The early medieval boyar courtyard of Strumba near Shumen

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1. Introduction

Courtyard houses or building complexes with a central roofless yard have been known in the eastern Mediterranean cultures nearly as long as stone architecture has existed. However, in the Bulgarian territories, this building type experienced a visible decline after the fall of the early Byzantine fortified borderline at the Danube River around AD 600 and the subsequent massive spread of a modest rural cottage architecture that preferred organic construction materials. These cottages were usually dug partly into the ground and thus had a sunken floor (so-called grubenhäuser). Their predominant use as dwellings is clearly attested by the regular presence of heating installations, in most cases of stone ovens. This type of cottage became the absolutely dominant style of dwelling architecture in early medieval Bulgaria’s countryside and is also known in particularly great numbers from the old Bulgarian ruling centers in the Pliska plain, especially from the so-called Outer Town of the Aboba-Pliska fortification. Beside these grubenhäuser, which clearly dominate the Outer Town’s settlement structures, stone-built courtyard complexes, however, appear anew in the later development stages of this important fortified site. Aerial photographs\(^1\) have shown recently that these architectural units hitherto known from just a few excavated examples in Aboba-Pliska’s Outer Town\(^2\) existed there in much greater numbers than were formerly assumed. Not a single case of such a building complex is known, however, that can be dated to the pre-Christian period of Aboba-Pliska. On the contrary, their number seems to spring up in the tenth century at the earliest, and no doubt many of them existed in the first half of the eleventh century, that is, in the time of Byzantine rule in Aboba-Pliska.

Grubenhaus dwellings still existed everywhere in this late period and many of these eleventh century cottages have been excavated in particular in the Inner Town area.\(^3\) It

\(^{1}\) Petrova 1992.

\(^{2}\) Especially well-explored archaeological exemplars are the building complexes No. 31 (Michajlov 1963), No. 40 (Petrova/Aladžov 1986) and No. 41 (Vitljanov 1999 and his article in this volume).

is, however, an open question as to what the relationship was between those courtyard building complexes and the rural grubenhaus dwellings. A solution to that question would certainly help to answer the following no less important question: What was the function of these stone-built complexes?

There is a serious debate over the question of whether these buildings were monasteries or “feudal manors” (феодални имения).\(^4\) This question is nearly impossible to answer purely by evaluating the architectural ground plan since courtyard style and the presence of a church building are elements that have equally to be expected in monasteries and in laic noble courts. But there is an important difference in the economic organization of the two institutions, which has been stressed by Stojan Vitljanov.\(^5\) Monks in eastern monasteries, unlike their western Benedictine counterparts in the eighth/ninth centuries and later, were obliged to do heavy agricultural fieldwork in order to assure the food supply of the monastic community. For the operation of laic manors, however, workers of different social positions were necessary and certain relations to dependent peasants have to be assumed. Thus a certain symbiosis between noble court and the rural population, living predominantly in grubenhaus dwellings, would not be surprising.

On the other hand, what seems so far to be the restricted appearance of courtyard complexes to the area of the administrative center of Aboba-Pliska would support the view that these building complexes were purely dwellings of aristocratic character without manorial or agricultural significance.

Thus the discovery of a courtyard building structure in the locality of Strumba, north of the town of Shumen and thus far away from Aboba-Pliska, offered an interesting opportunity for exploring in more detail a probable example of that institution and to contribute to the above-mentioned questions. In the framework of the German-Bulgarian archaeological field campaigns a geophysical prospecting activity was realized in this locality in 2003.\(^6\)

Pavlina Petrova discovered the site more than two decades ago through analysis of aerial photographs and subsequent field walking. By these means the approximate extension of the site was established and the aerial photos seemed to indicate the presence of a stone-built complex. A limited archaeological excavation directed by Pavlina Petrova followed and was focused on the central part of the building complex.\(^7\) This excavation succeeded in uncovering remains of stone architecture such as walls and foundations of columns belonging to a large building with an inner open yard. The

\(^4\) Aladžov 1997.

\(^5\) Vitljanov 1995, 94.

\(^6\) We are most grateful to Georgi Atanasov from the Museum of History in Shumen and to Stojan Vitljanov, St Konstantin Preslavski University in Shumen for supporting this measurement campaign.

\(^7\) Petrova 1993.
excavated structures were interpreted as a rural manor (имение). Ceramics and small finds came to light, which made a general dating of the complex between the ninth and eleventh centuries possible.

2. Magnetic prospecting

Since only a small part of the building complex was excavated, whereas the aerial photographs showed a rather extended building complex, a geophysical survey seemed to be promising. The summer of 2003 offered excellent conditions for that. Geomagnetic measurement areas were positioned all around the former archaeological excavation space on a surface area of 200 by 250 m² (Pl. 35-a). As a result of the geomagnetic survey new stone building structures became visible in continuation of the excavated structures and in other parts representing totally new elements of that building complex (Pl. 35-b). The excavated parts of the site and the newly detected structures made the reconstruction of an extended courtyard stone building complex possible (Pl. 35-c). The survey team succeeded in detecting the layout of the whole architectural complex and it became clear that former excavations had uncovered just a small part of it.

