

**To the attention of:**

Mr. Lazar Andreev (A representative of the Steering Board and supporters of the preservation of the archaeological site near Blagoevgrad, Bulgaria)

**Regarding:**

A request for an official statement in regards to the buildings found in the archaeological site along the route of Struma highway – LOT 3.1, section between the villages of Pokrovnik and Zelen Dol, Blagoevgrad municipality.

## **STATEMENT**

of the Bulgarian Archaeological Association regarding the cultural and historical value and interpretation of the newly found structures near the village of Pokrovnik, Blagoevgrad municipality.

### **SITE CHARACTERISTICS**

The archaeological site near the village of Pokrovnik is situated on the non-flood terrace of the Struma river, approximately 800 meters from the river's right bank and at altitude of 350 meters. According to the satellite images, taken before the excavation began, the region is situated amongst agricultural lands, used as such at that time as well. The terrain is completely flat and habitable. It is evident that in ancient times the fertile lands near the river and the natural assets of the broad valley between the Rila and Vlahina Mountains, where the present-day town is situated, were well utilized.

The topographic placement of the archaeological site, as well as the geographical benefits of the region, suggest intensive habitation of the entire valley during ancient periods. Therefore, it must not come as a surprise as the main architectural structures (regardless of the intend of their use) are found underneath where the current modern-day town is situated. The famous inscription mentioning the name of the village “Skaptopara” (Σκαπτοπάρρα) is found in an area which currently is a neighbourhood of the town of Blagoevgrad (former village of Gramada). This area is situated only about 2.5 km from the studied archaeological site which gives us every reason to believe that the archaeological remains found near the village of Pokrovnik are only one small part of the settlement which is situated underneath the modern town of Blagoevgrad.

In 2017, as well as 2018, the archaeological site has been studied by “rescue excavations” (in accelerated terms). The main target in the very beginning of the excavation work was to remove the archaeological structures and clearing up the area for new construction (the Struma highway). It is emblematic that, unlike other excavation areas, the work at this particular site reveals the ancient settlement in its entirety (and not just a part of it) and that in time this settlement has not been affected by

other construction or by the very common in Bulgaria “treasure hunting” intrusions. It is puzzling that despite finding the world famous inscription regarding Skaptopara in the area (its value is obvious and evident by the inscription being stored for safekeeping in Berlin, and not in Bulgaria), the representatives from the Regional historical museum located in Blagoevgrad did not even try to localize the settlement (not to mention the lack of interest in studying it, identifying it, or populating it) – the discovery of this settlement could be defined as “Gift from the Gods,” in other words something like a compensation for the scientists’ silence on a subject with global importance!

The rescue excavations reveal an ancient building with a remarkably large size. In the vague reports about this archaeological finding, there is a mention, however, of architectural details (marble ornaments), heated floors (hypocaust), four distinct historical periods of occupation, material testimonies that manufacturing took place there (ovens for building materials), 40 separate enclosures, preserved plumbing system, an enormous amount of artefacts (including remains of textiles), military diploma and others. We can easily conclude from all this data that the studied archaeological site carries national importance! In Europe, and Worldwide, similar archaeological monuments have their significant place in the science forums. The architectural plan, the distinct interior spaces and the originating inventory should be the subject of ample publications (usually in several volumes).

