Kabiyuk: another Pliska?

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1. Introduction

In the 1898 edition of the annual Известия Русского археологического института в Константинополе Karel Škorpil, a scholar and teacher of Czech origin who helped in establishing the late nineteenth-century Bulgarian education system, published for the first time his hypothesis of an early medieval “first capital” of Bulgaria. This was Pliska/Pliskova, the center that according to Škorpil would have existed roughly 200 years before the Bulgarian ruler’s see of Preslav was first mentioned in the written sources.¹ This assumption has taken very deep root in the Bulgarian national identity. As to the site of Pliska, Škorpil claimed that this was the large fortification near to the village of Aboba in northeastern Bulgaria where he initiated excavations financed and carried out by the Russian Archaeological Institute in Constantinople in 1899. The resulting monograph, which remains to this day the most solid scholarly presentation ever produced on this site, had appeared already in 1905 and all skepticism that had been expressed over his theory has since faded. For the first time in Bulgaria archaeology was used to decide a debate among historians. The nineteenth-century belief that an accepted European nation needs a permanent and dignified capital was certainly helpful in spreading the imagination of the Pliska capital in a time when the Bulgarian people had just reclaimed their national sovereignty from the Ottoman Empire. Škorpil’s arguments, however, were strictly scholarly. They are not only intriguing but are to some extent convincing, and cannot be discounted out of hand.

However, the written source base that might be used for deducing such a permanent capital, founded by the Bulgars under their early leader Asparuh after settling south of the Danube River or somewhat later, is extremely scanty. In fact “Pliskova” appears as a place name in the Byzantine written sources even later than Preslav, namely in connection with John I Tzimiskes successful campaign of 971/972 against Bulgaria. Byzantine documents and the so-called Protobulgarian stone inscriptions (mostly written in Greek) mention a number of courtyards/palaces (aulai) or houses/building compounds

¹ For a detailed description of Škorpil’s argumentation, see: Dončeva-Petkova 1999 and idem 2000.
(oikoi) probably all fortified. These are mostly un-named, and thus difficult to localize, with the exception of Durostorum and the aulē at the Tiča River. These sites were owned and probably alternately used by the ruler. Khan Omurtag’s column inscription of 822 AD mentions a “kampoς” (κάµπος) called “Pl(i)skα”, which most probably should be translated as “Pliska field” or “Pliska region”, since contemporaneous Byzantine sources prefer to use the word “kampoς” in connection with a topographical expression (river, place, locality) in order to name a particular landscape or region. It was never used in Byzantine documents for describing a fortified encampment of the Bulgars or a military camp of their own army invading the Balkans. However, since Uspenskij and Zlatarski translated “kampoς” in just this sense, the impression of a huge camp-like town or capital became widespread. In the northeastern Bulgarian basin landscape of what is today called Pliska plain the fortification of Aboba, however huge it may be, is not the only important early medieval fortified site and in principle Škorpil’s arguments can be applied equally to others in that area. There are for example the earthen rampart lines east of Aboba in Novi Pazar, which probably represent a defense for the protection of the Pliska plain to the east, and the large rectangular rampart fortification of Kabiyuk 8 km west of Pliska (Fig. 1). However, archaeological research following Škorpil’s evaluation, in the last 100 years at least and until the German-Bulgarian field work begun, was always strongly focused on, if not limited to, the Aboba fortification. 

In the course of time these German-Bulgarian archaeological field campaigns in the Outer Town of Aboba-Pliska, realized from 1997 to 2001, were accompanied more and more by methodological discussions about the dating and the subsequent interpretation of the monuments of this settlement agglomeration. More than once traditional belief clashed with doubts resulting from methodological concerns, archaeological observations and scientific results. When these problems culminated in the prohibition on investigating the “hot areas” of stratigraphy and of relative and absolute dating of the Aboba fortification the campaigns so far organized jointly with the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences (BAN) came to an end. German-Bulgarian fieldwork now in alliance with the Sofia and Shumen universities, and joined by further institutions, however, continued in fortified sites of the period in question such as Silistra (2002: geoelectric prospecting of the stone fortification of Durostorum/Drastar), Čatalar (2002 and 2003) and Kabiyuk (2003) continued as long as it was tolerated by the BAN, which still has a monopoly on granting or refusing excavation permission all over Bulgaria.

