

Archaeological investigation of the Ostrovo rampart near the town of Knezha (Abstract)

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The remains of three earthen ramparts are preserved in Northwestern Bulgaria, between the rivers Iskar and Lom. They are running across the plain on the right bank of the Danube (Fig. 1). In the archaeological literature, they are known as Ostrovo rampart, Hairedin rampart and Lom rampart (Рашев, Иванов 1986, 11). К. Shkorpil was the first to survey and describe their paths in detail (Шкорпил 1905, 528-530).

The study of the ‘Western Bulgarian’ ramparts caused controversy from the very beginning. V. Dobruski suggested that they dated from time of the Romans and the Celts (Добруски 1890, 37), while Shkorpil related them to the early period of the Bulgarian state. Supporting Shkorpil’s hypotheses, V. Zlatarski determined the three ramparts as the western boundary of Bulgaria at the time of Asparuh (Златарски 1970, 152). The close proximity of the earthworks and the relatively equal distance between them provide grounds for suggesting that all three ramparts were constructed at the same time, or in a very short period of time, to establish a unified serial defensive line (Рашев 1982, 68).

In the early 1960s, B. Nikolov and S. Mashov undertook a thorough field survey of Ostrovo rampart and its surroundings (Николов 1962, 33-38). In the 1970s, G. Alexandrov conducted the first excavations of Lom rampart, while in the mid-80s R. Rashev and P. Ivanov excavated Hairedin rampart.

An expedition called “Asparuh Rampart” was organized in 2010 and 2011. In the first stage, the north part of the Ostrovo rampart was mapped. In order to verify the field observations, three sondages were laid out along the course of the rampart (Fig. 3). The only positive

result came from Sondage III (fig. 4). An earthwork with a total width of c. 15.50 m was identified (Fig. 7). A ditch, 3.10 m deep and 4.50 m wide in its upper part, was found to the west (Fig. 5). An embankment, 10.50 m wide and with preserved maximum height of 1.30 m, was piled to the east (fig. 6). There is no berm between the ditch and the bank. The data from the excavations in the locality ‘Zahlupen Geran’ prove the existence of an earthwork facing to the west that has the characteristics of a fortification barrier (Fig. 8). Traces of additional defensive features were not found on the ridge of the bank. Even if such were once present, due to erosion they cannot be identified by current archaeological methods. Certainly, it cannot be excluded that the shelters of the defenders of the bank were made with materials at hand – for example, by ox-carts arranged on the ridge of the bank, or by large shields leaning on spears fixed into the ground – as it is described by Leo the Deacon for the siege of Drastar in AD 971 (ГИБИ 1964, 267). A source of particular importance for the reconstruction of the earthen ditches is the Arab historian Al-Masudi, who stated that “the country of the *burdzans* (Bulgarians) is enclosed by a wooden fence with openings similar to wooden windows; this fence resembles the wall next to the ditch” (Петров, Гюзелев 1978, 128). The present state of the earthworks limits the archaeological possibilities to identify the wooden palisades and the lines of hedges, described in the sources. The logic of use of these structures, however, not only does not rule out such features but, on the contrary, makes them a mandatory element in a defensive line.

The comparison with the other two ‘Western Bulgarian’ ramparts suggests that

they shared not only a similar construction, but also similar dimensions. This supports the hypothesis that the three structures were probably constructed at the same time or in close succession, as parts of a general building plan. A characteristic feature of all these ramparts is the absence of berm. The results of the excavations do not provide an answer as to the construction date of the Ostrovo rampart. Identifying the trench as a possible boundary of the Bulgarian state in the late seventh century AD hypothetically points to a possible construction at that time. However, so far, there is no secure evidence to confirm this. The lack of berm could serve as an

argument for an early date but, as yet, there are no studies proving that the simple construction of the earthwork is a secure chronological indicator.

At this stage, the results of the excavations support K. Shkorpil's observations for the existence of an earthen fortification that he names the Ostrovo trench. The date of the earthwork and its relationship with parallel or intersecting ancient roads would be the subject of future investigations. The answer to these questions requires obtaining more data from the structure itself, but also from the surrounding archaeological sites.