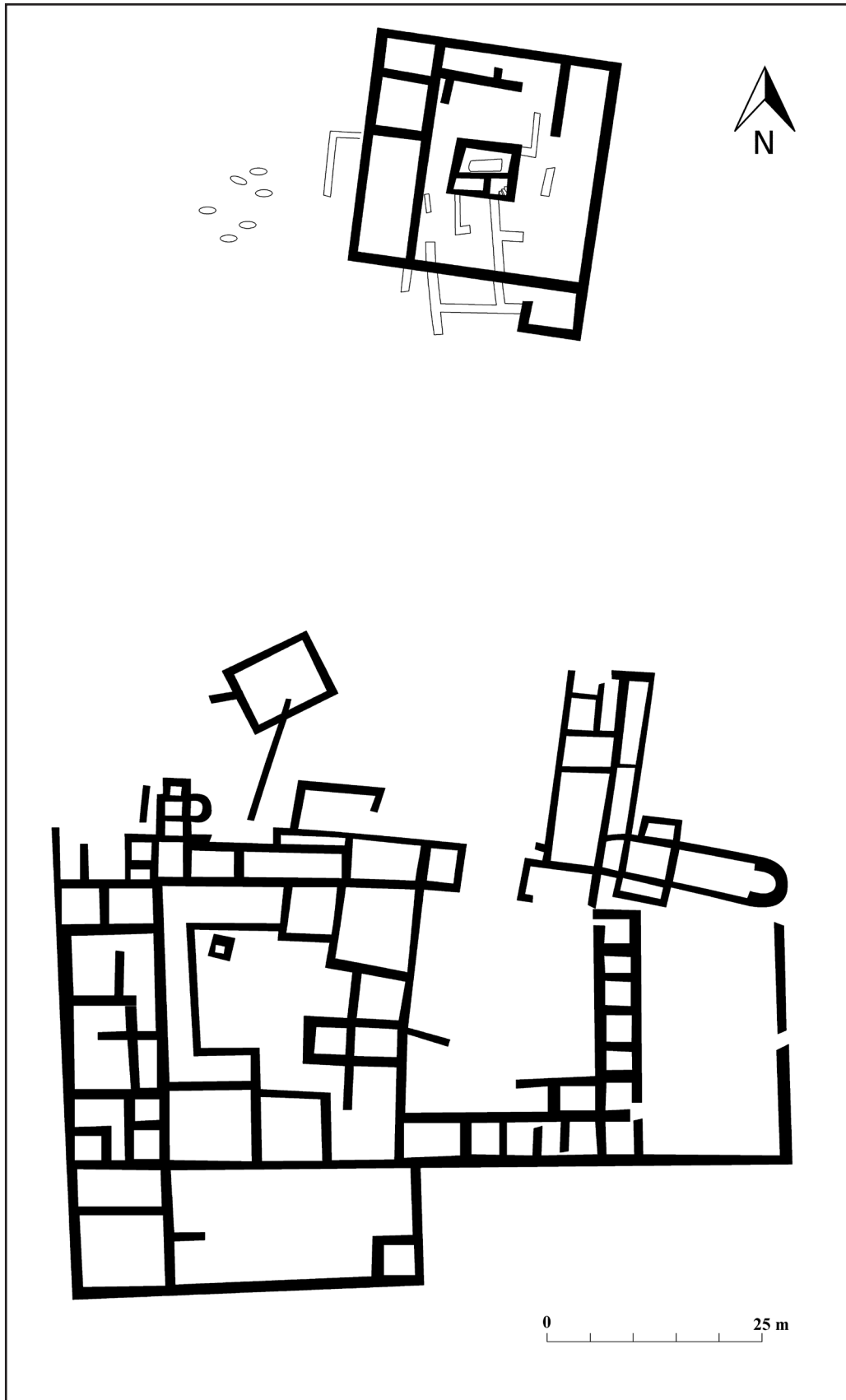
### **CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL IMPORTANCE**

The layout of the ancient building, discovered near modern-day Blagoevgrad (**Fig. 1**) possesses all the clearly distinguished characteristics of a Roman suburban estate (*villa*). In 1997, the archaeologist Ventsislav Dinchev gathers information and publishes in one volume all known to that date villas in Bulgaria – they are 33 total.

According to him, near half of all the studied villas are situated in Southwest Bulgaria, however, on the image included below, we can see that this region is mainly located near the modern-day cities of Sofia, Pernik and Kustendil (**Fig. 2**). The Roman villa near the village of Pokrovnik is the first such site (and the only one to this date), discovered in the area of Pirin’s Macedonia.

