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**Post-Roman Towns,
Trade and Settlement
in Europe and Byzantium**

Vol. 2

Byzantium, Pliska, and the Balkans

**Edited by
Joachim Henning**

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The Metropolis of Pliska or, how large does an early medieval settlement have to be in order to be called a city?

JOACHIM HENNING

1. Introduction

Who would hesitate to call early medieval Constantinople, the mega center of its day and capital of the Byzantine Empire, a city? And who would doubt that this city, embedded in a general urban culture of Byzantium, was not therefore the ultimate expression of that culture? According to Sozomen, a late antique historian of the Christian church, the enlargement of the city's fortified territory to an area of more than 12 km² under the fifth-century rule of emperor Theodosius II would have made Constantinople the largest city in the Roman Empire. Thus Rome, the Eternal City, found itself in second place. And while the impact of pandemic plague brought a considerable loss for the city in terms of population, which had been estimated at a height of 400,000 for the middle of the sixth century, the territory of Constantinople never experienced any noteworthy reduction until the crusaders' conquest of AD 1204.¹

And yet in the eastern half of early medieval Europe, namely in the Balkans in modern-day northeastern Bulgaria, and not too far from Constantinople, there stood another fortified center even bigger than this supposedly greatest of cities. But while it possessed dozens of stone monuments, such as palaces, sanctuaries and churches, stone fortifications with towers and gates, it perhaps remains doubtful as to whether we might call it a city comparable with the Byzantine urban model. Here I refer to the huge settlement complex situated in the vicinity of the former Turkish village named Aboba in northeastern Bulgaria, which was first brought under archaeological investigation at the end of the nineteenth century. Already before excavations started in 1899, the fortified site was hypothetically equated with the center of *Pliskoba/Pliska*, the assumed first "capital" of early medieval Bulgaria.²

Between 1997 and 2003 a series of joint German-Bulgarian archaeological field campaigns were realized in multiple early medieval fortifications in the basin of the

1 Koder 1984, 114-118.

2 For the background to the written record, see the article of Günter Prinzing in this volume.

modern-day Pliska plain in northeastern Bulgaria; special attention was given to Aboba-Pliska, in an effort to explore in greater depth the chronology, structure, and economic traits of all these fortifications. The following essay will discuss some of the results of this fieldwork, focusing on the question of a possible urban characterization of that unique settlement complex.

The Bulgarian kingdom developed following the immigration of the Bulgars into the former Byzantine territories of Scythia minor and parts of Thracia in the year 681 AD. This realm dominated most areas of Southeastern Europe over the following centuries, and more than once Bulgarian armies stood before the city walls of Constantinople, ready to raise their own king to the throne of this “second Rome”. A huge fortified settlement agglomeration, a “metropolis of the Balkans”, grew up in the approximate topographical center of the early Bulgarian kingdom. As for the extension of the fortified occupation territory, it toppled both Roman capitals from their pedestals. The modern discoverers and first excavators called it the “fortification of Aboba”, after the Turkish village that occupied a smaller part of the site.³ This early medieval settlement complex extends over a huge area of 21.8 km², one third bigger than the city of Constantinople. And yet, surprisingly, the site remains very little known beyond the scholarly community, at least in Western Europe (Fig. 1). Scholarly speculation has long suggested that the site is indeed that of Pliska, supposedly the power center of the Bulgarian realm. The most recent German-Bulgarian research has, however, caused some of the older doubts to resurface concerning the occupation history of the site, the dating of its development stages, and its early roots. Also in question is its role following the Byzantine re-conquest in AD 971/972 of the eastern half of the Balkan Peninsula under John I Tzimiskes, and then of the western half under Basil II the Bulgar-slayer (Βασίλειος Β΄ Βουλγαροκτόνος) from AD 986 to 1014. Finally, even the traditional assumption that the Aboba fortification might be the only or the “true” Pliska was called into question after the German-Bulgarian team’s surprising discovery of the unique occupation structures in the large Kabiyuk fortification, 8 km west of that of Aboba.⁴

For a detailed description of the Aboba-Pliska fortification we may consult the study of Janko Dimitrov,⁵ who has worked tirelessly to up-date the inventory of monuments first produced by Karel Škorpil⁶ and later revised by Krăstju Mijatev. As for the century-long research history of the Aboba-Pliska fortification, the compilation of Ljudmila Dončeva-Petkova provides a complete overview. Beginning with the first campaigns financed by the Russian Archaeological Institute in Constantinople in 1899 and directed jointly by Karel Škorpil, doyen of Bulgarian archaeology, and the institute’s director Fjodor Ivanovič Uspenskij, specialist in Byzantine studies, the review is

3 Aboba-Pliska 1905.

4 See the article of Henning & Eyup in this volume.

5 See his article in this volume with detailed references.

6 Škorpil 1905.

