

# Khan Omurtag's stone palace of AD 822: a “modernized” eighth century timber fort

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## Introduction

According to the famous Greek column inscription found in 1905 near the village of Čatalar (district of Shumen),<sup>1</sup> khan Omurtag, the ruler of early medieval Bulgaria from 815 to 831 AD, came from or was in the “Pliska kampos” in the year 822 AD and built a palace (*aulē*) at the Tiča River (Fig. 1). This is the first reference to Pliska in the written sources. From the same inscription we can deduce that Omurtag's palace was a fortified structure, that Greeks and Slavs were seen in opposition to the Bulgarians, and that the ruler built a bridge over the Tiča River. The fortified palace was also decorated with four columns and two bronze lions.<sup>2</sup> Much ink has been spilled in disputes over whether “Pliska kampos” referred to the Pliska basin as a topographical characterization or to a fortified military camp named Pliska. Many similar expressions can be found in the contemporaneous Byzantine literature where the description is of topographical units meaning “field”.<sup>3</sup> Thus Pliska field, Pliska basin or Pliska plain would be just some of the possible translations. In any case, the ruling center in the Pliska plain must have had some kind of defense whatever its level of preservation, quality or stage of reconstruction once Nikephoros I Genikos had burnt a timber palisade-like fortification to the ground in his attack ten years previously (811 AD). Therefore the translation problem hardly concerns the fortification character of the ruler's see in the Pliska plain. The same is true for Omurtag's fortified palace as mentioned on the column. This is independent of the question of whether one prefers to translate “*aulē*” (αὐλή) according to its Greek meaning as “palace” or if this Greek word was used in order to name an “aul”, a steppe-nomadic and predominantly fortified tribal or ruling center.

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- 1 This village has been renamed several times: Čatalar (until 1899) – Čatali – Krumovo – Tsar Krum – Khan Krum (1977).
  - 2 Beševliev 1963, 260, No. 56. For the primary publication and older discussions on translation details, see: Uspenskij/Škorpil 1905, vol. 1: 545-546, vol. 2 (Plates): CXV-1-II; Zlatarski [1918] 1970, 409, 577-580.
  - 3 Rašev 1995, 12-13.

