

Thracian and Byzantine Cultural Heritage in the Central Rhodopes
Studies of the Late Antiquity fortresses near Smolyan and the village of
Koshnitsa

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(Resume)

In the archaeological excavations of fortresses from late Antiquity and the Middle ages at the village of Beden, Devin municipality and the village of Koshnitsa, Smolyan municipality, we uncovered evidence that similar fortifications existed as early as eneolithic age. So far, the earliest fortresses in Central Rhodopes dated from the Iron Age. They were built near settlements, inaccessible places on mountain ridges and peaks whose steep rocky slopes were used as fortress walls. The walls were built with stones either with or without mud binder. Such building technique did not allow the building of high walls; that is probably why a wooden fence (palisade) was built above the stone wall. In most cases the Thracian fortresses protected peaks with sanctuaries built on them.

The Thracian fortresses are comparatively few. One possible explanation is the fact that they were used in the 6th century by the Byzantine Empire in building its fortification system in the Rhodopes. Archaeological excavations show that there had been Thracian tribes there before the fortresses at the villages of Beden and Podvis, at the town of Roudozem and the village of Koshnitsa were built. The purpose of those late Antiquity fortresses was to facilitate the soldiers in guarding the roads and the communications along them by providing military contingent and the local population with shelter at times of military action. Building fortresses in the Rhodopes was part of the defensive policy of the Byzantine Empire at the end of the 5th and the beginning of the 6th centuries. The importance of the Rhodopes increased at that time because of their strategic location – between the two major military roads passing through the Balkan peninsula, leading to the capital of the empire – Constantinople – the Central one (Singidunum – Constantinople) and via Egnatia (Dyrrachium – Constantinople).

The Majority of the Byzantine fortresses in Central Rhodopes are situated on the territory of Smolyan municipality which makes sense as two of the three Trans-Rhodopean roads with military and strategic importance for the Byzantine Empire passed through it. There are four fortresses along the Central road: on Turlata peak – south of the village of Stikul, in Turluka area – north of Smolyan, on top of the passage cave - southeast of the village of Koshnitsa and one lies

southwest of the village of Kiselchovo. The fortresses near the village of Podvis and the one near Rudozem were situated near the East Trans – Rhodopean road. After the Slavs captured the Rhodopean fortresses, the Byzantine fortification system collapsed. Most of the fortresses were not functioning from the middle of the 9th century (when the Rhodopes became part of the Bulgarian Kingdom) to the beginning of the 11th century – when they became part of the Byzantine Empire again. Very few were rebuilt and used between the 11th and the 12th century. After the Rhodopes again became part of the Bulgarian state till they were conquered by the Ottoman Empire at the end of the 14th century, only the fortresses at the villages of Beden and Podvis continued to exist

(Текст)

Between 2000 and 2013 numerous explorations were carried out on the territory of Smolyan region: field investigations and archaeological excavations whose findings enriched our knowledge of the past of the Rhodopes and corrected certain historical facts concerning the Central Rhodopes. For example the date of the earliest human presence in this part of the mountain was corrected. During a field trip for archaeological sites near the village of Smilyan, Smolyan municipality, pre-historic settlements dating from early Palaeolithic were uncovered [1]. The archaeological tour of the Smolyan region resulted in the tracing of the three already known major Trans-Rhodopean roads through the Central Rhodopes, used during the Eneolithic (4900-3600 BC), connecting today's Thracian Plain with the north Aegean coast. For convenience they will be called West, Central and East Roads [2]. Most of the located and uncovered sanctuaries, fortresses, settlements and necropolises in the Central Rhodopes are situated along them and the side roads connecting them (Fig. 1).

The material evidence of settlements in the Central Rhodopes uncovered at routine archaeological excavations date from the late Palaeolithic (19000-15 000 BC). Such evidence was uncovered at the exploration of the flint deposits near Orfey chalet, Borino municipality. The archaeologists have interpreted it as remains from workshops for tools and temporary homes showing the seasonal character of habitation of the mountain by groups of people, most probably hunters [3].

The archaeological sites with culture layers from the Eneolithic age provide evidence of permanent settlement in the Rhodopes. Such evidence was uncovered during the exploration of the cave dwellings in Yagodina, Haramiyska, Rizovitsa and Uleya [4] and Prohodna (passage) caves as well as at the fortresses near the villages of Gela, Strashimir, Beden [5, p.113], Podvis (Podvisos) [6, p.715] and Koshnitsa [7].

