

The Central Rhodopes region in the Roman road system

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The Central Rhodopes region is today's Smolyan region which in geographical terms is part of West Rhodopes

Since ancient times the Central Rhodopes region has played an important role in the development of the economic relations on the Balkans due to the fact that the shortest route between the Thracian lands and the North Aegean coast passed through it [1]. In Roman times the Central Rhodopes region was even more important as the three biggest roads passing through the Rhodopes lay on its territory: the Central, the East and the West Roads [2]. They connected the capital city of the Roman province Thrace – Philippopolis with the big cities situated on the North Aegean Coast on the one hand and the major Roman road – Via Egnatia- on the other (Fig. 1).

Besides the above mentioned important Roman roads, there existed in the mountain lots of smaller roads of local importance. The objective of this paper is to describe the layout of the above mentioned roads, the building technique used and their classification.

The Central Trans-Rhodopean Roman road was the shortest land thoroughfare which, in Roman times connected Philippopolis with Via Egnatia and the cities along the North Aegean coast. It is the only one of the three main roads passing through the Rhodopes whose whole roadway was on the territory of the Central Rhodopes region. South of Philippopolis it passed along Chernatisa mountain ridge and through the settlements of the villages Churen and Tumrush. In Krustiloto area, Tumrush settlement, the layout passed by an ancient fortress which P.Deliradev classifies as a roadside tower. [3]. Further to the south, the Central Trans-Rhodopean road passed along the east foot of Modur peak and through Mitnitsata area and reached up to where the chalet of Persenk is today and through the settlements near the villages of Lilkovo and Orehovo, Assenovgrad region. There are well preserved parts of stone pavement of the road near the village of Orehovo, which today are being used as hiking routes. After the chalet of Persenk the Roman road continued south slightly uphill to the peak of Persenk reaching Mezargidik area. In this three – kilometre long section, its pavement is very well preserved (Fig. 2). From Mezargidik the road continued south to Gluhite kamuni (the deaf stones) area; about 3 km east, in Zaburdska chuka area architectural remains of a late Antiquity Thracian sanctuary have been uncovered. [4]. Further south, the Roman road reached the resort of Pamporovo. Due to intense construction work in Pamporovo in the past years, it is hard to find traces of the road there. According to D. Damyanov, there was a deviation of the Central Trans Rhodopean Roman road from Pamporovo, leading to the area of today's villages of Stoykite, Stikul, Solishta and Gela to the west. [5]. After Pamporovo, the road continued south – towards Smolyanski

ezero area and the north outskirts of Smolyan. Before entering Smolyan, the Roman road passed by the late Antiquity fortress in Turluka area. [6].

Most probably, the Roman road in Smolyan crossed the Cherna River over the so called Beyski Bridge. Till the end of the 20th century some of its stone pavement was preserved. After Beyski Bridge the road meandered up Kaynadina ridge; continued along its crest to the west and reached the foot of Izvorets peak. At this point the road turned sharp round and changed direction – to the south. At the peak of Izvorets there used to be a deviation from the Central Road which led to the village of Mogilitza to the west and from there – to the south - to the spring of the Arda River. In 1706 the French traveller Paul Lucas passed along the deviation through the village of Mogilitza and gave a detailed account of it [7].

The Central Trans Rhodopean road continued south after the peak of Izvorets towards the village of Turyan, Smolyan region. Its layout coincided with the modern road to the village of Turyan, as, due to the topography of the area, it is the only possible route through the mountain to the village. After Turyan the road continued south, passed through the hamlet of Milkovo and headed towards the village of Koshnitsa, Smolyan region. In the segment between the villages of Turyan and Koshnitsa there are some well-preserved remains of stone pavement of the road and the curbs defining the roadbed (Fig. 3). The width of the road in the above mentioned section was about 2 m.