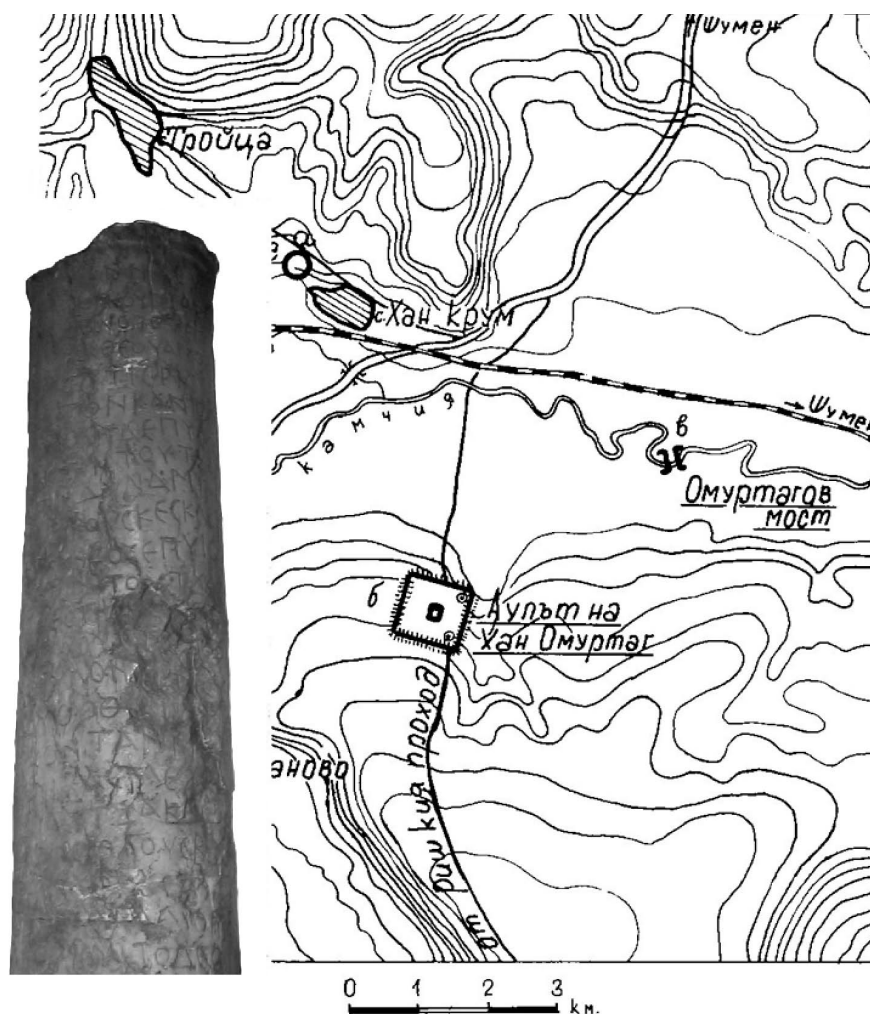


Fig. 1. The Čatalar column and the topographical position of Omurtag's *aulē* at the north-south traffic route from the Pliska plain to the Balkan pass of Riš

The archaeologist is more interested in discovering which particular fortification was most likely referred to in the written record. The fortification complex of Aboba-Pliska offers several possible solutions. However, as a result of the German-Bulgarian research campaigns in Aboba-Pliska, it seems unlikely that the big outer rampart fortification encircling the Outer Town was built much earlier than the late ninth or first half of the tenth century.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, one of the fortification lines enclosing the

4 See the article of Henning in this volume.

Inner Town has to be taken into account. The joint expedition was not permitted to realize regular excavations at the stone fortification encircling the Inner Town of Aboba-Pliska, which would have helped to verify the assumed dating of that "Roman-like" defense installation. Thus an alternative for bridging that gap had to be sought, which was found in the *aulē* of khan Omurtag.

It is to the credit of Vera Antonova and Svetlana Dremsizova-Nelčinova that they discovered the true Omurtag palace mentioned in the column inscription of AD 822. They succeeded in localizing that building and fortification complex to a position surprisingly close to the finding place of the column still in the meadows of the village of Čatalar, and realized a series of successful excavation campaigns. A large rectangular rampart fortification formerly classified, and not without reason, as a late antique or early Byzantine settlement,<sup>5</sup> turned out to have been rebuilt later and then became an important early medieval fortified ruling center. Prior to this discovery the palace center and later Bulgarian capital of Preslav, most probably the successor of Pliska, was thought to have originally been the palace of Omurtag mentioned in the Čatalar inscription. Interpretation now moved in quite another direction and after the whole inner palace area of the Čatalar fortification had been uncovered no further doubt was possible: the *aulē* of Omurtag had been found. A range of corresponding publications may be consulted for details concerning the excavation results.<sup>6</sup>

Our thanks must go to Todor Balabanov, then director of the Archaeological Museum of Veliki Preslav, for inviting the German-Bulgarian excavation team – working until then in Aboba-Pliska's Outer Town – to take part in two joint prospecting and excavation campaigns in the Čatalar fortification. According to the exploration results of V. Antonova and Sv. Dremsizova-Nelčinova the Omurtag fortification resembles in many details the Aboba-Pliska fortification, although the Čatalar complex has of course much smaller dimensions. Thus the following research results of Čatalar are equally important for interpreting Aboba-Pliska.

### The 2002 and 2003 exploration campaigns in the *aulē* of khan Omurtag

In two summer campaigns, each lasting two weeks in 2002 and 2003, geomagnetic prospecting activities accompanied by nine archaeological trial trenches were realized in the territory of the Čatalar fortification. This fieldwork was organized under the joint auspices of the Frankfurt University and the Archaeological Museum of Veliki Preslav,

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5 The excavations later uncovered two early Christian basilicas (Antonova 1968). T. Balabanov has excavated parts of the late antique stone fortification on the bottom of one of the earthen mounds at the eastern front of the fortification (Balabanov 2004).