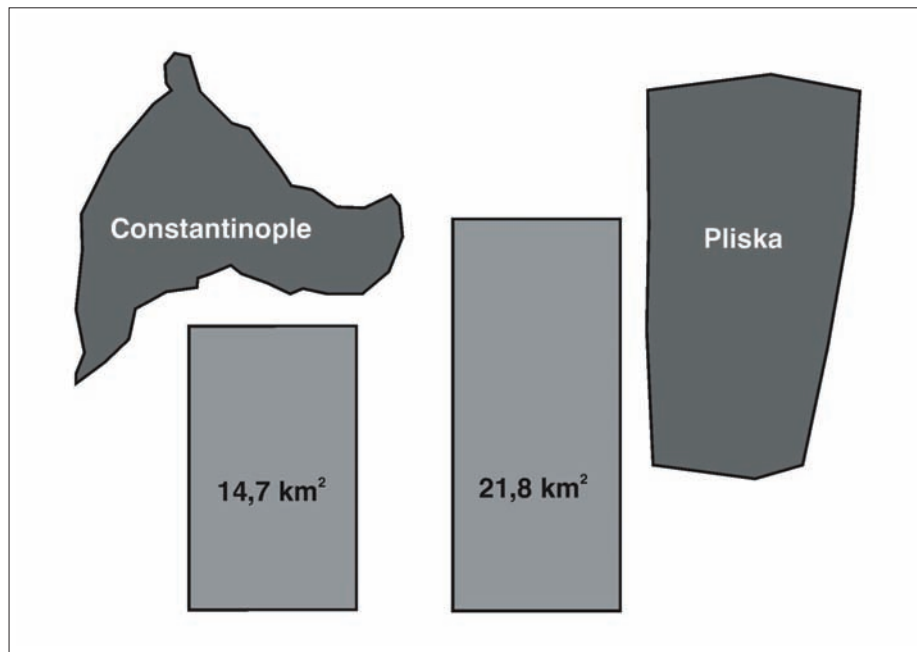


Fig. 1. Comparison between the fortified occupation areas of Constantinople (fourth-thirteenth centuries) and the Aboba fortification held to be Pliska, the capital of early medieval Bulgaria (c. eighth-tenth centuries)

then brought up to date with the German-Bulgarian campaigns financed by the University of Frankfurt am Main in 1997-2003.⁷

2. The German-Bulgarian archaeological research campaigns in the Aboba fortification and in the Pliska plain (1997-2003)

Two basic methodological challenges may be identified for archaeological research in the old Bulgarian ruling centers of the Pliska plain: First, the astonishing lack of modern methods of archaeological surveying and analysis applied in the Aboba-Pliska complex prior to 1997.⁸ This situation was especially regrettable in view of the great importance these sites have for Bulgarian and European history. Techniques such as

7 Dončeva-Petkova 2000. For more recent excavations in the Aboba fortification see: <http://aim.sofianet.net/main.php?lang=BG> and reviews in: *Archeologija* (Sofia) 44/4, 3003, 64-65; 45/3-4, 2004, 105-116.

8 For a description of the new scientific strategies applied since 1997, see: Henning 2000; *idem* 2006.

aerial photographs had been used sporadically since 1992, but very few basic applications of scientific analysis were realized.⁹ No consistent geodetic survey system relating to the entire territory of the site was ever installed¹⁰ and excavations too often were still organized in the style of nineteenth century Near-east large-scale diggings, with hundreds of workers and very few well-trained specialists. The second challenge lay in the enormous extension of the sites, especially of the Aboba fortification (21.8 km²; c. 6.5 km long and c. 3.9 km broad) and the Kabiyuk fortification (3.7 km²; side lengths of 2.0 - 1.2 - 1.98 - 2.36 km) as well as the sites of Omurtag's palace (*aulē*) near to the village of Khan Krum (22.5 ha; c. 550 m x c. 450 m) and the Strumba locality near to the town of Shumen (c. 4 ha). For German-Bulgarian surveying teams, there were considerable challenges in applying large scale prospecting by geophysics, systematic analysis of aerial photos and GIS application. With the exception of trench No. 21, and of a geophysical survey area in the southeastern corner of the Inner Town, all exploration activities in the Aboba-Pliska fortification were focused upon the extended areas of the Outer Town, especially on the Asar-dere area (Fig. 2).

In five 4-week-campaigns from 1997 to 2001 a total area of 53.35 ha (131.83 acres) was explored on the territory of the Aboba-Pliska fortification by geomagnetic measuring and corresponding mapping. Further sites were investigated in 2002 and 2003 in the same way outside the Aboba-Pliska fortification on a surface of another 29.2 ha (72.15 acres). The total of the explored area in the Pliska plain is 82.55 ha (203.98 acres). In order to verify structures that had been detected by geophysics, 40 archaeological trenches (31 trenches in Aboba-Pliska: Pls 24-a and 25, Fig. 3 and 9 trenches in the *aulē* of Omurtag: Pl. 36) were positioned in the most target-oriented way, as directed by the geophysical results. Aerial orthophotos and topographical maps covering the whole extension of the explored fortifications (Aboba, Kabiyuk, Omurtag's *aulē* etc.) were acquired, digitalized and then used for selecting and positioning suitable research areas and trenches and for displaying the results of structure detection. Geoelectric measurements were carried out in Aboba-Pliska for detecting production installations (trench No. 16), stone structures (trench No. 13) and the precise position of a secret passage in the Inner Town (trench No. 21; Pl. 29).¹¹ The complex stratigraphy observed in the main trench (No. 4-10) was used for separating ceramic finds according to the pattern of strata and consequent analyzing of development trends of the ceramic material.¹² Charcoal found in the secret passage (trench No. 21) was used for a first attempt at

9 Petrova 1992 and the article of Dimitrov (fig. 3) in this volume.

10 Personal experiences that were kindly confirmed by Professor Stefka Angelova (Sofia University). The German-Bulgarian team therefore used GPS, the American Global Navigation Satellite System (GNSS).