The road went down towards the valley of the Arda River and probably crossed the river along the modern bridge at the village of Koshnitsa. [8]. The topography of the region shows that it is the best spot for building a bridge over the Arda River which, undoubtedly was used by the Romans as well. The road passed through the southeast outskirts of the village of Koshnitsa and further, to the south went up the mountain ridge of Kom peak. About 300 m east of the layout of the road at Koshnitsa there was an early Byzantine fortress from the times of the Emperor Justinian I (527-565) [9]. The fact of the existence of the fortress at this place comes to prove that the Roman road was used between 5th and the 6th century and that there was a local side road towards the fortress.

The Roman road continued to the South, passed west of the peak of Karaburun and reached the southwest foot of Kom peak. The width of the road was about 2 m (Fig. 4) [10]. Medium-sized and big flat stones laid with the broader side, were used for paving it. On both sides the roadway was defined and stabilized by bigger stones laid along the length of the road, forming a curb. From the south foot of Kom peak the road changed direction to southwest, after 1.2 km, it again changes direction and continues to the South reaching Sedlovinata (the saddle) area where it crossed Bulgarian – Greek border and entered the territory of today's Republic of Greece. In the section of the road between the south foot of Kom peak and Sedlovinata area, the stone pavement of the

road is well preserved. On its surface one can clearly see the massive stones forming the roadway and the stone curb defining it.

Archaeological excavations in the region where the Roman road passed through show that on Greek territory, it continued to follow the slightly sloping mountain to the southwest using as a starting point the road station of Topirus. The station was the point where the two roads – the Central Trans Rhodopean Roman road and the main Roman road – Via Egnatia - connected [11].

The fact that the Central Trans Rhodopean Roman road is well-preserved gave us the opportunity to walk along the whole road bed and to find out what techniques were used for its construction. It was built according to all the requirements for Roman mountain road building – covered with strong stone pavement. Following the differences in the terrain and the difficulties in overcoming different mountain slopes, the pavement was built in different ways. The regular width of the road was 2 meters. In the higher mountain regions, where the terrain allowed the tracing of long straight sections, the width reached 2.8m-3m. Examples of the above have been registered at the foot of Persenk peak [12]. The overall pattern of laying the pavement was the same – using big stones with dimensions up to 0.4m-0.6m. Most of the paving stones were laid on top of a levelled layer consisting of soil and small stones (Fig. 5). On both sides the roadway was defined by huge stones forming a curb whose function was not only to line the road bed, but also to fortify it especially on the sloping side.

The steep sections of the road were corrected by building serpentines (sharp turns). An example of this along the Roman road is found in the high South parts of the Rhodopes, Chernatitsa ridge. In order to prevent slipping of the serpentines along the width of the roadway flat stones were laid, with a sticking edge 0.05m high. Such building can be seen along the roadbed of the West Trans-Rhodopean road in Markovo kale area, north-east of Dospat [13] and along some mountain Roman roads in the territory of ex Republic of Yugoslavia [14].

The complex analysis of the finding from the exploration of the Central Trans Rhodopean Roman road shows that, starting from Philippopolis, it crossed the Rhodopes along their highest ridges. Not paying attention to the difficult to pass mountain terrain, the Romans remained true to their basic principle in road building – to connect two points of departure with the shortest possible shortcut. In truth, the Central Trans Rhodopean Roman road is the shortest land thoroughfare connecting Philippopolis with Via Egnatia at the big road station Topirus. It was the main purpose of its building. As a separate land thoroughfare the Central Trans Rhodopean Roman road can be defined as the Roman road Philippopolis – Topirus.

As to dating the tracing of the road Philippopolis – Topirus, I presume that as a direct land thoroughfare through the Rhodope mountain connecting the biggest city of Thrace

province – Philippopolis with Via Egnatia, it was laid with strong stone pavement during the first years after the conquest of Thrace and turning it into a Roman province. In this respect the Roman road Philippopolis – Topirus can be defined as a continuation of the Roman road Oescus – Philippopolis [15].

