



The most significant values
of the cultural and natural heritage

THE MEDIEVAL FORTRESS OF ISAR-SHTIP

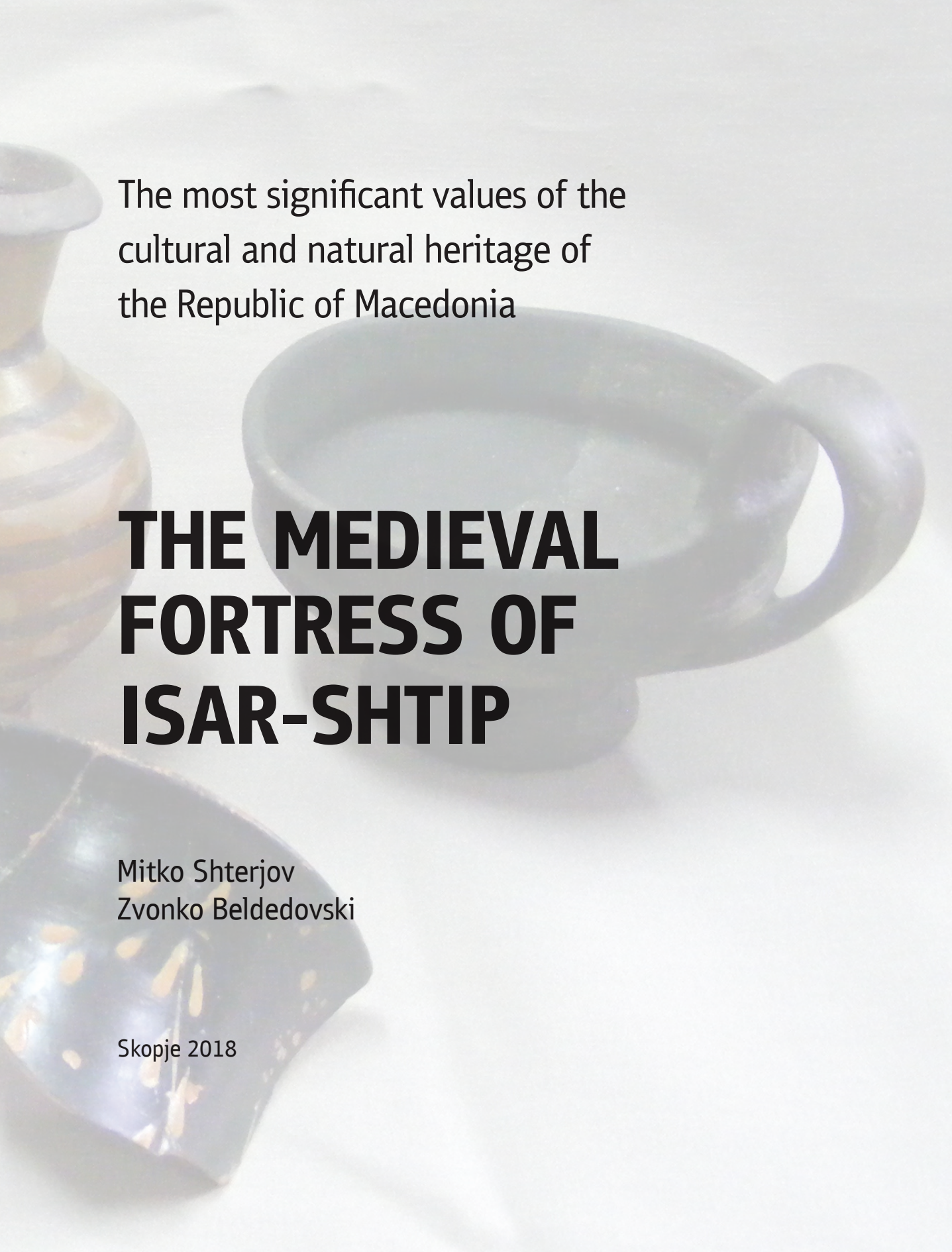


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The background of the cover features a faded, high-angle photograph of several ancient ceramic vessels. On the left, a portion of a vase with horizontal bands of light and dark glaze is visible. In the center, a shallow, wide bowl or dish with a single handle is prominent. In the bottom left corner, there is a fragment of a dark-colored vessel decorated with small, light-colored spots. The overall image has a soft, ethereal quality with a light greyish-blue tint.