According to the same author, in ancient times there was a cultural border, along the line of the rivers Iskar and Mesta. The villas situated to the East from that line fell during the barbarian invasions in the middle of 3rd century AD. To the West from that line the villas structures blossomed in a period of prosperity in fourth and first half of fifth century. In a cultural and historical sense the villa near the village of Pokrovnik may be attributed to the same group of eminent archaeological monuments linked to the history and bloom of the early East Roman Empire (also known as Byzantine Empire). Such are the emperor’s residences near modern-day city of Kostinbrod (*Scretisca*), the Palace of emperor Galerius near the city of Zaychar in Serbia (*Felix Romuliana*), and others built during the time, when the centre of the ancient world moved from Rome to the Balkans.

In 2002 the English researcher Lynda Mulvin publishes her work about all of the known villas in the Balkan region (a total of 64). From the data tables published in her book, one can note that there are only four with a comparable to the villa near the village of Pokrovnik size – Chatalka near



**Fig. 1.** The discovered near village of Pokrovnik building. General layout.

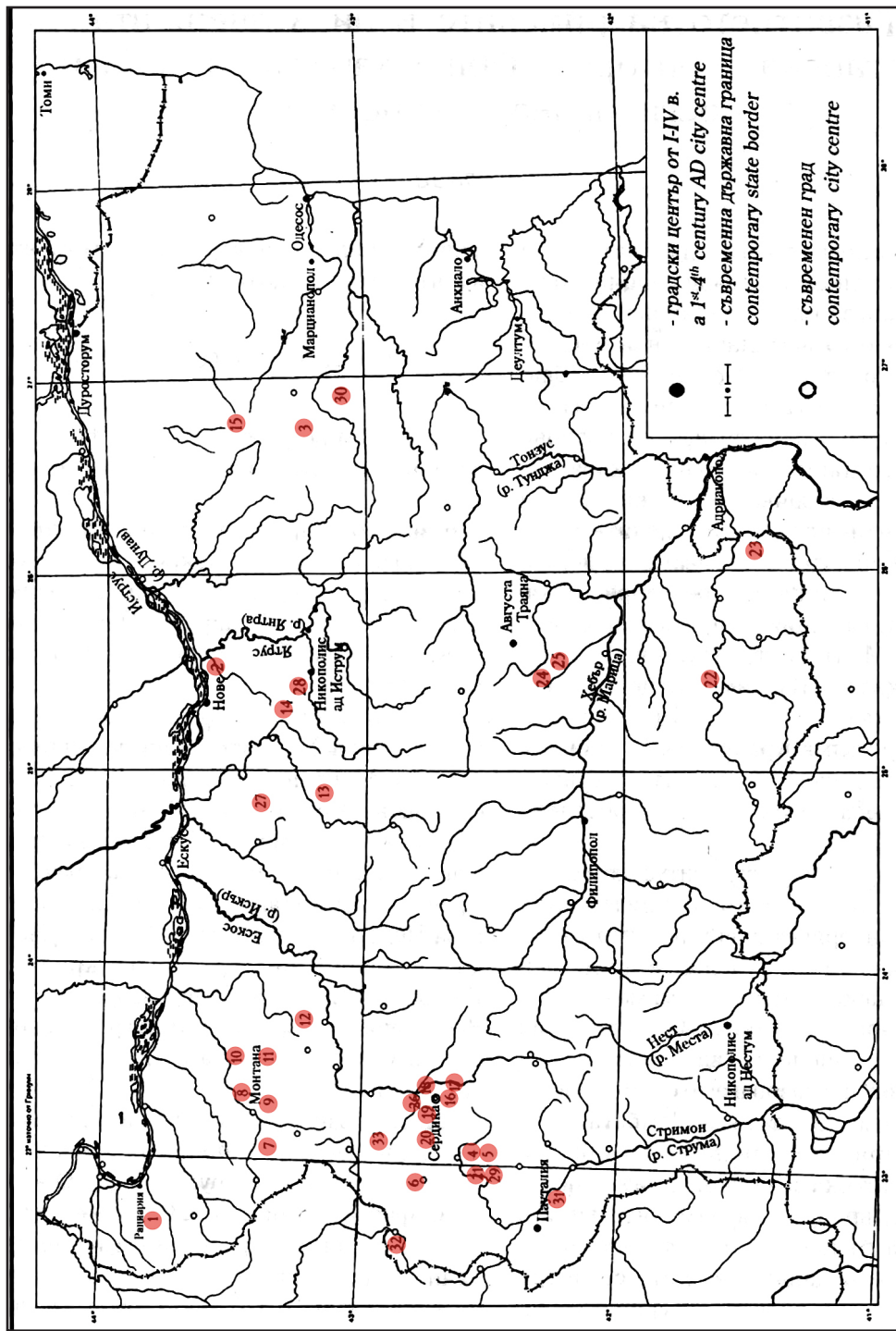


Fig. 2. The villas discovered in Bulgaria (according to V. Dinchev)