The East Trans Rhodopean Roman road connected the main city in the province of Thrace – Philippopolis, via Topolovski Pass, with the interior of the Rhodope Mountain and the Arda River valley. The main reason for its building was the rich ore deposits in the Rhodopes. The road was traced along the flank, easier route through the mountain ridges Dobrostan, Krushevka Mountain and Radyuva Mountain situated on the territory of Central Rhodopes. Its pavement is best preserved along the northwest slope of Studenets peak in Radyuva Mountain (Fig. 6) [16].

The exploring of the East Trans Rhodopean Roman road shows that it followed the changes of the terrain it was passing through and was dependent on convenient supply of stones used for its paving. Flat stones were used for paving roads in mountainous areas and they could be found everywhere in the Rhodope Mountain.

Based on data from historical sources and archaeological findings on ancient roads in West Rhodopes, I have the reason to believe that the East Trans Rhodopean Roman road was built on top of already existing (before Roman times) roadbed with direction Abdera- Elidzhe Pass- Radyuva Mountain- Krushevka Mountain- Topolovski Pass- the Hebros River valley. That was the shortest land thoroughfare from the North Aegean coasts through the Rhodopes to Thrace. Probably that route was used by Alexander III of Macedon during his march of 335 BC from Amphipolis through the Rhodopes to Hemus [17].

The East Trans Rhodopean Roman road was used during medieval times as well [18]. It used to be the most important and shortest land connection from the White Sea through Radyuva Mountain, the Yugovska River valley and the Chepelarska River valley to the medieval city of Estanimak. Paul Luca and Auguste Viquesnel travelled along that road during their expedition for exploring the Rhodopes region [19].

The West Trans Rhodopean Roman road, like the rest of the Roman roads in the Rhodopes, was not marked in any of the known Roman guidebooks. Evidence of its existence as a separate land thoroughfare, connecting Philippopolis (through Besapara road station) and the Rhodopes with the Mesta River valley and the North Aegean coast can only be found in the relatively well-preserved sections of the stone pavement of the road and the uncovered archaeological findings and architectural remains of ancient settlements built along its roadbed [20]. Most of the road passes through the Central Rhodopes area. As a whole, it was directed northeast-southwest. Its stone pavement is still well-preserved in Markovo kale area situated 3 km northeast of Dospat and 5 km northwest of the village of Zmeitsa (Fig. 7).

The fieldwork observations carried out south and southwest of Dospat proved that the West Trans Rhodopean Roman road continued to the southwest towards the valley of the Mesta River and the Roman city Nicopolis-ad-Nestum. The way the stone pavement was laid as well as the width of the roadway of the West Trans Rhodopean Roman road is identical with those of the Central and East roads. Probably the stone pavement of all three roads was laid at the same time – the first few years after the conquest of the province of Thrace by the Romans.

The West Trans Rhodopean Roman road was most intensely used after the beginning of the 4th century when the Roman city of Nicopolis-ad-Nestum was flourishing. During that time the West Trans Rhodopean Roman road as a separate thoroughfare can be labelled as Roman road Philippopolis- Besapara-Nicopolis-ad-Nestum- Philippi.

According to the attached classification of the Roman roads within the general Balkan road network the three roads described above can be defined as ‘main Trans-Rhodopean Roman roads’ which are a subgroup of the secondary Roman roads [21]. This fact comes to prove the strategic position of the Central Rhodopes within the system of the Roman and early Byzantine road network.

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Resume

Since ancient times the Central Rhodopes region has played an important role in the development of the economic relations on the Balkans due to the fact that the shortest route between the Thracian lands and the North Aegean coast passed through it. In Roman times the Central Rhodopes region was even more important as the three biggest roads passing through the Rhodopes had been traced on its territory: the Central, the East and the West Roads. They connected the capital city of the Roman province Thrace – Philippopolis with the big cities situated on the North Aegean Coast on the one hand and the major Roman road – Via Egnatia- on the other.

The Roman roads through the Rhodope Mountains are the subject matter of a number of books and printed material. Luckily it is in the Rhodope Mountains that the greatest number of well-preserved sectors from the roadways of the Roman roads can be found which give the chance of many authors to study them in depth.