6 Antonova/Dremsizova-Nelčinova 1981; Antonova 1968.

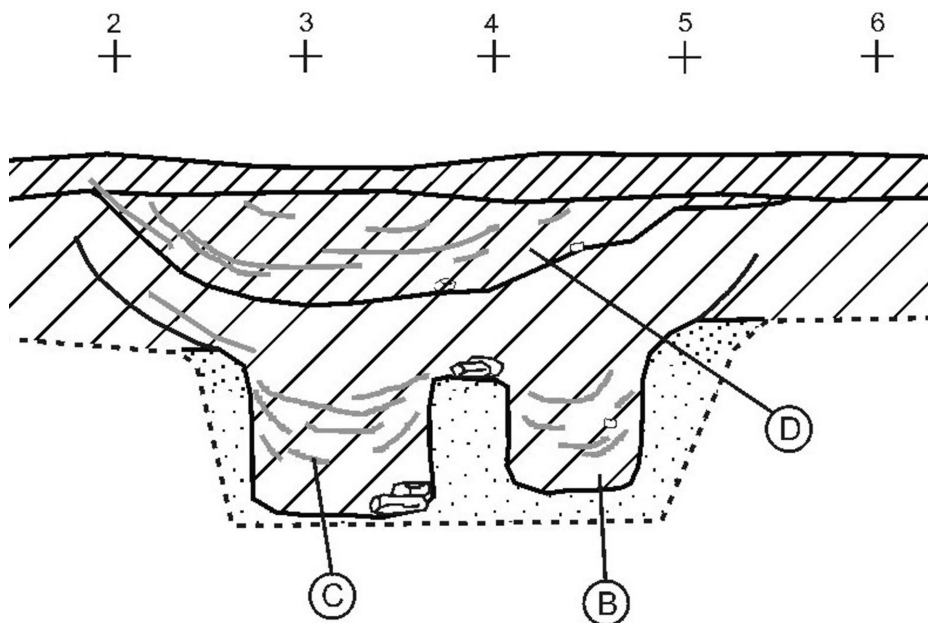


Fig. 2. *Aulē* of Omurtag. Section 1: double palisade ditch

as part of an archaeological summer school program in Bulgaria supported by the Volkswagen foundation (2002-2004). A number of Bulgarian universities and research institutions were involved.<sup>7</sup>

For training and practical exercise in methods of geomagnetic surveying PhD students and undergraduates from participating universities succeeded in exploring nearly the whole territory between the inner stone-built enclosure of the palace and the outer earthen rampart of the fortified complex.<sup>8</sup> The measurements were carried out with a Foerster Fluxgate gradiometer on a total surface area of approximately 11 ha (108,200 m<sup>2</sup>).

7 Furthermore we are grateful to the following institutions and individuals for supporting the summer school program: University of Sofia (Senior lecturer Dr. Stefka Angelova, Prof. Dr. Veselin Kulev), University of Shumen (the university's president Prof. Dr. Dobrin Dobrev; the Dean of the Faculty of Philosophy, Prof. Dr. Stojan Vitljanov), University of Veliko Tŕrnovo (Prof. Dr. Krazimir Popkonstantinov), Archaeological Museum of Varna (Director Dr. Alexander Minčev), Museum of History in Balčik (Director Darin Kanavrov) and Museum of History in Silistra (Director Dr. Ivan Bačvarov).

8 The two geomagnetic measurement teams were lead by Peter Milo (2002) and Daniel Ziemann (2003). Geodetic surveying was in the hands of Klaus and Peter Henning. Prospecting was supported by Eyub F. Eyub und Jordanka Ziemann.