The most significant values of the
cultural and natural heritage of
the Republic of Macedonia

THE MEDIEVAL FORTRESS OF ISAR-SHTIP

Mitko Shterjov
Zvonko Beldedovski

Skopje 2018

FOREWORD

MACEDONIAN CULTURAL AND NATURAL HERITAGE

Throughout the course of history until present days, Macedonian cultural and natural heritage has never been of greater interest to the national and international public as it is today.

Its presentation afore the general public with dedicated promotional publications is one of the tasks of the Directorate for Protection of Cultural Heritage, which deems to showcase the rich treasures of our historical past and the preserved natural landscapes.

Ever since the Palaeolithic and the Neolithic, the Bronze Age and the Iron Age, Antiquity and the Medieval period, all of the great achievements of the civilizations which have dwelt in this land, have been researched and presented for the readers in our country and worldwide.

This edition is a continuation of our intention to widen the access to the cultural and natural heritage for all. In this manner, we believe, everyone can come closer to the significant archaeological monuments, the sacral heritage, the old urban ensembles and the specific natural areas.

By presenting its heritage, the Republic of Macedonia offers its contribution towards the heritage of the world, since these publications aim to preserve the important moments of our history for the future generations.

Eleonora Petrova Mitevska, PhD

THE MEDIEVAL FORTRESS OF ISAR-SHTIP

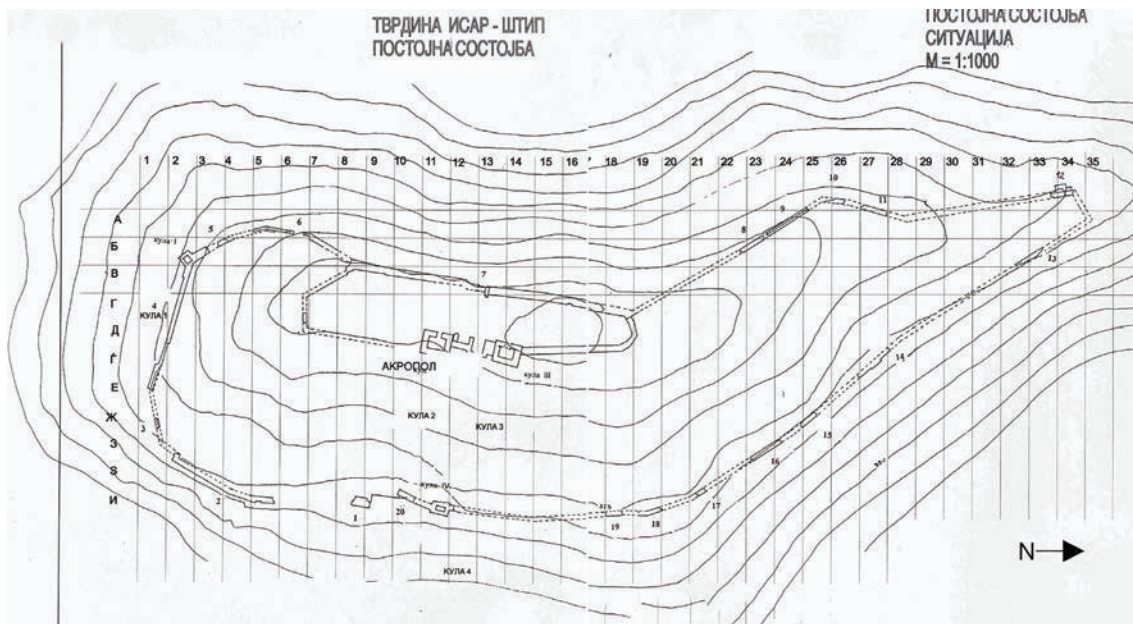
The cultural history of Shtip and the Isar fortress are an integral part of the general cultural and historical evolution of Macedonia and the Bregalnica Region, where numerous settlements and material artefacts from the Neolithic to the medieval period have been registered. Archaeological findings suggest that in this region many civilizations reflected the character of their peoples whose cultures interacted and clashed, thereby creating new cultural values. Every civilization continued to build over the ruins of the one it had destroyed, or it complemented it in its own way, using the old foundations of collapsed buildings, as well as architectural and artistic achievements.