11 See the contribution of Norbert Schleifer in this volume.

12 See the first attempt at evaluating the ceramic materials by Ljudmila Dončeva-Petkova and the analysis of yellow pottery by Vassilena Petrova, both in this volume.

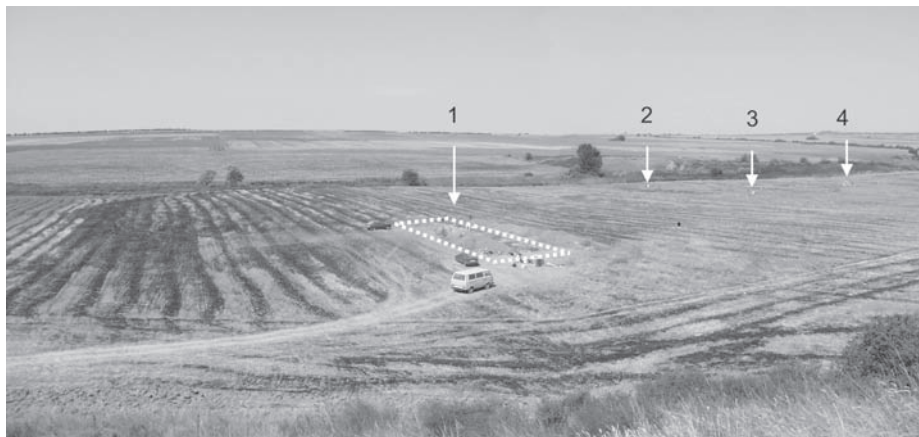


Fig. 2. The area of the German-Bulgarian field exploration at the Asar-dere creek valley (line of bushes in the background) in Aboba-Pliska's Outer Town surrounded by the earthen rampart (identical with the horizon line) viewed from the mound No. XXXIV (see Pl. 23). 1 - main trench (No. 4-10); 2 - trench No. 14; 3 - trench No. 13; 4 - trench No. 12

dendrochronological dating. A detailed report of the results is currently in preparation in monograph form.¹³

What follows is a discussion of some of the archaeological observations, which are especially relevant for the question of urban developments and the historical situation in the Pliska plain.

3. A nomadic camp and rural beginnings?

The extended rectangular earthen rampart enclosure that surrounds the Outer Town of the Aboba-Pliska complex (Pl. 22, graphic symbol No. 1) is commonly thought to be one of the first constructions built shortly after the first settlement of the nomadic Bulgars in the Pliska plain, which must have happened somewhat after 681 AD. According to that view, the inner territory of the camp-like enclosure would have been covered by loosely scattered rural settlement complexes consisting of modest cottage dwellings of the sunken floor type (*grubenhäuser*).¹⁴ This settlement area is called the Outer Town

¹³ Henning (in prep.)

¹⁴ This conceptual picture of an early Aboba-Pliska camp with *grubenhäuser* settlement structures was drawn especially by R. Rašev (1995, 16) who refers on the one hand to the research results of Michajlov, Milčev, Georgiev etc. in the Outer Town, and on the other hand ascribes all non-stone-built structures including the great number of *grubenhäuser* found in the Inner Town to a homogenous first archaic "timber-built Pliska".