2 For an overview, see: Ziemann (forthcoming).
5 See the articles of Henning and of Dončeva-Petkova in this volume.
6 The areas of discussions are named in: Henning 2000.
7 See the article of Henning/Balabanov/Milo/Ziemann in this volume.
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The first ever scientific field research campaign in the Kabiyuk fortification was realized in 2003 by the German-Bulgarian team (without BAN participation) and financed by the University of Frankfurt. It delivered spectacular results and thus became one of the crowning events of the University’s seven years of research work in northeastern Bulgaria. The fortified site of Kabiyuk was formerly described in Rašo Rašev’s extended compilation of early Bulgar earthen rampart fortifications (published by the BAN branch in Shumen) as a widely empty refuge or enclosure for housing cattle herds or horses of the Bulgars in times of unrest. The Aboba fortification, meanwhile, was praised as the true “aul” and the sole permanent old Bulgarian rulers’ see.8 However, the 2003 results, which are now published here, clearly contradicted this traditional assumption and questioned the theory of a permanent capital in the pagan period of

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Bulgaria’s history. In spite of these unexpected and promising new results (or perhaps because of them?) the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences (BAN) refused the formal request to continue the archaeological research work in the Kabiyuk fortification. This request was jointly addressed to the BAN by the universities of Shumen and Frankfurt and explicitly stressed the enormous significance of that new discovery. In the meantime the site was used by an army of treasure hunters who dug trenches, extended holes and even tunnels, thus destroying many of the valuable discovery situations and, in large part, the extended stone monuments. After more than three years of paralysis and inactivity on the part of the BAN in protecting that important site, the local government finally put an end to this and placed the site under police protection. Excavations of the BAN have now started in Kabiyuk and are directed by Rašo Rašev (BAN).

2. The fortification and the geomagnetic survey of 2003

The archaeological site of Kabiyuk is situated in the fields of the village of Konjovets 10 km north of the town of Shumen (Pl. 32); it represents one of the three large early medieval fortifications of the Pliska plain and extends 8 km west of Aboba-Pliska. The area encircled by a rectangular rampart-and-ditch fortification has a surface of 3.7 km² (370 ha). The lengths of the four sides of the fortification are approximately 2,000 m, 1,200 m, 1,980 m and 2,360 m. The inner construction of the earthen rampart is unknown since no regular archaeological rampart trench was ever positioned. In the southwestern part of the fortification a natural rock hill (338 m above sea level) provides an excellent outlook for watching and controlling the whole Pliska plain. Kabiyuk (from the Turkish for “low hill”) is the particular name given to this impressive rock elevation that dominates the surrounding flat landscape and is visible from several kilometers away. In the eastern part of the fortification two smaller barrows, probably artificially constructed and thus possibly burial mounds, are to be found. The fortification encloses the source of the small river Tchiflik-dere in its northern extension. A group of “standing stones”, so-called Devtašlari, interpreted as “Protobulgarian” burial or memorial monuments, inside the eastern part of the fortification represents the starting point for a chain of several kilometers of multiple such groups connecting the Kabiyuk fortification with that of Aboba (Pl. 32, symbol No. 3). This chain of groups of “standing stones” ends at the western outer rampart line of the Aboba fortification and it has been considered that this line perhaps marks the route of a sort of procession road between the two sites. This visible connection line between Aboba and Kabiyuk as well as the general similarity of the rectangular rampart lines gave cause for Karel

10 For these data see: Rašev 1982, 101.
11 One of these stone groups has been excavated by Rašev 1992.
Škorpil, who described this fortification in the “Aboba-Pliska” monograph,\textsuperscript{12} to assume a contemporaneity of the two fortifications.

The inner area of the fortification was never explored archaeologically, although some observations about structures visible on the surface are reported. According to Škorpil, in his day, building structures were visible south of the rock hill and Roman coins, brick fragments and the remains of a water conduit have been discovered between these stone-built houses.