The Isar fortress, the medieval settlement and the fortified medieval city of Shtip, are located on a dominant hill between the rivers Bregalnica and Otinja. The fortress extends in a north-south direction at a length of about 350 m, rising for about 100-150 m above the riverbed of Bregalnica. Erosive forces have disconnected the hill by means of deep gorges; to the north and west is the river Bregalnica, while the dry ravine of the river Otinja is in the south. In the feudalistic period, when the need for effective defence and protection was necessary, this natural position served as an advantage instigating the establishment of a medieval city in the likes of Markovi Kuli (Marko's towers) (Prilep), Samoilova Tvrđina (Samoil's Fortress) (Ohrid), Kale (Fortress) (Skopje), Carevi Kuli (Tsar's towers) (Strumica) and others, at the highest parts of the hill.

The crossroads located at the base of the fortress increases the significance of this location. The Bregalnica Valley represents a very significant artery connecting the northern and eastern Balkans since the earliest times of human existence. The Bregalnica Valley acquires a particularly significant role in Roman times. According to *Tabula Peutingeriana*, a map of the ancient road network from the end of the 4th century, the diagonal road from the highway Via Egnatia, passed through the Bregalnica Valley. This road connected the city of Stobi to Kjustendil (Pautalia), and further to (Serdika), present-day Sofia, at the mouth of Crna Reka (Erigon) into Vardar (Axios), passing by Astibus (Shtip) and Tranupara. This road was connected to the branch Stobi - Heraclea Lyncestis (near Bitola), due to which contacts with the great Roman road Via Egnatia were established. It also connected the city of Thessalonica to Pautalia and Serdika. The road Stobi -Pautalia was a point where other, smaller roads converged, or diverged, in the direction of Radovish, Strumica, Ovche Pole and the upper reaches of Bregalnica through the Maleshevo mountains towards the valley of the river Struma. The road Stobi - Pautalia - Serdika is of great economic and strategic importance, which considerably increased with the development of mining in the regions of Zletovo, Kratovo, Vinica and Shtip.

During the period of Late Antiquity, in the Bregalnica Region was created a large network of

fortresses and settlements including Bargala, Krupishte, Morodvis, Vinichko Kale and Creshka. Most of them continued to exist throughout the Middle Ages, as well. This period is characterized by major ethnic changes and realignment of the entire Balkan Peninsula. Major changes were especially evident with the relocation of the Slavs in the late 6th and 7th centuries. Past research supported by documented scientific findings suggested that the invasions of the Slavs of the Early Byzantine Kingdom were characterized by devastation and destruction of the towns and settlements. Subsequently, the Slavs formed new dwellings and small settlements over the Late Antique and Early Byzantine cities and in some of them fortified medieval towns appeared later. The Early Mediaeval Slavic settlement, which later grew into the organized and fortified city of Shtip, was established over the ruins of the ancient Astibus and the Byzantine Stipion.



Plan 1 - the Isar fortress

The medieval history of the city that starts with the settlement of the Slavs in this area is followed by violent events. In the 9th century, during the reign of the Bulgarian Khan Persian and his successor Boris (852-889), Macedonia, including the Bregalnica Region, falls under Bulgarian rule. In the period from 976 to 1014, the medieval fortress i.e. the city of Shtip, is part of Samoil's (Samuel's) state. The period from the fall of Samoil until the grand expansion of the Serbian state in the south toward Macedonia, when Shtip remains under Serbian rule for a longer period of time, is characterized by frequent changes of rulers: Byzantium until 1197, Bulgaria until 1207, Strez, the Macedonian ruler and ruler of Prosek, until 1214, the despotate of Epirus until 1216, Bulgaria until 1246, the Empire of Nicaea until 1254 and so on. During this period in Macedonia there were frequent intrusions by the Pechenegs, Cumans and Normans. During the reign of King Milutin (1282-1321), Shtip falls under Serbian rule and becomes a border area of the Serbian and Byzantine states. However, after a short period of time, it falls under Byzantine rule once again. During the reign of Stephen Dechanski (1321-1331), the Serbian feudal lords annexed Shtip to the Serbian state. The protosebastos Hrelja was the feudal lord and ruler of Shtip at that time. After the withdrawal of Hrelja, Jovan Oliver ruled the city. From 1335 until the arrival



External tower - east entrance to the fortress



Main Tower "donjon" - view from the east



Main Tower "donjon" - view from the west

of the Turks in Eastern Macedonia, this area was ruled by the brothers Konstantin and Dragash Dejanovikj.