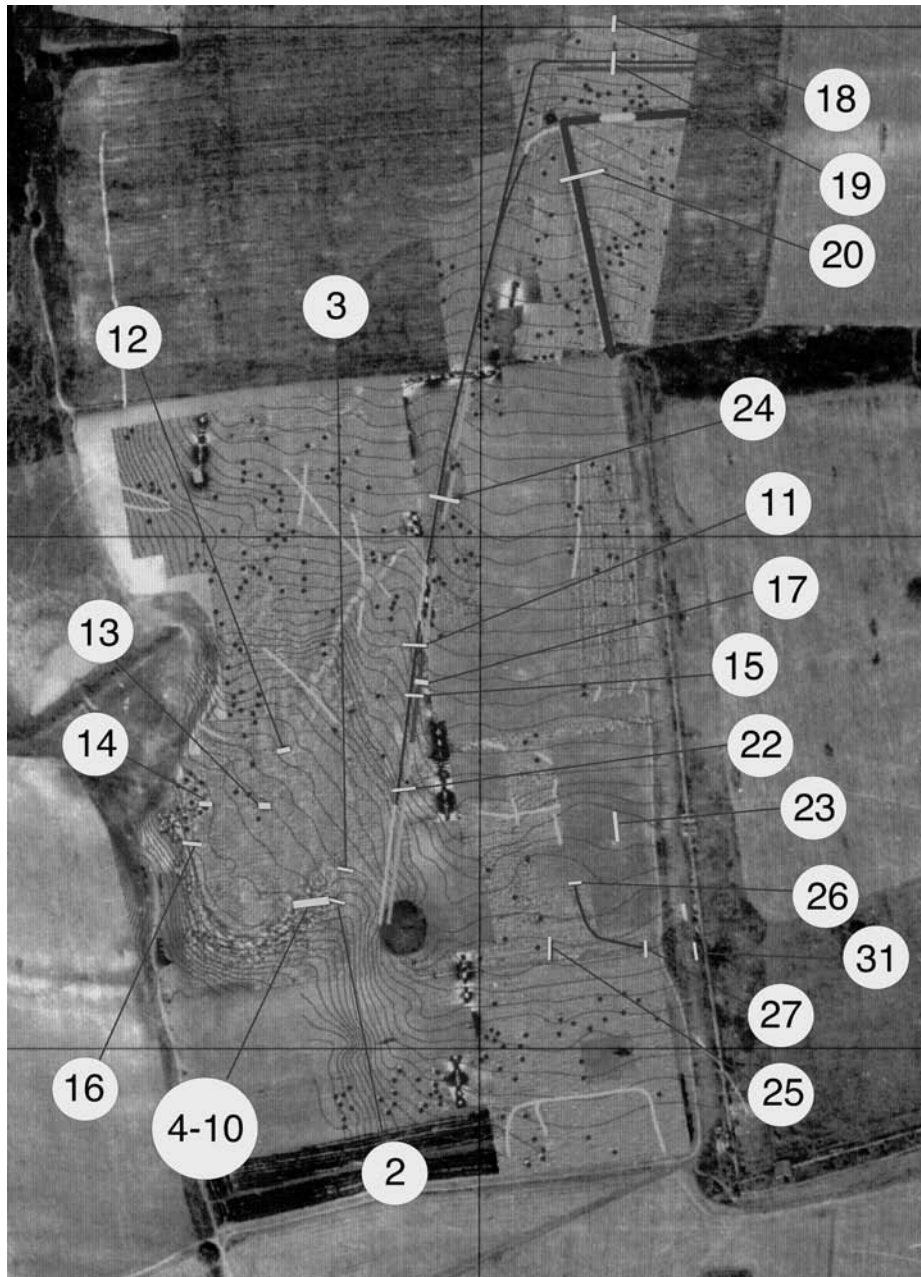


Fig. 3. Archaeological trenches of the German-Bulgarian research team (1997-2000) in the broader Asar-dere area of Aboba-Pliska (see also Pl. 24a and for trenches in the Poluostrov area, Pl. 25)

as distinct from the Inner Town, which consists of the palace center and aristocratic building complexes encircled by a stone fortification (Pl. 22, graphic symbol No. 2). The two best explored examples of such supposedly primordial rural settlement structures of the Outer Town were those excavated by Atanas Milčev in the late 1950s and early 1960s. These excavations took place in the Asar-dere area (parts of which are also called “Hadžaklăjuk”), which is an extended territory west of the Inner Town’s stone fortification named after the nearby creek valley (Pls 23 and 24).¹⁵ Comparable excavations were carried out in the territory of the Great Basilica’s building complex northeast of the Inner Town (Pl. 30). Parts of the latter excavation were undertaken, and results published, by Pavel Georgiev in the late 1970s, and these excavations were later completed by Radoslav Vasilev in the 1980s.¹⁶ Milčev’s Asar-dere and Georgiev’s Great Basilica settlements may be regarded as the two main pillars of Pliska’s urbanization hypothesis. These two settlements were thought to have been associated with the very early first socio-economic development stage of the Aboba-Pliska complex in the period from the late seventh to the eighth centuries (Michajlov, Milčev) or in the eighth and first half of the ninth century (Georgiev). Supposedly they would attest a substantial rural population located around the ruler’s residence, living in *grubenhäuser* in the large area surrounded by the earthen rampart and serving in the khan’s army. The Asar-dere settlement in particular was labeled by A. Milčev as “Slavic” and was held to confirm the assumed original “Slavic character” of the first Bulgarian capital, a view that was clearly favored at that time by the state and party leaders of Bulgaria.¹⁷ Georgiev’s assumption of a Slavic-Bulgarian character as regards the “pagan” settlement in the Great Basilica area holds a middle position in recent discussions. The population that lived in those two settlement complexes would have dealt predominantly with animal husbandry and to a certain extent with farming. An enormous nomadic, semi-nomadic or at least rural fortified camp with the khan’s palace at the center thus seemed to provide an adequate label for that complex, which would be the starting point for further developments.

Four clay-made furnaces, which were interpreted as pottery kilns for producing glazed ceramic vessels were also uncovered in the Asar-dere area and were related to the next socio-economic development stage of Pliska in the later ninth to tenth centu-

15 Milčev 1960 (two *grubenhäuser* excavated in 1959). According to Milčev (1964, 29), five years later he had uncovered a total of 12 *grubenhäuser* spread over the entire Asar-dere area and all would have delivered the same pottery material datable to the eighth century. For such an early dating, see already: Michajlov/Milčev 1959, 288 with reference to the badly preserved (or excavated) *grubenhäuser* in the area of the building complex No. 31.