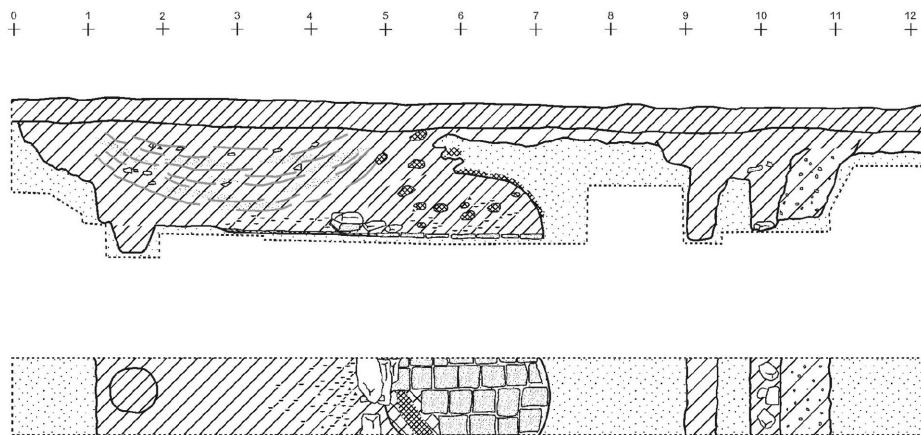


Fig. 3. *Aulē* of Omurtag. Section 4: double palisade ditch and grubenhaus with baking furnace

One of several important results was the detection of a rectangular double palisade line (Pl. 36, No. 2), which became visible as a light-grey geomagnetic anomaly line. This line runs approximately parallel to the inner stonewall enclosure of the palace complex and the outer earthen rampart positioned in the middle and just between them. The nature of this line was explored with five trial trenches (Nos 1, 2, 4-6) sectioning that line. The result was in principle the same in all five trenches. A double ditch line of two meters depth came to light (Figs 2-3). Without doubt, the feature represents a solid palisade construction seemingly encircling the palace. The size of this rectangular palisade installation is 250 by 350 m. The palisade ditches were filled in their lower parts exclusively with late antique materials such as amphora fragments, small pieces of bricks and the usual so-called kitchen ceramic. The latter material was exclusively well burnt and of red, yellow or blue-grey color. In the upper part of the palisade ditch fillings of trench No. 1 two small fragments of early medieval ceramic with the typical corrugated surface and of modest hardness were found. All palisade ditches delivered large amounts of animal bones. To determine the chronology of this palisade line three samples of animal bones from trench No. 1 were taken for AMS 14C dating. Two samples were taken from the lower ditch fillings (Fig. 2-B: sample No. 1 and C: sample No. 2) and a third from the upper filling (Fig. 2-D: sample No. 3). The calibrated dating results of the two samples from nearly the bottom of the palisade ditches, measured in the laboratory of Erlangen, are rather similar. Sample No. 1 dates with higher probability between cal. 688 AD and 781 AD whereas sample No. 2 dates with higher probability between cal. 687 AD and 780 AD. Sample No. 3 from the upper ditch filling dates with higher probability between cal. 801 AD and 895 AD. As regards these dating results it is clear that the palisade fortification was most probably constructed several decades before 822 AD and thus precedes the building of Omurtag's *aulē*, which is certainly represented by the rectangular stone-built compound in the center of the complex.

Further results of interest relate to the grubenhäuser settlement that was already detected in the northern parts of the complex through the excavation campaigns of V. Antonova and Sv. Dremsizova-Nelčinova. These excavators had uncovered seven grubenhäuser (Pl. 36, symbol No. 7). The mapping of the geomagnetic measurement results showed a large number of dot-like anomalies especially in the western half of the fortified area. One of these dots was chosen for investigation by a trial trench (Pl. 36, trench No. 3), and this trench attested a grubenhäuser as the cause of that particular dot anomaly. Another example of a well-preserved grubenhäuser, which had to be assumed from the discovery of a similar dot anomaly, came to light in trench No. 4 (Fig. 3). This trench had been laid out in order to find the double palisade line and this was reached successfully. Additionally, the grubenhäuser was sectioned by this trench. This sunken floor hut possessed a relatively well-preserved baking furnace with a pavement constructed of late antique brick stones. Thus there is reason to assume that the many dot anomalies indicate more or less completely the extension of the grubenhäuser occupation at least in the western half of the fortification.