The archaeological explorations conducted in the area of the Isar fortress before 2008 are modest. In 1979 excavation probing was conducted in the area from the acropolis section of the fortress to the west defensive rampart. During the excavations, were discovered the remains of an older wall under the foundations. In 1998/99 were performed conservation interventions and protective archaeological research of the main tower. This research led to the discovery of the entrance to the northern half of the acropolis and part of the tower of the northern half of the eastern wall. The systematic archaeological excavations carried out at different periods, from 2008 to 2011, almost completely uncovered and helped document the entire preserved architecture. At the site of Stara Klanica, in the north-western



Tower and entrance to the northern half of the acropolis



South entrance to the acropolis

area of the fortress, was discovered a medieval church and a necropolis with enclosure rampart walls, whereas in the west area of the site Chekichan Skala was discovered the legendary tunnel under Isar, at the level of the riverbed.

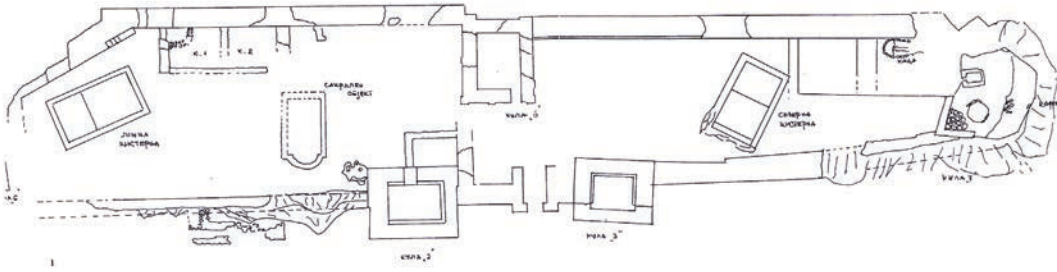
The medieval city of Shtip, as well as other cities – fortifications, consisted of a fortified part - an interior city (frurion), and an exterior city (amboria).

The highest parts of the hill at Isar are surrounded by wall sections which virtually follow the surface, extending on almost the same isohypse, with a height difference between the western and



Southern half of the acropolis and a single-nave church

eastern side of about 15 m. The southern and northern halves of the fortress are distinctive in the manner of their fortification. The southern section was built of wide and solid walls which are drawn into one another in the south-western part, uniting into a whole. The central part is best preserved. The protruding northern section has an extended wall, in the shape of a wedge, preserved at several points. At the tip of its northernmost part, where access is easiest, is located an auxiliary entrance. The main entrance is located on the east



Plan 2 – the acropolis at Isar

side, near a partially preserved massive tower. The entire area within the city walls is 16.600 m². The highest parts of the Isar elevation are surrounded by wall sections, forming a medieval fortress with a main entrance on the eastern side and an auxiliary entrance on the northern side. The most fortified and safest section of the fortress is located at the acropolis of the hill covering an area of 1705 m². Here is located the main tower “donjon”, the best preserved building of the overall architecture of the fortress with dimensions of 10 x 8 m and at a height of the eastern wall over 12 m. This building was accessed from the west side by means of a high wooden staircase. Directly, i.e. north, of the main tower there is another tower measuring 7.50 x 7.10 m, and between the two towers there is an entrance that leads into the northern wing of the acropolis. At the



Southern tank



Foundation remains of residential buildings



Tea pots

Plates

space in front of the south wall of the main tower "donjon" are located remains of the entrance to the southern wing of the acropolis. The relatively well-preserved mortar base at the entrance, with the remains of the basis - door carrier, suggests that the length of the overall staircase of about 8 m was executed by means of a compact lime mortar. The width of the gate, which amounted to 3 m, was not entirely preserved. These data, with complete certainty, confirm the existence of a notable southern entrance to the acropolis. In the southwest direction, near the south gate, was located part of a foundation base of a small single-nave church (the apse of the church and part of the north and south walls). At the space between the entrance and the apse of the church were discovered burial structures, predominantly registered east of the foundation remnants of the single-nave church, as well as in the area of the entrance to the southern wing of the acropolis. Some of the graves placed over the fundamental base of the rampart, as well as at the



Arrows, a knife, fibulae, a spur



Internal tower



North wing of the acropolis

entrance itself, suggest that the sacral building - the church and the necropolis- originate from the period after the Ottoman conquest of the fortress in the late 14th century.