16 Georgiev 1981; *idem* 1993; Vasilev 1987; *idem* 1995. See also the articles of both authors in this volume.

17 See the conceptual article of Milčev 1964, and for the so-called “first Slavic capital”, see: Michajlov 1959. The “Slavic” character of the early development stages of Aboba-Pliska still plays a role in the conceptual view of Dimitrov 1994b.

ries. This would have been marked by the existence of professional and highly specialized craft working and other elements of an urban economy.¹⁸ The chronological basis for relating the many craft activities attested by Atanas Milčev in the Asar-dere area to this more advanced later development phase of Pliska – that is, the period after its supposedly stepwise transformation into a true large town – came as a result of the until now broadly and certainly correctly accepted dating of the first occurrence of glazed ceramic ware, namely not until the later ninth, or more likely even until the tenth or eleventh centuries. Similar conclusions were drawn from the situation observed at the Great Basilica where glazed ceramic supposedly never occurred in sunken floor dwellings of the grubenhause settlement that was uncovered there. Consequently, that cottage agglomeration should have preceded the construction of the Christian church complex and was dated to the eighth and earlier ninth centuries and thus to the pagan period. After prince Boris/Michael had adopted Christianity in the year 864 AD the former settlement area would already have been cleared and used immediately for constructing the Great Basilica.

Over subsequent years numerous similar assumptions and further observations made in Aboba-Pliska were more or less automatically incorporated into this conceptual view of a stepwise urbanization of the early medieval Bulgarian society out of ingenuous roots.¹⁹ It has thus been seen as a society comparable or equal-ranking with those of Byzantium and Western Europe or, perhaps, as an even stronger and more dynamic society since “Pliska” was in fact so incredibly large.²⁰

4. The dubious eighth century “Slavic” grubenhause occupation in the Asar-dere area

So far so good. However, as a result of the extended and complex investigation work that the German-Bulgarian team has realized in the Asar-dere area, it has become clear that the assumed stages of Aboba-Pliska’s socio-economic evolution actually took place exactly in reverse order. It was not the case that a predominantly agricultural style of living opened the way to a stepwise growth in craft activities, but rather a situation of fully developed and highly specialized artisan production was followed later by a process of broad ruralization.

In its very first occupation phase large parts of the Asar-dere area comprised a huge waste disposal site, accompanied by numerous installations such as hearths and kiln-like features attesting several craft activities that created the extended layers of

18 Milčev 1960b esp. for the urban consequences pp. 54-55.

19 Balabanov 1980; Rašev 1994; Vitljanov 2000.

20 For a most curious demonstration of Pliska’s superiority when comparing it with eighth/ninth centuries’ Paris, see: Milenov 2005.

to be pottery kilns for glazed ceramic, are still preserved in the Sofia University today.²¹ Their re-evaluation brought to light that no artisan glazed pottery had been produced. Surprisingly, however, it was found that advanced glassmaking can be attested by many elements of broken ceramic fragments with glazed incrustations. Thus a number of these fragments were relicts of crucibles or melting pots misinterpreted as glazed pottery. Consequently there is no reason per se to date activities connected with these finds to later periods when glazed pottery occurred. The attribution, however, of the production installations, which were undoubtedly glass ovens and not pottery kilns,²² to the surrounding production garbage of the Asar-dere, which contains production waste of glassmaking and emerged in the eighth to earlier ninth centuries, is compelling.²³ An extraordinary extended craft-working center characterized by highly professional and advanced craft working was installed on site in an early stage of the Aboba-Pliska complex. And this establishment of a craftsmen colony was a greenfield development.

The German-Bulgarian excavations in the Asar-dere area have uncovered many grubenhäuser structures (Pls 23, 26, 27). Not a single one belongs to the earlier craft-working occupation phase of the eighth/ninth centuries. After the production activities had stopped, for whatever reason, the whole production area was covered by considerable amounts of erosion material (colluvium). Coming from higher parts of the area near to the Inner Town's fortification it traveled downhill and spread over the former craft-working zone (Pl. 24-b). The question as to why these erosion processes took place and exactly how long they lasted is difficult to answer. Their locally different intensity was reconstructed by physical-geographical studies. However, approximately at the end of these soil creep events cottage dwellings of the grubenhäuser type were constructed in great numbers by digging them either into the erosion layer that had developed in the meantime or, if this layer was locally unimportant or even absent, directly into the older garbage layers of the abandoned craft-working quarter. This stratigraphical observation is valid for all grubenhäuser that have been discovered by the German-Bulgarian team. Grubenhäuser No. 10 and 20 were dug directly into the production garbage layers (Pl. 26) whereas No. 12, 13 and 14 were dug just into the upper erosion material covering the garbage (Pl. 27, especially clear is the case of grubenhäuser No. 32). Photographs documenting the finding situation of most of the 12 grubenhäuser

21 I owe sincere thanks to Stefka Angelova (Sofia University) for making these materials available to me.

22 Such a characterization also corresponds with the unique construction of these objects, which are absolutely unusual for pottery kilns, see: Henning 1977, 178, cat. No. 153. Although pointing at the uniqueness of these kilns, I still followed then Milčev's characterization.