The measurements were made 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 procedure of measurement was done in a zigzag mode and for the measurement square units a size of 50 by 51 m or smaller was chosen. Idrisi software was used for processing the results, while Corel Draw was used for plotting the grayscale maps. The measured values were visualized by 256 grayscale values with an amplitude range of -5 nT (white) to +5 nT (black). Thus, dark and light colors represented high and low magnetization of the underground, respectively. All amplitudes outside this range are allotted maximal or minimal values and were accordingly printed in white or black.

As mentioned above, the geophysical detected walls corresponded very closely with those architectural elements uncovered by the earlier excavations. Archaeologically excavated walls continued in the geophysical mapping and the architectural complex now became much more easily understandable. The traces of walls seem to belong mostly to one single extended building compound. Walls became visible by negative magnetic anomalies, which usually reflect stonewall foundations. When combining wall structures detected by the magnetic survey with those discovered archaeologically a reconstruction of the whole building structure was the result. The outer walls of the inner courtyard building seem to form a large rectangular enclosure measuring c. 40 m in width and c. 50 m in length. The width of the walls can be estimated at 1.5 m. An entrance existed at the west side of the building. Inside of the building rooms or cells are visible, which are composed around an inner courtyard.

At the eastern side of the inner courtyard compound a church building can be deduced. Its layout seems to correspond with the basilica type. A good parallel to this
geophysical result is the basilica detected with the same method on the acropolis of Pisidian Antioch in Turkey. In that case the magnetic survey provided a very clear outline of a basilica with dimensions of about 25 m by 50 m. The central apse was 10 m wide. Unfortunately the structure discovered in the Strumba locality is not so clear. But a protuberance at the eastern end of our structure can hardly be interpreted other than as an apse. Also the division of the building’s body into three sections (probably naves) and the general east-west orientation speak in favor of a basilica building. This church then would have been 23 m long and 15 m wide.

An outer enclosure wall surrounded the whole compound. This enclosure is approximately 144 m by 83 m large. At the northern part of that wall smaller rooms or little buildings have been attached. In the southwestern part of the compound the downhill acting erosion seems to have destroyed some parts of the structures. An interruption of the wall line and a strong anomaly in the middle of the western side of the enclosure may reflect an entrance to the complex.

Generally, the magnetometer map is characterized by a very low noise indicating low susceptibilities of the subsoil. Dipole anomalies with randomly oriented minima dispersed over the area signalize iron objects. Some of these dipoles will certainly reflect modern ferrous litter while others may reflect ferrous features associated with the complex. Two belt-like zones with a great number of such dipolar magnetic anomalies probably indicate two roads running alongside the northern and the southern outer wall of the complex.

Besides this a further 60 anomalies seem to be archaeologically relevant. All of them have to be interpreted as pits or similar pit-like structures filled probably with deposits of enhanced magnetization. They are sometimes rounded in shape and cover areas between 0.5 and 35 m² in principle. Most of them, however, have an extension of 5 to 10 m². Some of the larger pits have a rectangular shape and most probably they can be interpreted as sunken floor huts (grubenhäuser). Such archaeologically relevant anomalies are distributed north and south of the stone complex with a higher density in the north, however.

From the occupation layer inside the courtyard, characterized by early medieval pottery, an animal bone sample was chosen for AMS 14C dating. The calibrated dating range with the highest probability (2 sigma, 93.1 %) is that between cal. 773 AD and 981 AD and this corresponds roughly with general expectations concerning these complexes. Another example of a more or less precise dating comes from the courtyard No. 40 from Aboba-Pliska’s Outer Town where a hoard of 15 Byzantine gold coins (solidi) was found, which was collected between 912 and 931 AD and buried thereafter.

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8 Taşlıalan et al. 2003, 278, fig. 2.
3. Conclusions

The geomagnetic measurements in the Strumba locality near Shumen, which covered a surface area of 50,000 m² have successfully completed and enriched the results of an archaeological trial excavation and field and aerial photo analysis. The complete ground plan of a rectangular courtyard type building complex, well known until now only from Aboba-Pliska’s Outer Town, was detected. As an element of this building complex a church of the basilica type came to light. Church buildings of that type appear in monasteries as well as in private manor houses of the Bulgarian nobility (boyars). Thus, the appearance of that church *per se* does not allow for a definitive answer as to the function of this compound. However, since monasteries usually favor exceptional topographical positions and are characterized by their inner organizational structure of self-sufficiency, in this particular case the non-spectacular position in a flat and purely agricultural landscape and the great number of accompanying (most probably) rural dwelling structures of the grubenhaus type would definitively speak more for a rural laic installation, thus a boyar courtyard.

It is no less important to recognize, that this rectangular architectural building type was evidently not restricted to the important power center of Aboba-Pliska. According to the pottery finds and the AMS 14C-dating the compound seems to have existed somewhere between the ninth and the tenth century. This is roughly the same period as the so-called “*curtis*” existed in the great Moravian stronghold of Břeclav-Pohansko (Pl. 35-d). The great number of examples for that type of building complex that is known from early medieval Bulgaria calls into question the assumption of their western European provenance. Since such rectangular building compounds are unknown from the rural sphere of contemporaneous Western Europe, for the time being one should avoid using the term *curtis* for them.

Bibliography


10 Macháček 2007, 350.
CHAPTER VI

PLISKA AND THE BALKANS