Apart from these irregularly scattered structures, found in the inner area of the fortification and most probably representing the usual grubenhäuser dwelling type, relatively regularly composed lines of mostly rectangular anomalies of roughly the same size were observed (Pl. 36, symbol No. 4). These anomalies formed two separate lines absolutely parallel to the fortification lines, one near to the western rampart line and the other near to the western palisade line. Unfortunately, there was no time to verify one of these structures by a trial trench. Therefore it is a matter of speculation to assume a probable contemporaneity of the strictly ordered fortification and stone-built palace structures and these regular anomalies. A large rectangular ditch-like anomaly in the western part of the fortification was analyzed through three sections (Nos 7-9). Only the nature of the ditch was thus attested whereas no datable materials came to light.

## Conclusions

The geophysical and archaeological investigations of the Čatalar fortification complex have proven the existence of a solid double palisade fortification that was probably built some decades before the stone palace compound was created by khan Omurtag in 822 AD. Thus it seems that the Čatalar inscription does not reveal the whole truth. Evidently, Omurtag did not found the complex at this site but ordered a reconstruction, rebuilding or “modernization” in stone of the formerly timber-built fort. Comparable processes have also been assumed for Aboba-Pliska. Double palisade lines forming rectangular enclosures have been uncovered in the Outer Town in the “selishte” locality, dated by a coin find to the early ninth century.<sup>9</sup> Obvious palisade lines have also

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9 Stanilov/Dimitrov/Jankulov 1991.

appeared in several other parts of Aboba-Pliska without forming clear structures, however. While the palisade rectangles of the Outer Town of Aboba-Pliska were sometimes identified as timber-built courtyards and thus forerunners of the tenth/eleventh century stone-built courtyard complexes, the finding situation of Čatalar suggest that a military background is more likely. A possible explanation would be to interpret these rectangular palisade installations as timber-built military forts predominantly of the period preceding the Byzantine invasion of 811 AD. After their destruction they were in part rebuilt or replaced by stone forts.

The rampart fortification built out of timber and earth and faced with dry-stonewalls, as discovered by the Russian archaeological expedition in the Inner Town of Aboba-Pliska (Pl. 29-b, symbol 3), was brought in connection with the same events.<sup>10</sup> A trial trench sectioning a secret passage that connects the so-called Krum palace (Pl. 29-b, No. 1) with that fortification laid out in 1999 by the German-Bulgarian team delivered large quantities of burnt and thus well preserved wooden construction elements (Pl. 29-d). Wooden remains of the same passage excavated by Rašo Rašev in its northern parts together with a large set of vessels of the yellow pottery type (Pl. 29-c), which is in fact datable to the time around 800 AD, were analyzed for dendrochronology. The chemical timber conservation treatment, however, caused several problems for the application of the 14C wiggle matching method. Thus the first attempts at dating were not satisfactory and further efforts are needed. Without further progress in this field of scientific dating, the above-mentioned assumptions remain possible but, as yet, hypothetical.

Dating of the grubenhaus settlement inside the rampart fortification of Čatalar is another problem that still cannot be resolved with certainty. Unfortunately, no stratigraphical relation between these dwellings and the palisade enclosure were to be observed. AMS 14C dating of animal bones from two of these grubenhäuser meanwhile delivered ambiguous results. The sample of the grubenhaus from trench 4 dates to a range between cal. 657 AD and 781 AD (2 sigma, 93.4%) and consequently seems to be contemporaneous with the palisade line. However, the sample from the grubenhaus in trench No. 3 dates between cal. 426 AD and 604 AD (2 sigma, 93.4%) and would thus need to be formally attributed to the early Byzantine occupation stage, which seems unlikely. Arguing from the structural point of view the appearance of a small church building among the grubenhäuser would suggest a dating of at least parts of the settlement to the time after Christianization. The same conclusion can probably be derived from the random distribution of these dwellings, which shows little relation to the strict composition of the palace compound and the palisade. Last but not least, the general picture of the large rectangular rampart defense containing the many grubenhäuser supports the impression of a refuge in times of incursions and unrest. And this fits best to the later ninth and tenth centuries.

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10 Pletnjova 1992.

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