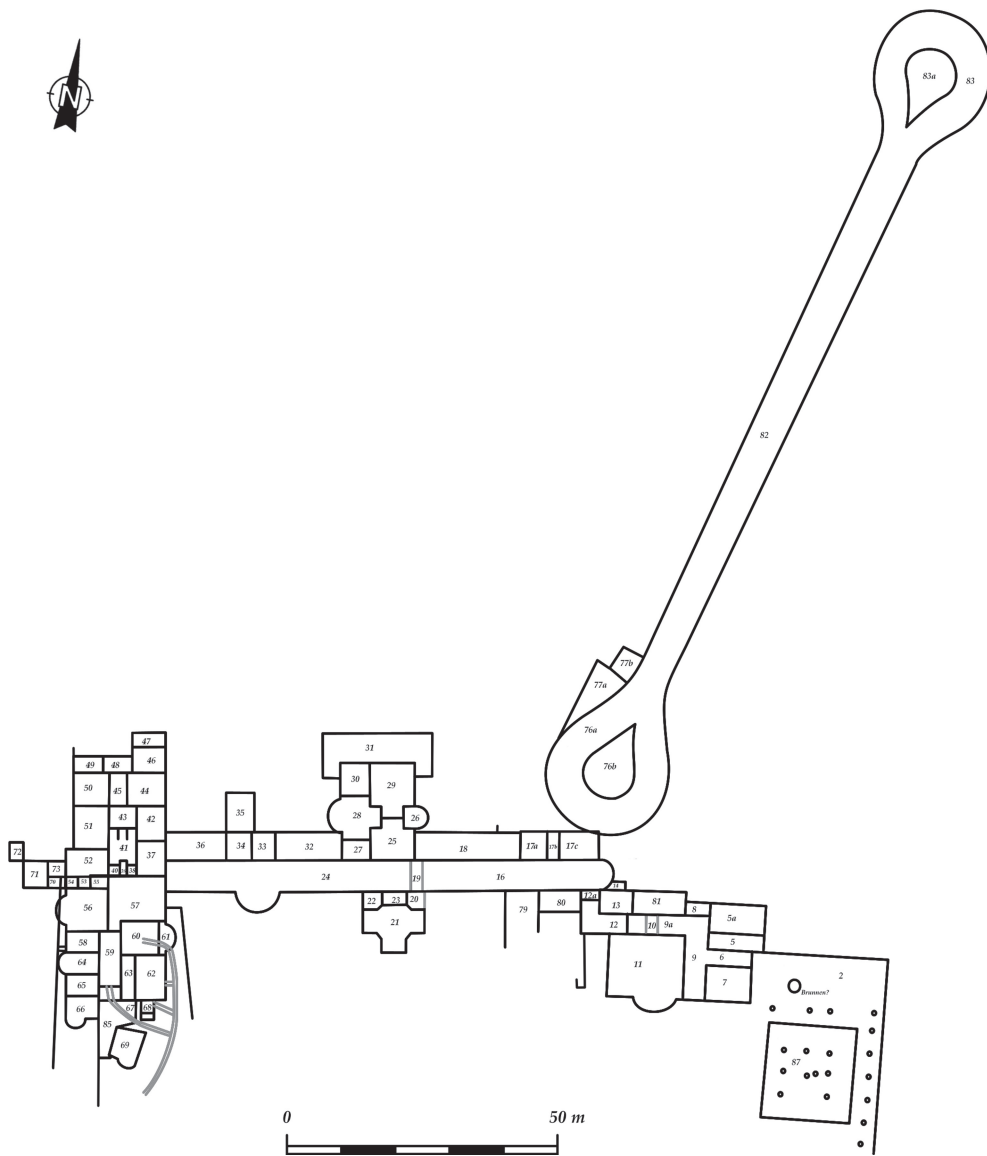


Fig. 2. Villa Forst-Thalerhof (Illustration: P. Marko).