the town of Stara Zagora (6890 sq m), Dracevica on the Adriatic coast (5600 sq m) and Mediana near modern-day city of Nish in Serbia (6732 sq m).

In the research reports to date there were various attempts to classify and determine the villas from the Roman and Late-Roman periods. Over 30 researchers were involved in the matter, and their proposals to systematize the information vary from comprehensive review of the building layout to social and economical interpretations. For the time being, the newly found villa near the village of Pokrovnik could not be listed under any of these classifications, as the settlement developed in time, and clarifying the entire chronology, timing and sequential phases of construction is a subject of in-depth and precise scientific research, as previously mentioned.

The layout of the building near the village of Pokrovnik shows a building establishment with two distinct inner courtyards. Near the East courtyard there is a grouping of rooms with significant dimensions, and north from them there is an attached smaller (in comparison to the size of the rooms) bathroom. In the East section there were unearthed earlier walls (inconsistent with the orientation of the building). Namely those early walls could be qualified as “foundations with perishable nature made of stone and clay binder or dry joint” (Official statement by National archeological institute with museum (NAIM) within Bulgarian academy of science (BAN) in regards to the rescue archaeological excavations near the villages of Zelen Dol and Pokrovnik, Blagoevgrad municipality).

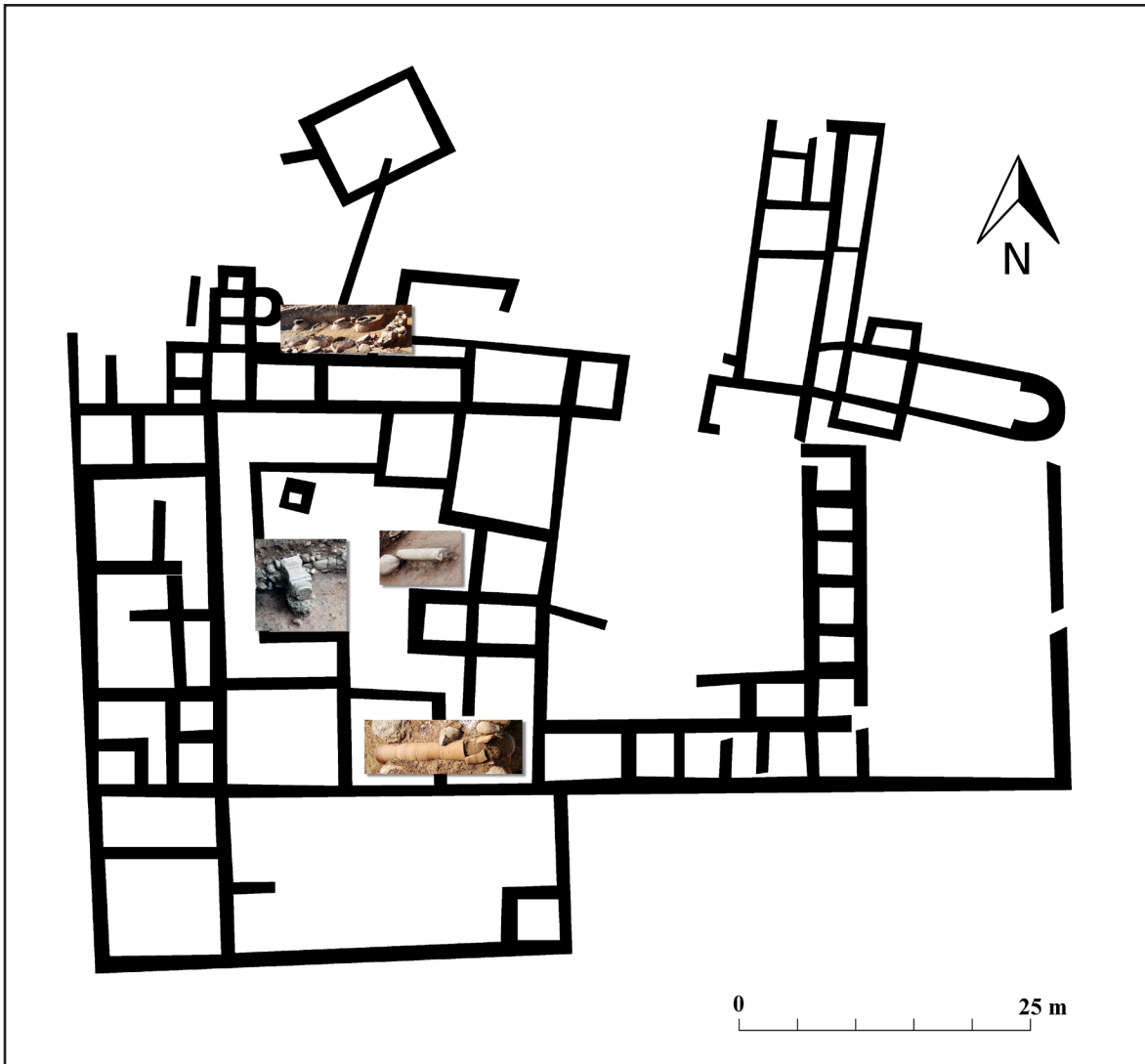
The courtyard to the West was peristyle type, i.e., it had a row of columns surrounding the yard which is clearly seen by the remains of columns and arches found in place (**Fig. 3**). The estate had plumbing and thermal system. A wide *Portico* (entrance) was excavated South of the courtyard, most likely utilized to access the housing complex.