The southern wall is composed of two sections – a south-western and a southern section. In the mid-section of the rampart was built a rectangular tower projected toward the exterior. Most of the tower base is located under the foundations of the existing building of MRTV (Macedonian Radio and Television) placed on the acropolis. At the area



Pots and pots with a handle



Pitchers



Northern tank

of the southern half of the acropolis, is located the south tank. This structure was built deep into the rocky soil. It is located immediately in front of the present-day buildings of MRTV with a north-south orientation. Northwest of the tank, along the western fortification wall, were discovered partial foundation remains of several building structures - medieval houses built of stone and mud. The architecture of the building structures was destroyed due to incompetent excavations from the past. Through these structures, in a northern direction, passes one of the lightning conductor strips of the

MRTV building, causing further damage to the buildings. In these building structures, as well as at the area of the southern sector, were registered parts of hearths, ash and coal, fragmented hearths and luxury table pottery from the medieval and early Ottoman period.

The western rampart is divided into two sections. The first, directed to the southeast, becomes the southern rampart of the acropolis, whereas the other, directed towards the south, continues as part of the western rampart of the fortress. The south wing of the western wall of the acropolis ends with an inner tower in the north measuring 10 x 7.50 m. Part of the western wall of the fortress was used as the western wall of the tower. The tower is accessed from the east. It was built of crushed granite stone and lime mortar. In certain sections of the walls were embedded fragments of construction brick and tegulae. On the exterior, the walls end in prominent decorative grooves - pilasters.

Opposite the inner tower, in the central part of the eastern rampart, at the area near the north wall of the main tower "donjon", there is a partition wall that extends to the west. Between this partition wall and the inner tower in the centre of the acropolis, there is an entrance for communication between the southern and northern part of the acropolis. The acropolis is practically divided into two parts - a north and a south wing, divided by the main tower "donjon."

At the wide area between the inner tower and the northern tank, most likely, in the northern half of the acropolis, was located the presumed



Jugs, a baking vessel, a plate

palace of the mansion. Significant visible material remains have not been preserved. The only traces of this presumed facility were the numerous horizontal holes in the western fortification section where wooden beams were inserted to serve as horizontal carriers of the structure of the building. A western wall of the palace was used as a part of the western fortification section. The south wall of the building was probably the north wall of the inner tower. At the space immediately in front of the tank



A round structure – bath tub

were recorded foundation remains of a wide wall built of stone and mortar, which was connected to the western fortification section at a right angle. These foundation remains probably belonged to the northern wall of the presumed palace. The numerous finds consisting of tiny fragments of luxury enamelled table pottery, made in sgraffito technique, as well as fragments of flower pots, attest to the existence of these types of buildings.

Near this facility was located the northern tank. It was built of the same material as the southern tank. In the north-western half of the tank was discovered a brick floor of baked brick from a recent period. A significant number of cartridge cases and ammunition packs - pieces of chargers of firearms were found in the tank. These finds clearly indicate that the facility had a secondary



The church of St. Michael the Archangel – Fitija (Sv. Arhangel Mihail)

use in more recent times, serving as a temporary residence to military units during the Balkan wars and the First World War, and possibly later. A large amount of fragmented pottery typical of Late Antiquity and the Late Middle Ages was also recorded in the tank.

At the area beside the west wall, north of the tank, is located a rectangular chamber, probably of a commercial use. Here was recorded a considerable amount of pottery, including fragmented and partially preserved fireplace pottery: single-handle pots, parts of baking vessels, jugs and small pithoi, as well as a great amount of luxury fragmented table pottery. Inside the rectangular chamber there was a small structure, a bath tub, with a round base, lined by means of vertically placed rectangular stone slabs. Fragments of a ceramic pipe, a water tubule, were preserved from the south side of the pool, opposite the tank, which was probably part of the plumbing installation for the water supply from the tank to the tub.



Foundation remains of the church of St. Vlasie, north-western suburbium of Isar

The north rampart has a three-sided i.e. polygonal ending on the exterior. Here was located the inner defensive tower – the north tower of the acropolis.