Besides the above mentioned important Roman roads, there existed in the mountain lots of smaller roads of local importance. The objective of this paper is to describe the layout of the main Trans-Rhodopean Roman roads, the building technique used and their classification. The paper also mentions the settlements from Antiquity and Late Antiquity, by which the roads had passed. It gives a clearer idea of the ‘whole picture’, of the characteristics of the Central Rhodopes regions in the system of the Roman road network.

The Central Trans-Rhodopean Roman road was the shortest land thoroughfare which, in Roman times connected Philippopolis with Via Egnatia and the cities along the North Aegean coast. It is the only one of the three main roads passing through the Rhodopes whose layout was wholly on the territory of the Central Rhodopes region. South of Philippopolis it passed along Chernatisa mountain ridge and heading all the way to the south reached the present Bulgarian-Greek border. From there it continued to the big road station Topirus situated on Via Egnatia west of today’s city of Xanthi (Republic of Greece). The Central Trans-Rhodopean Roman road as a separate land thoroughfare can be defined as the Roman road Philippopolis – Topirus. Its laying with strong stone pavement was done in the early years of the Roman conquest of Thrace (when Thrace was turned into a Roman province).

The East Trans-Rhodopean Roman road connected the main city of Thrace province – Philippopolis through the Topolovski pass with the interior of the Rhodope Mountains and the Arda River valley. The main reason why it was built was the rich ore deposits in the Rhodopes. The road was traced along the flank, easier route through the mountain ridges Dobrostan, Krushevka Mountain and Radyuva Mountain situated on the territory of Central Rhodopes. After the village of Momchilovtsi, Smolyan region, it headed east towards the lower stream of the Arda River and Edirne plain.

Research and explorations of the East Trans-Rhodopean Roman road show that it followed the line of the terrains it passed through and was built near places where stones for the pavement of its roadway could easily be found.

The West Trans-Rhodopean road, like the other roads in the Rhodope Mountains, was not marked in any of the known Roman guidebooks. Evidence of its existence as a separate land thoroughfare, connecting Philippopolis (through Besapara road station) and the Rhodopes with the Mesta River valley and the North Aegean coast can only be found in the relatively well-preserved sections of the stone pavement of the road and the uncovered archaeological findings and architectural remains of ancient settlements built along its roadbed. Its overall direction was northeast-southwest. The way the stone pavement was laid as well as the width of the roadway of the West Trans Rhodopean Roman road is identical with those of the Central and East roads. Probably the stone pavement of all three roads was laid at the same time – the first few years after the conquest of the province of Thrace by the Romans.

I have good reasons to believe that the West Trans-Rhodopean Roman road was functioning most intensely at the beginning of the 4th century when the Roman city Nicopolis-ad-Nestum was flourishing. At that time in Itinerarium Burdigalense (the Burdigal guidebook) for the first time the name of the station Besapara appeared which was the point south of which the Roman roadway to the Rhodope Mountain deviated. During that time the West Trans-Rhodopean Roman Road as a separate land thoroughfare could be defined as the road Philippopolis- Besapara-Nicopolis- ad-Nestum- Philippi.

Annotations:

Fig. 1 Map of the main Trans Rhodopean Roman roads (by M.Madzharov)

Fig. 2 Section of the roadbed of the Central Trans Rhodopean Roman Road in Golyam Persenk peak area (Photo by D.Damyanov)

Fig. 3 Section of the roadbed of the Central Trans Rhodopean Roman road south of the village of Turyan (Photo by M.Madzharov)

Fig.4 Section of preserved stone pavement of the roadbed of the Central Trans Rhodopean Roman road along the north-west slope of Kom peak (Photo by D.Damyanov)

Fig.5. Outline of the Central Trans Rhodopean Roman road near Persenk peak (according to M.Madzharov)

Fig.6. Stone pavement of the East Trans Rhodopean Roman road in the west foot of Studenets peak (Photo by M.Madzharov)

Fig.7. Preserved section of the West Trans Rhodopean Roman road in Markovo kale area (Photo by M.Madzharov)