23 Nonetheless, the Asar-dere ovens still play a decisive role in conceptual synthesizes constructing a flourishing pottery production in Pliska's urban development stage: see Vitljanov 2000, 88.

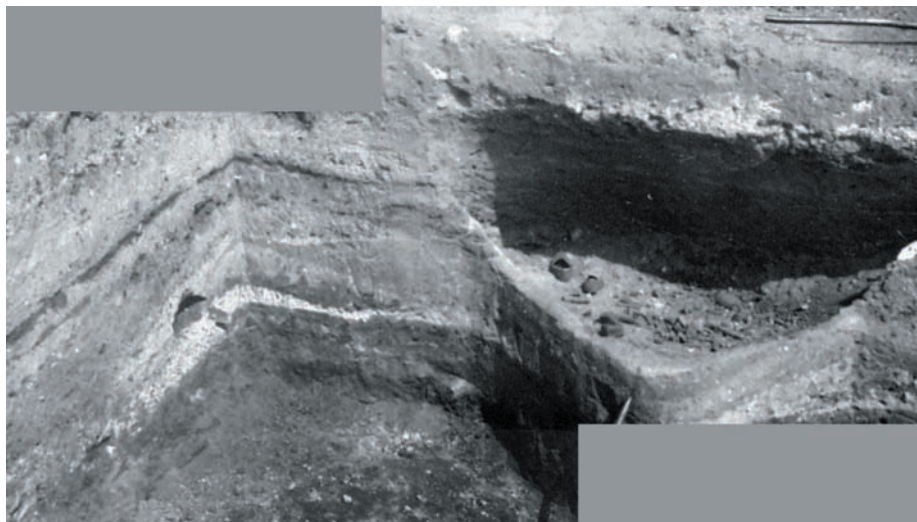


Fig. 5. Grubenhaus excavated in 1961 by Atanas Milčev in the Asar-dere area of Aboba-Pliska. An uncovered corner of this sunken feature is visible cutting into layers of production garbage

excavated by A. Milčev in the Asar-dere area are still preserved in the archive of the Sofia University.²⁴ Except for the first two, which were published in 1960,²⁵ the remaining ten have never been published but all 12 were dated to the eighth century by the excavator since supposedly they would all have delivered the same spectrum of pottery finds.²⁶ The description of the discovery situation of Milčev's grubenhaus No. 2 clearly attests that these dwellings were dug into a dark grey (most probably erosion) layer.²⁷ A direct and unquestionable analogy to our observations is offered by another one of Milčev's Asar-dere grubenhäuser, visible on the photo documentation (Fig. 5). The pit of this grubenhaus was clearly dug into production garbage layers, which reveal multiple colorful strata.

24 I wish to address my sincere thanks to Vassilena Petrova for calling my attention to the existing documentation and to Stefka Angelova for making it available to me.

25 Milčev 1960a.

26 *Idem* 1964, 29.

27 *Idem* 1960a, 34. Since grubenhaus No. 2 was detected in a construction trench the complete profile was preserved. Grubenhaus No. 1, however, became visible only after bulldozers had removed the complete plow soil and probably the lower layer of old erosion materials as well. The excavator therefore correctly notices that he was unable to determine the exact level where the deepening of the pit of grubenhaus No.1 once had started.

Thus Milčev's evaluation needs to be revised fundamentally.²⁸ According to the careful analysis conducted by Ljudmila Dončeva-Petkova on the pottery materials excavated by the German-Bulgarian team,²⁹ the ceramic finds from the fillings of the grubenhäuser in the Asar-dere region belong exclusively to the period after Christianization of the Bulgarian realm. Dating therefore has to be looked for between the late ninth and tenth/eleventh centuries, that is, some hundred years after Milčev's determination.³⁰

5. A "pagan" grubenhaus occupation below the Great Basilica?

The second pillar of the supposed early rural beginnings of Aboba-Pliska, the grubenhaus settlement uncovered in the area of the stone building complex attached to the Great Basilica, is no less problematic (Pl. 30). When the present author arrived at the excavations of the area around the Great Basilica in 1976, as a newly minted archaeologist and well trained by the late Paul Grimm in excavating Central European grubenhäuser,³¹ a number of freshly uncovered, supposedly "free-standing" small stone ovens caught his attention. They were scattered over the territory of the excavated stone structures attached to the Great Basilica, which was just beginning to be extensively excavated by an enormous number of workers in preparation for the then forthcoming 1300 year jubilee of the Bulgarian state. Since the preliminary interpretation of these ovens as being part of "the monastery's open cooking area" seemed rather obvious, he asked for permission to excavate a separate section of the area more carefully.³² As a result, the first complete sunken floor feature clearly of the typical eastern European

28 We have nevertheless to stress here the great merit of A. Milčev having saved and perfectly documented for the time a number of very important non-stone-built monuments. This was achieved in a period of terrible devastations for the Outer Town areas in the 1950s and 1960s when the monstrous idea of constructing a reservoir dam in the Asar-dere valley was realized. I cannot exclude that after having discovered the last grubenhäuser of his campaigns, which in their stratigraphical situations were so clearly late but for unknown reasons have never been published, this well-trained excavator might have understood that his early dating of the Asar-dere settlement was wrong. It was, however, not the right time to revise the assumption of the Slavic roots of Bulgaria's first capital".