Along the Trans-Rhodopean road passing through Central Rhodopes, there are two archaeological complexes on whose grounds artefacts proving human presence in the Eneolithic were uncovered. The first one is the cult complex in Mogilata area near Smolyan where, most probably, was the centre of an unfortified settlement from late Eneolithic [8, p.15]. The archaeological objects uncovered from the site prove that the settlement and its sacred centre preserved its function as a place of worship in the following centuries; after the conquest of the Rhodopes by the Roman Empire 2nd – 4th century cult buildings were constructed. Later on, on top of the base, a Christian temple was built, turned into a monastery complex in the 6th century [9]. The second archaeological complex consists of a cave dwelling, a rock sanctuary and a fortification. It is situated south of Smolyan, along the central Trans-Rhodopean road, on top of the cone-shaped peak (1006 m) southeast of the village of Koshnitsa (Fig. 2). The peak has been 'cut' from northwest to southwest by a passage cave the levels of whose entrances differ by 35m. The cave is a steep tunnel with a semi-circular section diminishing in height; its upper entrance was one of the entrances of the Byzantine fortress built in 6th century (Fig. 3) [10].

The archaeological examination of the complex uncovered evidence, that the peak was used as a rock sanctuary turned into a fortification during the Eneolithic. Stratigraphic analysis of the culture layer at the north fortress wall showed peak usage of the mountain top during different times, viz. during late Eneolithic, early and late Bronze Age, early Iron Age, 1st-3rd century BC, 6th century and 11th – 13th century. During the excavations, 1 metre away from the inner face of the wall, a nest with a charred beam (from a palisade) was uncovered lying 2.4 m deep. Its diameter is 0.16m – 0.18 m and it was under the re-deposited Eneolithic culture layer (Fig. 4). The wall of the fortification like other walls from that age was probably a wooden fence, fortified at its base by a stone wall [11].

Although the ceramic material was re-deposited and fragmented, the typical ornamentation 'Gradeshnitsa' type leads us to the conclusion that both the peak and the cave in it were inhabited during early Eneolithic (Fig. 5). Such ornamentation was characteristic of modern West Bulgaria and North Greece [12]. The examinations of the west and north wall planned for conservation and restoration have not resulted in the uncovering of earlier bases of fortress walls. It is obvious that during different ages, the best layout for the base of the fortress equipment was chosen. The steep rocky land the need for huge amount of stone made it necessary for the people to use the building material (stone) from earlier fortifications.

Old stone building material was not used during the Byzantine conquest; at the end of the 5th and the beginning of the 6th century the Byzantine Empire built a great number of fortresses to protect its territories on the Balkan Peninsula.

Such is the case with two of the examined Thracian fortresses in Central Rhodopes – the fortress near the village of Gela, Smolyan municipality and the one near the village of Strashimir, Zlatograd municipality (Fig. 1) [13]. They existed between 11th – 9th century BC and were used as sanctuaries in war times. They were built on inaccessible places – rocky ridges and peaks-sanctuaries. [14]. The fortresses were always built near abysses which served as natural fortress walls. They were built of layers of chipped, crushed or natural stone with or without mud. Such a building technique did not allow the making of high walls - that is why on top of the stone wall a wooden fence (palisade) was built. An example of this is the fortress near the village of Strashimir where, inside the stone filling, in the middle of the wall nests with beams 0.2-0.2m in diameter were uncovered. The wall was built of stones only; its height was 2.5-3 m, its width 3.2-3.5m and its length – around 120m (Fig.6). The archaeological examinations of the Thracian fortresses in the Central Rhodopes have provided evidence that they existed till 2nd -3rd century – that is, after the conquest of the mountain by the Roman Empire in the 1st century [15].

As it was situated midland in both Byzantine and Roman Empires, the Rhodopes had no strategic importance during war times. There were no big cities in Central Rhodopes whose protection would require the building of strongholds. While building communication road system for its army, the Roman Empire used the already known routes through the mountain, fortifying them by paving the shaky ground. (Fig.7) So, not only was the passing through the Rhodopes from North to South made easier, but also a direct connection was established between the two main thoroughfares leading to the capital of the Roman Empire – Constantinople viz. Via Diagonalis (Via Militaris) through the Thracian Plain and Via Egnatia – along the north Aegean coast (Fig. 1) [16].

The division of the Roman Empire into East and West in 395 led to struggle of its Emperors for dominance and the restoration of the Empire. An example of this is the foreign policy of the Byzantine Emperor Justinian I (527-565), oriented towards the unification of the former Roman Empire. His policy led to years of war for regaining former territories of the Empire in North Africa, Italy the Pyrenean peninsula and Transcaucasus area. The constant wars resulted in the diminishing of the contingents of the East Roman Empire in Europe and its weakening as a military power at times when the attacks of the Avars and the Slavs on its Balkan territories became quite frequent. The incapability of the Empire to defend its territories on the Balkan Peninsula forced it adopt a defensive war policy. An example of this is the fortification of its defensive

system, more specifically – the restoration of the existing and the building of new fortresses.