The lower town was situated on the slopes of the eastern, south-eastern and north-western base



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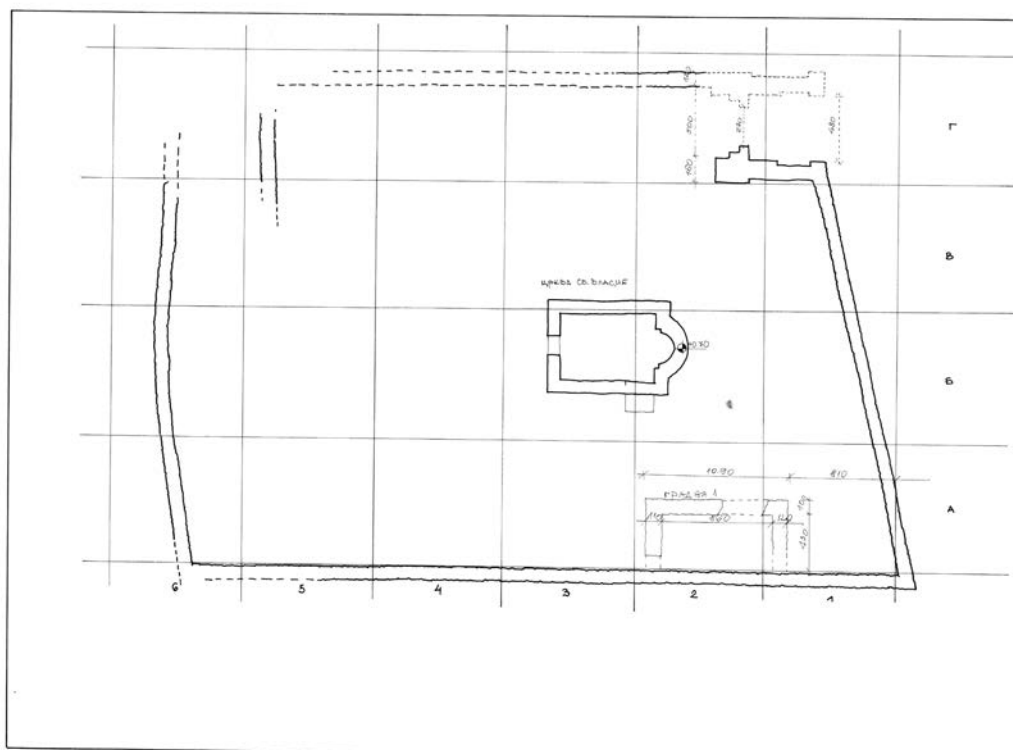


4



Macedonian - Hellenistic pottery, 3rd -1st century BC

A bronze earring interwoven with silver wire



Plan of the site of Stara Klanica - Church of St. Vlasie

of Isar. The flattened plateau in the northern part of the eastern slope of Isar, surrounding the church of St. Michael the Archangel (Sv. Arhangel Mihail), represents the core of the lower town, and subsequently came to represent the old part of the modern town. The northern ridge of Isar is the mildest and most accessible part of the fortress. Here was also located the auxiliary entrance to the fortress where traces of the old road can still be noticed, widened and carved in the granite stones, as well as square and rectangular depressions in the rocky slope - remnants of medieval dwellings.

In the northwest suburbium of the fortress, on the flattened plateau above the riverbed of Bregalnica, at the site of Stara Klanica, in a space enclosed by a rampart, were placed the foundation remains of a small mediaeval church from the 14th century; the church of St. Vlasie, known for its medieval records. The church was single-nave, with a dome and paintings in the Cyrillic alphabet, as attested by the research finds. The church measured 10.60 x 6.90 m to the eastern half of the south wall, with an additionally built section on the exterior representing a platform. In the western half of the naos was recorded a pillar, probably a remnant of a dome carrier. The southern pillar is missing. The floor was built of stone slabs over a mortar base. The church was painted with frescoes, as attested by the large number of fragments of fresco mortar, which also contained Cyrillic letters. To the east and southeast of the church was located a necropolis with finds typical of the Late Bronze - Early Iron Age, the Roman and medieval times. This site also yielded the Macedonian-Hellenistic finds from the 3rd to the 1st century BC: pottery decorated with the technique *West slope*, cups, plates, unguentaria, etc. A typical find is a bronze pyramid earring adorned with rows of interwoven silver wire ending in a ring, characteristic of the 10th and



11th century.