29 See the article of Dončeva-Petkova in this volume on the ceramic materials from the Asar-dere excavations.

30 Milčev 1964.

31 By 1972 I had spent more than six months on Grimm's excavation of the Ottonian *Aula Regis* (Pfalz) of Tilleda in eastern Germany and was especially responsible for excavating and documenting the dozens of Slavic influenced grubenhäuser in the palace's suburb, which regularly possessed stone ovens in one of their corners. For the results, see: Grimm 1990.

32 I am most grateful to Totju Totev, then director of the Shumen branch of the Archaeological Institute, for giving me the permission for participating in the excavations and to Pavel Georgiev and Stojan Vitljanov for the close cooperation on site.

grubenhäuser type with a stone oven in its northeastern corner was excavated at this site (Fig. 6).³³ And thus it was demonstrated that all the many stone ovens uncovered earlier in the area were the relicts of non-recognized grubenhäuser.³⁴ Identification of these structures was in fact not easy for the archaeologist more familiar with excavating stone structures. They were dug into an older grey and uniform looking cultural layer, additionally superimposed by a cover of erosion sediments, which together were of a considerable thickness. As an element of exactly that older occupation layer the author succeeded in uncovering yet another different kind of dwelling feature, which had no stone oven but a flat stone hearth in one of its corners creating a platform of c. 80 cm diameter covered with clay that was burnt and, unlike the grubenhäuser, was not dug into the ground.³⁵ This structure, named dwelling No. 3 (Pl. 30), was clearly associated with pottery of the earlier occupation stage of the Aboba-Pliska settlement complex and had to be dated therefore approximately to the eighth or first half of the ninth century. This pottery spectrum was widely identical with that of the occupation layer into which grubenhäuser No. 4 was dug (Fig. 7). Both spectra were characterized by a high proportion (more than 50%) of fine grey ware, often decorated with polished stripes and of the appearance of red-slipped fine ware (Pl. 30-b). These ceramic finds resemble those excavated in the earthen mound XXXIII (Fig. 8, Pl. 4: 41-46, Pl. 5: 47-49). Ceramic fragments discovered on the sunken floor of grubenhäuser No. 4, however, were unquestionably much later and typical for a period between the end of the ninth and the eleventh centuries. The pottery spectrum from that grubenhäuser floor contained fine brownish or greenish glazed pottery typical for this later period, the portion of fine grey ware was strongly reduced and red-slipped fine ware was absent (Pl. 30-c). A fairly similar spectrum occurred in the grubenhäuser excavated by the German-Bulgarian team in the Asar-dere area mentioned above. Since the position of all grubenhäuser in the Great Basilica area apparently respected a layout approximately in a grid pattern, and consequently not a single superposition was observed (Pl. 30-a), a chronological uniformity had to be assumed.³⁶ Cultural distinctions between the two chronological phases, that of the older occupation layer with dwellings built at ground level and that

33 This sunken floor dwelling feature was first described in an article for a broader public (Henning 1980, 26, fig. 6) and later counted as “zhilishte (grubenhäuser) No. 4” (following “zhilishte No. 3”). This was after one had understood that another two badly preserved (or badly recognized) structures that were excavated earlier represent relicts of sunken floor dwellings as well.

34 Unfortunately details of these many “free-standing” ovens have never been published, although a monographic publication describing the Great Basilica building complex has appeared in the meantime: Georgiev/Vitljanov 2001.

35 For a representation of this dwelling drawn by the author and counted as “zhilishte No. 3”, see: Georgiev 1993, 17, fig. 8, who does not mention who the excavator was. Whether or not this relict once belonged to a yurt-like construction, as Georgiev assumes, is difficult to say.