In 2015, a previously unknown part of the *villa* was discovered on aerial photographs (Fig. 2: 76/82/83): It seems to be a single, 6 m broad linear structure with drop-shaped endings of a total length of ca. 175 m, almost one *stadium* (Choquer – Favory 2001, 73) – the distance between the tips of the opposed “drops” (76b/82b) measures 127 m. These shapes of 24 m diameter seem to point to a use in connection with carriages or chariots; however, there are no comparable structures known in ancient architecture that could confirm this assumption – *circenses* and *stadia* generally feature straight or convex outlines (Letzner 2009, 11f.), and are consistently bigger than the specimen in Thalerhof (Letzner 2009, 27).

This structure increases the known covered area of the *villa* by 50 %. While its purpose can not be ascertained outright, the fact that it can not be identified as any known kind of utilitarian building makes it more plausibly a part of the *pars urbana*, reiterating on the one hand the opulence of the building, and on the other hand reminding us that a considerable part of the *pars rustica* has yet to be identified.

The only other extraurban Roman building known in Austria that is comparable in size to the one in Thalerhof is the *villa* of Loig near Salzburg (Gruber 2015; for a comparison of Thalerhof

and Loig cf. also *Kastler – Marko 2016*). The plan of its *pars urbana* shows a division similar to Thalerhof: A pavillion-like residential or representative tract and an extensive bath complex are connected by a long hypocausted corridor (*Gruber 2015, 10*). In Loig as in Thalerhof there is a *granarium* integrated into the structure.

While the *villa* of Loig is the only known complex displaying such a close structural similarity, certain aspects of the architectonic concept of Thalerhof can be found in other *villae*, and those as a rule are situated in areas known for their “high society” inhabitants in Roman times. There are sporadic examples in the provinces, such as the *villa* of Orbe-Boscéaz in Switzerland, near Aventicum, which shows a similar tripartite structure, in this case with a double peristyle. This *villa* was called by its excavators “the biggest Roman villa North of the alps” (https://issuu.com/regionduleman/docs/orbe_2015/5; cf. also *Monnier 2016*). A similar level of luxury is perceivable in the main building of the *villa* of Nennig in Germany, maybe the most important of the impressive Roman palaces along the Moselle (*Glaser et al. 2007, 33*), which shares, apart from an acreage comparable to Thalerhof of over 6000 m², also the U-shaped layout, connected by a long corridor. Furthermore, it features a 250 m long *ambulatio*, in this case connecting the main building to a bath house South of it (*Glaser et al. 2007, 36*).

For further examples we mostly have to look to the Roman heartland, especially Lazio, Campania, or Istria. The greatest palace to be mentioned here is of course the *villa* Hadriana near Tivoli (*Salza Prina Ricotti 2001, 139–141*), which features a long *ambulatio* on the North side of the so-called *pecile*; this is however closely integrated into the architectonic ensemble, while the example from Thalerhof extends freely into open space. A closer parallel can be found in the *villa ‚ad duas lauros‘* in Centocelle (*De Franceschini 2005, No. 62, 176–179*), where a similar corridor connects the main building with a bath house, as in Nennig, or in the *villa dei sette bassi*, near Rome (*De Franceschini 2005, No. 75, 209–214; Mayer 2005, 120*).

Another over 100 m long structure, which was defined as “Cryptoporticus”, was uncovered in the 19th century in Barbariga, Istria (*Schwalb 1902, 27 and T. 2; cf. also De Franceschini 1998, 618 with further references*). It is attached to the co-called “summer residential building” in an obtuse angle – as is the one in Thalerhof –, it connects the building to a landing stage.

All these comparisons firmly connect the *villa* of Thalerhof to the top layer of imperial Roman high society, the building characteristics apparently dependent more on the owners’ fashionable taste than on geographical context.