In the 1380s, the powerful Ottoman army conquered the well-established cities and fortresses. The heavily fortified cities and fortresses could not be easily conquered, provoking fierce and extended battles for their conquest. This was also attested to in folk traditions. One such tradition was recorded by the Turkish traveller from the 17th century, Evliya Celebi, specifically linked to the city of Shtip. According to Evliya Celebi, during the reign of the sultan Murad I (1360-1389), the city was surrounded by a large Turkish army, but the siege was unsuccessful. After the unsuccessful attempts to conquer the city, the soldiers who were located in the trenches near Bregalnica, from the west side of the fortress, noticed that under the fortress, beside the riverbed, ducks came out, and, afterward, people of the city's crew, as well. The captured defenders of the city revealed the secret, and the Turkish

A medieval tunnel - view from the west



An entrance with a staircase into the tunnel

troops passed through the tunnel and, surprisingly, conquered the fortress. Although these and similar tales seem unoriginal and unreliable, in the case of the legend for the conquest of the Shtip Fortress, there was a coincidental match of the legend with the discovery of the tunnel in the western base of Isar.

The interior of the tunnel has remarkable dimensions. The cross section of the rock is 2.50 m high, with a width of 1.60 m. The ceiling is vaulted, whereas the floor is executed by means of a relatively well-carved staircase which follows the inclination of the surface toward the fortress. The tunnel was recorded in a length of 30 m and continues in the deep and narrow passage toward the fortress. Middle Age and Late Antique pottery fragments were recorded in the tunnel, as well as smaller fractions of mixed osteological material (human and animal). The tunnel was probably built in Antiquity and was also used in the Middle Ages.

The period of construction of the fortress cannot be reliably determined. However, the material artefacts, as well as the historical data, indicate that the fortress and the lower town were constructed, rebuilt and developed in phases. The upper sections of the preserved present-day ramparts of the fortress were mostly built in the 14th century.

The western base of Isar and the site of Star Konak, with the highest part of the hill which holds the remains of the medieval fortress, represent the area where the ancient settlement of Astibus was located. As a confirmation of this stand a large number of finds concentrated mostly in the eastern foothills of Isar, at the narrow area around the church of St. Michael the Archangel. Processed



Warrior's or emperor's torso

stone and marble blocks were embedded into the walls of the fortress. During the occasional excavations performed for the construction of residential buildings, many ancient marble sculptures including the head of an Ephebus, part of a horseman statue, a naked torso of Aphrodite, a statue of Nike - Athena, and others, were discovered. In the structure of the church of St. Michael the Archangel were embedded several spolia of ancient buildings, including a metope and a capital and two columns - pillars of an early Christian basilica. In the surrounding wall of the staircase of the house was embedded an ancient marble head. Here was also discovered the marble torso of a warrior's, or possibly an emperor's, statue from the Roman period found at the foothills of Isar. A significant confirmation that an urban settlement existed here in Antiquity is attested to by the remains of the Roman aqueduct in the area of Kjemmer. The economic growth of the city is confirmed by the discovery of mining remnants from Roman times at the site of Trgovski centar (Commercial centre), where mineral resources were exploited by means of horizontal mining galleries, trenches and pits. According to the analysis of the archaeological material, the settlement reached its peak in the late 2nd and early 3rd century. The period of Late Antiquity is characterized by major ethnic changes and the realignment of the entire Balkan Peninsula. Building additions, pottery fragments and tegulae pieces – tiles, typical of Late Antiquity- were registered at the Isar fortress, indicating that there was a Late Antique refugium in the wider surrounding area.

The Early Middle Ages i.e. the end of the 6th, 7th and 8th centuries, which is also considered as the period of settlement and stabilizing of the Slavs in the Balkans, is still ambiguous and insufficiently researched. Regarding this period, a small number of sites with individual finds, including the area of Shtip which was attested to by several finds characteristic of that time, were registered in the Bregalnica Region. Among them were recorded fragments of a larger handmade ceramic bowl, probably an urn, containing burned human bones and charred wood. This was part of an Early Slavic funeral ritual, characteristic of the Slavs before receiving Christianity, which may indicate the sprouts of the earliest Slavic settlement in this area. The first Slavic dwellings were earthen and semi-subterranean dwellings, supported by earth, and with light overhead roofing structures. That was the main reason for their disappearance from the terrain, and therefore presents an issue in the study of the ancient material culture.

The period of the existence of the Macedonian (Samoil's) state (969-1014) marks the intensive establishment of cities and fortresses. This was the period when the Shtip fortress was built, or rebuilt. At the time of Samoil and his successors, Shtip had already developed into a large urban settlement, as attested to in the records of Jovan Skilica who mentions the city in 1018, when Basil II was welcomed by the residents of Shtip (Stipeon) with prayers and hymns.