The characteristics of the west part of the villa are distinctive for these kind of buildings dated to the 2nd and first half of the 3th century AD. The most close example is the famous *villa Armira* near Ivaylovgrad (which had a central peristyle courtyard, surrounded by rooms in various sizes), which only differ in its smaller overall size in comparison to the one we are discussing here (**Fig. 4**).

The East courtyard is formed by a row of rooms and was most likely open to the North. From the archaeological excavation report for 2017 it does not become clear whether the East courtyard existed alongside the West part, or it was built at a later time. The so called “church” is located North of the East courtyard.

We must note that the spacious rooms ending with a wide apse are ones of the most characteristic elements in the villa complexes, built after the beginning of fourth century.

Some researches are distinguishing standalone type villas based on this characteristic – the so called “villas with Apsidal Hall Plan” (**Fig. 5**). The so called “Church” is nothing else but a representative apse building in the villa, evident by the number of rooms to the West, organically connected to the “church.” The building with the apse and the connected to it rooms form a freestanding complex, with a slightly offset axis compared to the main building layout, which relates to its construction in a later period. It is interesting to note that the direction/axis of this complex matches the direction of the Mausoleum discovered 40 meters to the north of it.



**Fig. 3.** The villa near Pokrovnik with marked places of the of architectural details found in situ.

In conclusion, we would have to note again the exceptional scientific and cultural value of the newly found villa near the village of Pokrovnik. Rushed excavations, inaccurate and misleading information about this monument are still not able to undermine its importance, simply because its significant scale and rich substance of the archaeological artefacts are evident and recognizable even for people who are not specialists in this area.