The *villa* of Löffelbach³

A second example of Roman “luxury architecture” in Styria is similar in this last respect, but yet contrasts sharply with the architectonical concept perceivable in Thalerhof as described above – this *villa* was found in the East of modern Styria, in Löffelbach near Hartberg, on the outskirts of the territory of Flavia Solva. Indeed, Löffelbach might already have been situated in the territory of the neighbouring *colonia* Savaria, in Pannonia, as the exact course of the borderline between the two provinces has not yet been ascertained (cf. e. g. *Harl 1997; Lehner 2012; Lamm 2014*).

In Löffelbach a *villa* residential building in a compact peristyle layout was found (Fig. 3), the courtyard measuring just 14 m square, and dominated by the typical focal point of late Roman representative architecture, the *aula absidata* on the North side (24). Harald Mielsch defines this approach to architecture as projected from the interior spaces, and as a concept contrary to the earlier high imperial building style (*Mielsch 1987, 92*).

The excavator compared it to the *villa* of Piazza Armerina in Sicily, which was at the time thought to have been an imperial residence, as well as to the *villae* of Bruckneudorf and Konz (*Modrijan 1971, 18*), for both of which similar claims have been made.

Besides the *aula absidata*, another typical feature of late Roman elite residences is the area adjacent to the great *aula* in Löffelbach: a group of partially polygonal rooms that are usually

³ A preliminary interpretation of the architecture of Löffelbach was published in *Marko 2011*.