Anastasius I (491-517) used to have concentric defence system – which means that defence ‘belts’ were built from the periphery towards the centre (the capital city Constantinople); Emperor Justinian I changed it into polycentric defence system ensuring the independent defence of big cities and important roads. In the Rhodopes the Byzantine Empire built its fortresses near the main roads and big settlements such as the settlements near Smolyan and Koshnitsa. In some cases, due to their location and the availability of building material, Thracian fortresses were chosen. Evidence in support of this was uncovered during the excavations of the Byzantine fortresses at the villages of Beden [17] and Podvis [18], the town of Rudozem, the villages of Koshnitsa [19] and Mogilitsa [20] which had been built on top of Thracian ones. Of course, there were fortresses built on new locations – an assumption supported by the evidence uncovered at the archaeological excavations of the fortresses at Devin [21] and Smolyan [22]. Thus, over a short period of time – from the end of the 5th to the beginning of the 6th century, eleven fortresses were built in Central Rhodopes; they had, most probably, been used as quarters by the soldiers recruited from the locals as well as shelter for the population during military actions.

Archaeological excavations are being carried out at eight of those fortresses. In this paper, I will share the findings from two of them; as an implementation of the project of Smolyan municipality ‘Thracian and Byzantine cultural heritage in the Rhodopes and the North Aegean coast’, they will be preserved, restored and made accessible to the public. They are the late Antiquity fortresses in Turluka area near Smolyan and the Passage cave near the village of Koshnitsa. They are very close to the Central Trans-Rhodopean road through the Central Rhodopes, which passes through the ancient settlements located in the region of Mogilata area near Smolyan and in the village of Koshnitsa (Fig. 1).

The archaeological exploration of the fortress near Smolyan was carried out by the Regional Museum of History Stoyu Shiskov – Smolyan, supervised by Nikola Damyanov in 1998 and Damyan Damyanov 2004-2006. The south wall with its adjacent inner premises, part of the east wall and the northeast corner of the fortress, were examined during that time. (Fig. 8). The fortress itself is located on the east ridge of the three rocky ridges in Turluka area, situated north of Smolyan. Its altitude is 1450-1482m and its area – about 5 acres. Smolyan fortress was built on an inaccessible location with a view in all directions. The rock slopes of the ridge, reaching 50m at places, were used as its west wall. It was typical of all mountain fortresses, probably because both building materials and time for building the fortresses were not enough. At the same time the clear view made it possible to watch the neighbouring areas and

to establish visual contact with other military fortresses- sanctuaries (Fig. 9). Smolyan fortress had such contact with the fortress at the village of Podvis to the east and with the one near Rudozem to the southwest.

The inaccessibility of the fortress prevented the numerous enemies from entering it; it was also impossible for the enemy to attack the fortress with a battering ram. As the front line was narrow, fewer people were needed to defend the fortress and there was no need to build battlements which played an important role for the defense of fortresses on the plains. The steep slope in front of the main entrance of Smolyan fortress made it impossible for the enemy to attack the gate with a ram. That is why it was unnecessary to build a battlement in front of the main gate. The same applied to the northeast entrance which was accessible through a narrow path on the side; impossible to attack and shot from the front (Fig. 10).

The fortress in Turluka area was a military fortification [23, pp. 33-44] where the population from the settlement –Mogilata area today- found shelter. It was maintained by a garrison, whose task was to watch and guard the communications along the Central road through Central Rhodopes. It was one of the many castles which – according to Procopius of Caesarea (chronicler, contemporary of the times) - on Justinian's order- had been refurbished, rebuilt and new ones had been built in the European territories of the Byzantine Empire. Probably because they were newly built and considerably smaller in size, the names of the castles in the Central Rhodopes remained unknown to Procopius. That is why he did not mention their names; he called them 'countless castles' [24].

The examination of the fortress proved that there existed two building periods. The first one was in the 6th century, and the second one – between the 11th and the middle of the 13th century. The walls of the castles mentioned by Justinian are 1.6m wide. They were smooth on both sides – inner and outer – and, most probably because there was not enough time and manpower, their bases were not dug into the rock. Their structure type (opus implectum) meant building with crushed and chipped stones (at the entrance) bound with white mortar – between the stones – filling of small stones and white mortar with very little crushed brick [25, pp.64-68].

The south fortress wall was immediately to the rocks which played the role of a fortress wall. The preserved wall is 38m long and 2.5m high. In the middle of it was the main entrance to the fortress. It was 1.8m wide and had two – winged gate. The threshold was made of two rectangular stones in whose outer corners axes grooves of the two wings of the gate were preserved. (Fig. 11). The amount of the remaining building materials from the wreck of the south wall

shows that it was at least 7m high. Near its inner side six premises have been uncovered. They were semi-dig in the ground and were used as storage rooms judging by the remains of pithoi (for storing olive oil and other liquids) querns, iron tools, etc. uncovered in them.