**THIS ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE REPRESENTS AN ENTIRE UNDIVIDABLE COMPLEX!** Its “dismemberment” (relocating separate parts and destruction of others) could be compared to the destruction of a modern house and saving only its sanitary facilities ... Such approach will not be beneficial for the site’s promotion, nor will it conserve the area’s history in an adequate manner that is up-to-date. Actually, exactly the opposite – destroying this remarkable site could turn into a

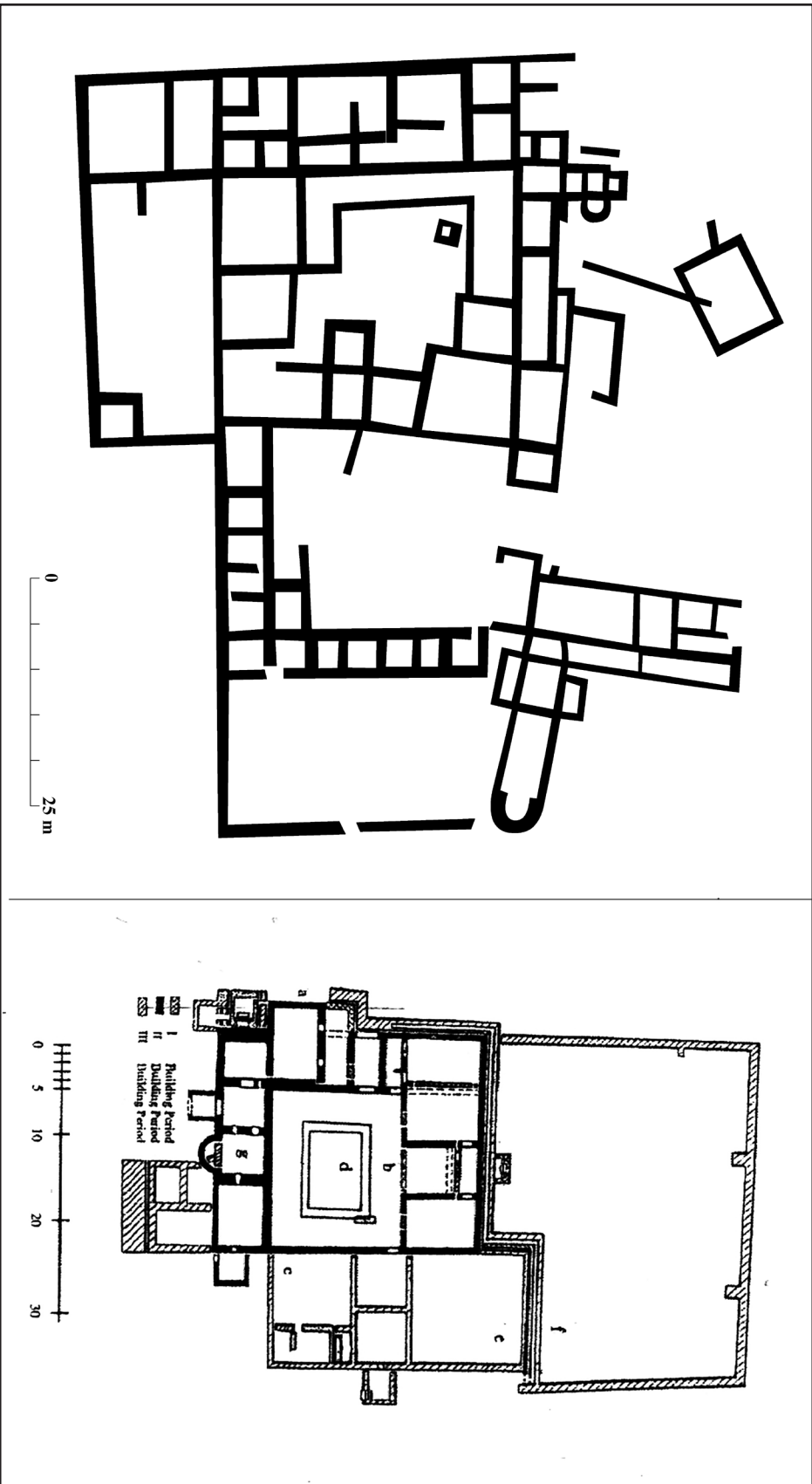


Fig. 4. The villa near Pokrovnik and villa Armira

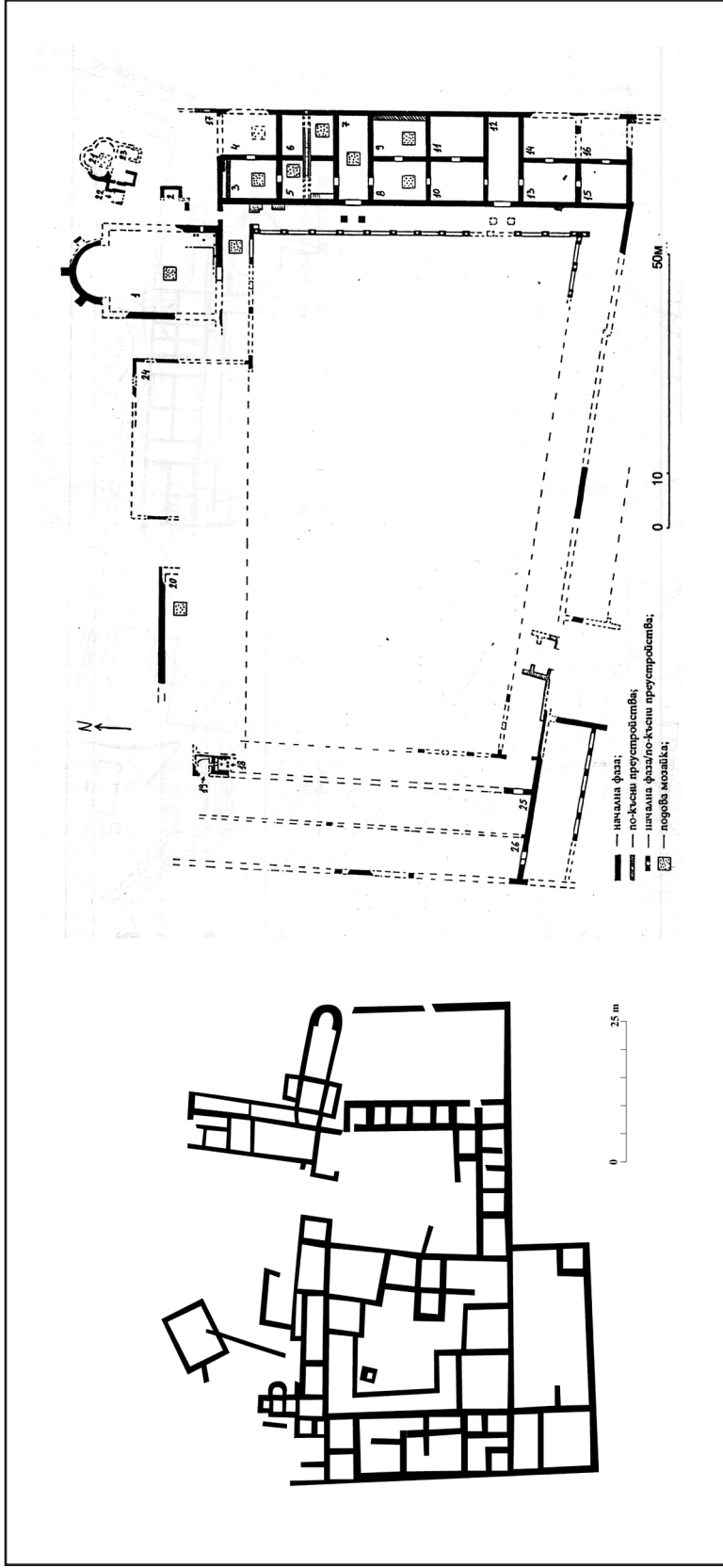


Fig. 5. The villa near Pokrovnik and the Imperial Residence in Kostinbrod.



mournful example of a country that is short-sighted and regional politics which will take away the opportunity for the city of Blagoevgrad to develop as a tourist and historical centre.

**Note:** *The Plan, representing the structure of the excavated ancient building found near the village of Pokrovnik, is composed based on aerial footage, published in Facebook. Images published in the public group forum, as well as publications and “site excavators’ ” statements in the media are utilized for informational purposes in the text below.*

*The author of this statement has not visited the site personally and she is not familiar with the archaeological finds derived from the site (approximately 3000 based on media publications). Despite that, the public information available is clear enough so that the author can define the character of the archaeological site.*

Krassimira Luka:



Chairman, Bulgarian Archaeological Association

Sofia

May 27th, 2018