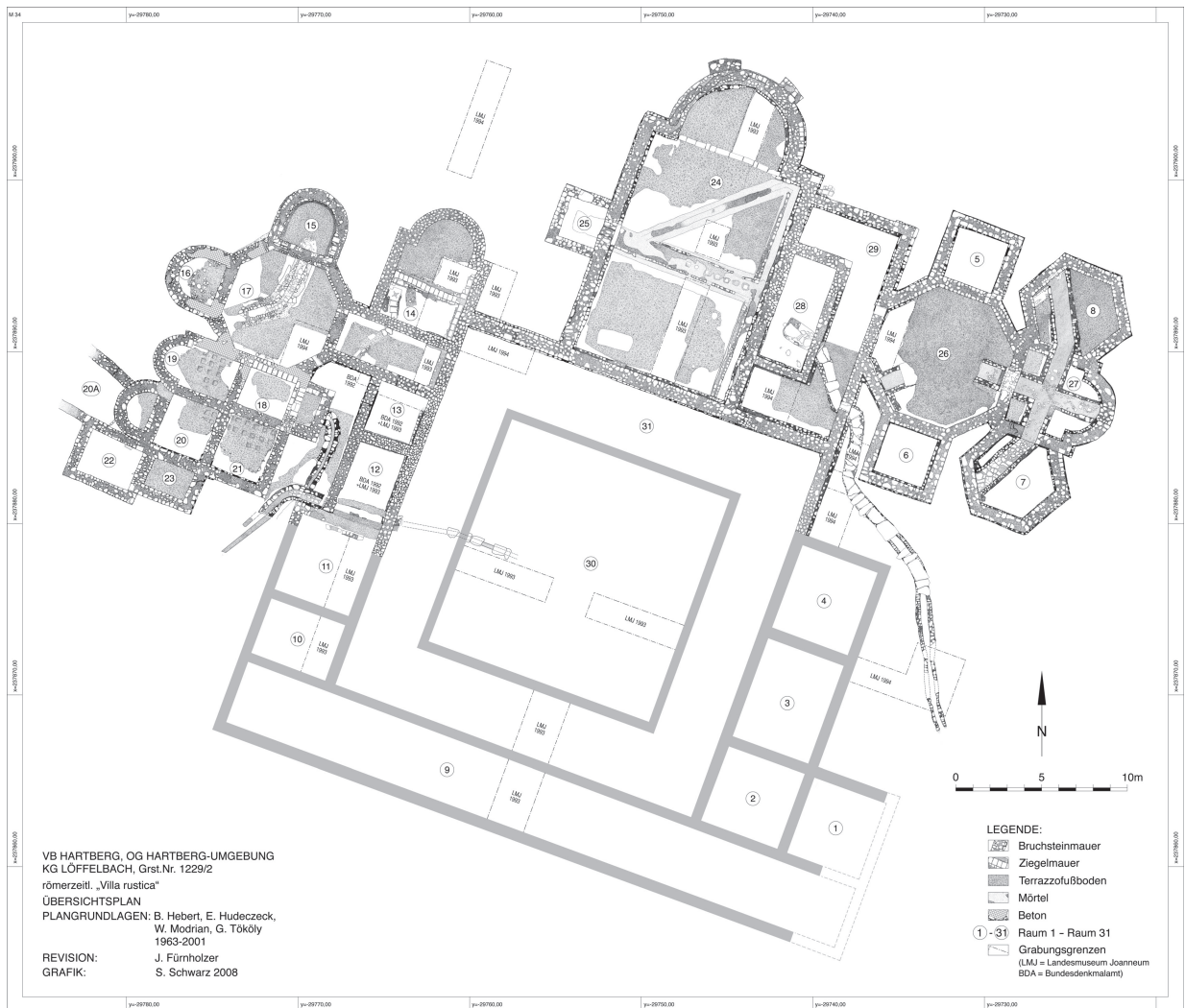


Fig. 3. Villa Löffelbach (Illustration: Fürnholzer – Schwarz 2008).

interpreted as forming a sequence of increasingly private reception rooms, a “sistema del percorso glorificante variamente composto” (Scagliarini Corlàita 1996, 837–838). Their typical shape is that of a triconch, but there are also variations to the theme, such as in the palace of Galerius in Felix Romuliana/Gamzigrad, where the plan takes the shape of a recursive clover leaf pattern, connected to the great *aula* by a three-sided peristyle, analogue to the three-sided corridor in Löffelbach (29).

The example showing the closest relation to Löffelbach is situated in Desenzano del Garda, Italy (De Franceschini 1998, 147–151), where behind the big reception room, here triconch-shaped, a small apsidal chamber provides access to two opposite polygonal rooms. An almost identical ensemble can be found in Löffelbach (7.8.27). The two are further alike in their relatively unrepresentative access doors directly from outside the building, via a *viridarium* in the former, and the three-sided corridor 29 in the latter.

The closest comparison piece to Löffelbach in geographical terms on the other hand can be found in the tetrarchic imperial palace of Savaria (Szentlélek 1995; Scherrer 2003, 65–66). Here the *aula absidata* is accompanied by a group of rooms with an octagonal central chamber and polygonal annexes. Due to later buildings in this spot the tract could not be excavated completely, so it could not be determined conclusively whether this area was a bath, or a reception tract. However, the similarity to Löffelbach and the other mentioned buildings,

one none of which feature water installations, makes the latter explanation seem the more plausible.

All these comparable examples support a dating of the building uncovered in Löffelbach near tetrarchic time, and contextualizing it in an elite societal bracket with a need for a variety of representative rooms for varying occasions and/or guests.

Concluding remarks

From the evidence of these find spots it can be ascertained that the territory of Flavia Solva was home to members of the “high society”, although historical sources do not confirm a noteworthy status of the *municipium*, its inhabitants, and their political or economic power in the Roman empire. Recent research on the infrastructure of the area as well as on various single find spots is uncovering further reasons to reestimate basic expectations about the territory, such as population density, economic power, export capacity *etc.*; this shows a great potential for further research and a new evaluation of our knowledge, for which the next years can hopefully provide new opportunities.

Mag. Dr. Patrick Marko
University of Graz
Heinrichstrasse 78
AT – 8010 Graz
patrick.marko@uni-graz.at

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FACULTAS PHILOSOPHICA

Trnava University in Trnava, Faculty of Philosophy and Arts, Department of Classical Archaeology
Hornopotočná 23, SK – 918 43 TRNAVA; Phone: +421-33-5939371
Fax: +421-33-5939370; E-mail: klasarch@truni.sk; Web: <http://klasarch.truni.sk>

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