An area 300 m east of the rock hill used for agriculture was chosen for the geomagnetic survey (Pl. 34). The area explored has an extension of c. 6 ha. The measurements were carried out with a magnetometer of the type “Förster Ferex 4.032” with three channels. The width of the measuring grid was 0.25 m by 0.50 m. The measurement procedure was completed in a west-east direction in a zigzag mode and for the measurement square units a size of 50 by 51 m or smaller was chosen. The measured values were visualized by 256 grayscale values with an amplitude range of -5 nT (white) to +5 nT (black).

As a result of these measurements six buildings became visible (Pl. 33). All of these buildings were evidently elements of a planned regular settlement structure since all of them had the same orientation and respected a grid pattern. This grid pattern was strictly oriented in accordance with the cardinal points. The buildings seem to represent structures predominantly of the courtyard type with cell-like rooms composed around inner yards. Two peristyle houses with “classical” nearly quadratic outlines are clearly visible. While the one at the lower edge of the map is visible only in parts the other one was matched completely. This house has a size of c. 30 by 35 m. Two entrances are visible in the south and in the west. Dark dots in the centers of many of the rooms can probably be interpreted as pillars supporting an upper floor. These building structures have to be related in general to the Mediterranean traditions of architecture. The best parallels can be found among excavated settlement structures of pre-Roman, Roman, late Antique and Byzantine periods (Fig. 2).

The aerial orthophotographs of the inner area of the Kabiyuk fortification demonstrate a very close correlation between those building structures detected by geophysics and similar regular pattern structures visible from the air in the territory around the three elevations. These two structural patterns clearly have the same orientation and most probably belong to the same widespread occupation pattern.

Agricultural plowing activities that were carried out roughly in these areas and illegal digging by treasure hunters in 2007 have brought to light a series of stone structures, single stone blocks. Judging from some graffiti on these stone blocks, representing e.g. the IYI symbol well known from many early medieval monuments of the Pliska plain, at least a certain number of stone buildings seems to belong to the early medieval occupation period.

\textsuperscript{12} Škorpil 1905, 38-40.
Fig. 2. The peristyle building of Kabiyuk: a - geomagnetic mapping, b - schematic ground-plan of the same building. Comparable layouts: c - Davina Kula near Skopje, early Byzantine fortress with sixth/seventh centuries occupation, d - Pliska, south of the Inner Town, so-called caravansery, e - Courtyard complex No. 40 from the Outer Town of Pliska with geomagnetic survey results (German-Bulgarian team), f - schematic ground-plan of the same building.
3. Conclusions

The geophysical prospecting campaign realized in 2003 in the Kabiyuk fortification in the Pliska plain, which also included the analysis of aerial photos, has detected a planned, regular stone building pattern of Mediterranean character, which covers large parts of the inner area of that fortification. It is still too early for speculation about the chronology of that pattern. Recent discoveries by treasure-hunters, however, seem to attest that there are stone buildings of early medieval age perhaps superimposing older ones, which probably date back to Late Antiquity or earlier. In 2007, south of the Kabaiyk fortification near to the village of Konjovets, excavations in a group of four burial mounds have delivered the first aristocratic equestrian burial with exceptional grave goods from the early settlement period of the Bulgars in the late seventh to early eighth centuries. Whereas the provenance and the meaning of Antique constructing materials in the Aboba-Pliska fortification is still under discussion, without having found a really plausible explanation, the Kabiyuk site may yet deliver the answer. Whereas the mysterious absence of “pagan” burials in the Aboba-Pliska fortification is a very noticeable circumstance that calls for explanation the Kabiyuk fortification seemingly does not have such problems. For the time being we cannot exclude that Kabiyuk was one of the important aulai of the Bulgarian rulers, a fortified aristocratic see that perhaps did not emerge merely by fortune in a place with evident Mediterranean settlement traditions. Without excavations it will remain an unresolved question as to whether this was just another Pliska, another contemporaneous aulē or the long-sought after early example of an early ruler’s see of the Bulgars, a predecessor of the Aboba complex. The German-Bulgarian team was denied the opportunity of harvesting the fruits of its discovery and joint research work that was started in the fortification of Kabiyuk.

Bibliography

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