The notable artefacts that confirm the period of existence of the fortress are numerous ceramic finds, as well as several recorded numismatic finds: a coin of Theodosius II (402-450), Marcian (450-457), Justinian I (527-565), two bronze coins of John Tzimiskis (969-976), eleven silver denarii of Stefan IV Dushan minted after 1346, and several coins that bear witness to the events of Ottoman rule, as well as a token of the 17th century (1690-1719) Roman-German Empire, several gold coins of the Austrian ruler Leopold I (1657-1705), the Venetian Doge - Alvise IV Mocenigo (1763-1778) and the last Venetian Doge - Ludovico Manin (1789-1797), and two coins from the Turkish period of Mahmud II (1808-1839) and Abdulmejid (1839-1861). Other characteristic metal finds from the acropolis of Isar include: rings, fibulae, knives, spurs, arrows, etc..

Shtip reaches its highest economic, cultural and spiritual growth as a mediaeval city in the 14th



Gold coins

century under the rule of the Serbian feudal state. This period is characterized by significant and intense sacral building activities. Many sacred buildings were established including: St. Michael the Archangel (fitija), the Sifieva church dedicated to St. Nicholas (Sv. Nikola), the church of St. John the Baptist (Sv. Jovan Krstiteľ), the church of St. Vlasie, the St. Ascension church (Sv. Spas) and the church of St. Archangel Glavatov. The founders and builders of nearly all these churches are well-known. The very existence of representative sacred buildings from the 14th century centred around the fortress are an indication of the size and power of the city of Shtip in the 14th century.

Firstly, the most representative sacred building is the monastery church St. Michael the Archangel, built sometime before 1332 with Protosebastos Hrelja, the city governor at the time, as the donor. It is located under the fortress, on the eastern side of Isar.

High above the rocks on the south side of Isar, opposite the mouth of the river Otinja into Bregalnica, was built a small single-nave church dedicated to St. John the Baptist. This facility was built and the fresco painted by the ruler Ivanko Probishtipovich before 1350.

On the left bank of the river Otinja, on the flattened rocky plateau, in 1369 was built the St. Ascension church (Sv. Spas) by Duke Dimitrie. In the area of Star Konak is located the church of Sv. Archangel Glavatov, which has been partially preserved. It was built in 1378, and has been recently reconstructed. The Sifieva church dedicated to St. Nicholas was built around 1341. No material remains have been discovered given that the present-day church of St. Nicholas was built at this place in the first half of the 19th century.

The church dedicated to St. Vlasie, mentioned by the sebastos bishop, built before 1377 by the Shtip governor Stanislav, does not exist. However, by means of recent archaeological excavations on the north-western side, at the foothill of Isar, were discovered foundation remains of a single-nave sacred facility, with remnants of fresco painting, assumed to be from the church of St. Vlasie.

According to a popular legend, at the site of the present-day Husa Medin Pasha Mosque, was located the church of St. Elijah (Sv. Ilija). Historical sources mention the church of the priest Sterie, which Konstantin Dejanovikj contributed to Hilandar in 1381. It is assumed that Sterie's church was located at the cult place of St. Elijah, i.e. the present-day Muslim shrine Husa Medin Pasha Mosque.



A marble spolia with an Arabic inscription

The existence of representative sacred buildings from the 14th century, centred around the fortress, are an indication of the size and power of the city of Shtip in the 14th century. It is an indisputable fact that the city was managed by powerful feudal lords of the Serbian state of Emperor Dushan, who also acted as founders and patrons with their own residence within the city fortress. During the city's Ottoman conquest, the fortress was ruined to a high extent, though not abandoned. This is indicated by the single-nave church and the surrounding tombs located in the southern half of the acropolis. The fact that they extend over the devastated eastern rampart, suggests that the church was built after the conquest by the Ottomans, i.e. toward the end of the 14th century.

Some of its parts were restored under Ottoman rule. During the reconstruction of the entrance to the fortress, which suffered the most, was built a marble slab with an Arabic inscription. In the mid-17th century, the Turkish traveller Evliya Celebi noted:

"Shtip is an area with a fortress on the hill that keeps guard." The town possessed mosques, baths, a large caravan-palace (saray) and a small river.

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