Part from the east wall, 10 m long has been examined. It was built in the same the south wall was; adjacent to its inner side ground rooms used for storage had also been built.

The north fortress wall is 16m long; northwest it touches the sheer rock of the northern peak of the ridge. The second entrance to the fortress is in it. It can be defined as 'poterne' (secret entrance) as it was hard to reach and hard to notice. Apart from being used both as a 'back entrance' and escape route, during the building of the fortress building material was carried through it. It is 1.25 m wide (Fig.12).

The fortress on top of the Passage cave near the village of Koshnitsa was the second military fortress and sanctuary along the ancient Central Trans-Rhodopean road in Central Rhodopes (Fig. 1). Its area is about 2.5 acres; the thickness of its walls – 1.7-1.8 m. The masonry is double-sided, consisting mostly of natural limestone and white mortar; the wall was filled with stones (different in size) and mortar. The fortress walls base was not dug into the rock. With a few exceptions, there is no mortar overlay in the base. (Fig. 13). Archaeological examination has been done on the west and north fortress walls [26].

The west wall is 38m long. Its northwest corner is best preserved. On the south end of the curtain an outer cupola which was connected to the fortress wall (Watchtower). The tower is rectangular; its walls are 1m-1.1 m thick. Its outer dimensions are 5.5mx3.m. Its entrance is 1m wide (Fig. 14).

The preserved length of the north fortress wall is 44.5m. Of all the walls, it is best preserved; its height reaches 3m at some places (Fig.15). The northwest corner and the east fortress wall have been ruined completely. Along the length of the wall, two vertical walls were uncovered, probably storage rooms, similar to those at the fortress near Smolyan.

Unlike the north rocky steep part of the fortress, the south half is even. In plan it is a semicircle, its radius is about 25m. The fortress wall is even more destroyed and visible only at a few places on the site. The excavation findings confirmed the assumption of the team about a chapel built at the east end of the fortress. The bases of two chapels have been uncovered. The findings from the excavations proved that there had been a chapel in the east end of the fortress.

The bases of two chapels have been registered, whose times of existence coincided with the existence of the fortress. The first period is during the 6th century, and the second one – 11th -12th century. A layer of burnt material marked each period and was a proof that the fortress had been burnt down.

The archaeological complex in the village of Koshnitsa is the perfect example of time-space continuity. Since the Stone-Copper Age till the beginning of the 13th century on the mountain top and the cave under it, there existed rock sanctuaries and Christian temples, unprotected dwellings and fortresses. The thorough examination of this archaeological site will provide us with more details about the way of life of the local people and their contacts with other parts of Thrace and the north Aegean coast.

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Annotation:

Fig.1. Trans-Rhodopean roads and the archaeological sites near them (made by At. Kiryakov)

Fig.2. Northwest view to the village of Koshnitsa and the peak with a passage cave (Photo by D.Damyanov)

Fig.3. The Passage Cave and the fortress on top of it, north view (Photo by D.Damyanov)

Fig.4. A nest of a charred beam of a wooden fence (palisade) at the north fortress wall (Photo by D.Damyanov)

Fig.5. Ceramic piece with 'Gradeshnitsa' decoration (Photo by D.Damyanov)

Fig.6. West wall of the Thracian fortress in Gradishte area near the village of Gela, Smolyan region (Photo by D.Damyanov)

Fig.7. Section of the Central Trans-Rhodopean road along the east slope of Golyam Persenk peak (Photo by D.Damyanov)

Fig. 8. Plan of the archaeological excavations of the late Antiquity fortress north of Smolyan (based on a drawing by Iv.Sarov. Drawn by: M. Kamenova)

Fig. 9. Northwest view to the rock abysses (west walls) of the fortress near Smolyan (Photo by D.Damyanov)

Fig.10. South wall of the fortress near Smolyan, northwest view (Photo by D.Damyanov)

Fig.11. Main entrance to the fortress, view from inside (Photo by D.Damyanov)

Fig.12. North entrance of the fortress near Smolyan, view from outside (Photo by D.Damyanov)

Fig.13. Plan of the archaeological excavations of the late Antiquity fortress southeast of the village of Koshnitsa (Изготвила: architect M. Kamentova)

Fig.14. Southwest view to the tower and the west wall of the fortress near the village of Koshnitsa (Photo by D.Damyanov)

Fig.15. Northeast view to north wall of the fortress near the village of Koshnitsa (Photo by D.Damyanov)