36 Vasilev (1995, 33) therefore suggests a “uniform planning” of the settlement.

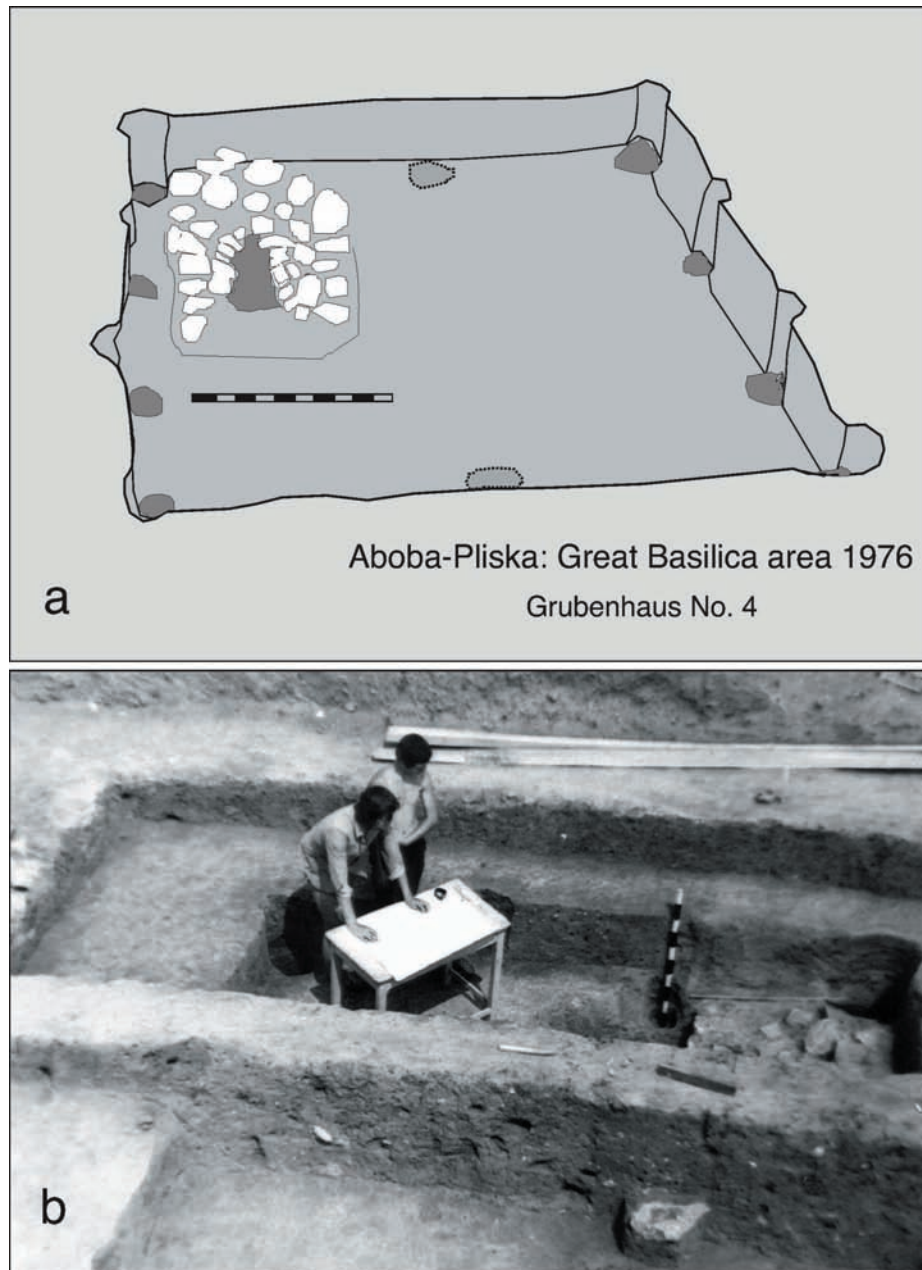


Fig. 6. Grubenhaus No. 4 in the area of the stone building compound around the Great Basilica of Aboba-Pliska. a - perspective representation, b - excavation photo

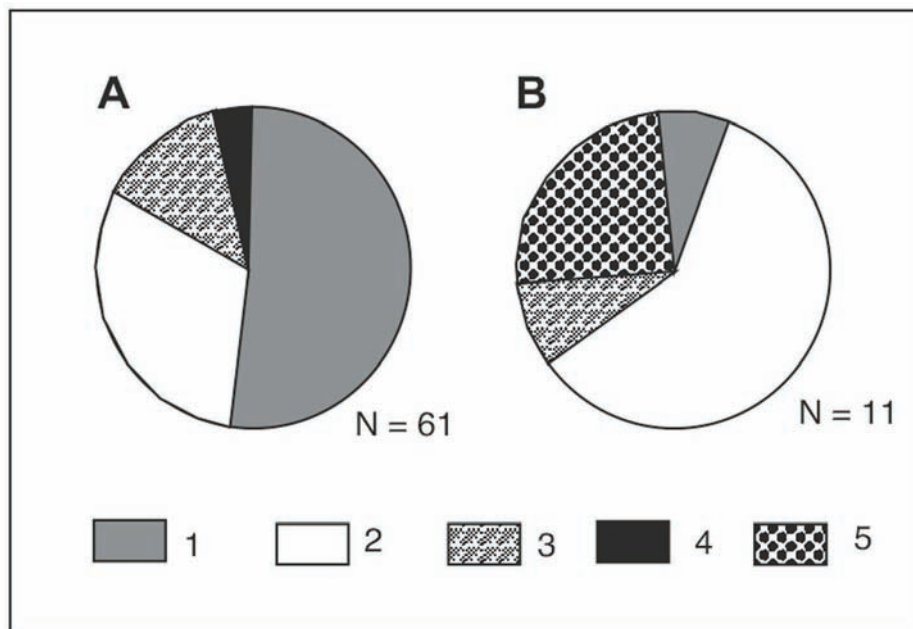


Fig. 7. Pottery fragments found in and around grubenhaus No. 4 in the Great Basilica's area of Aboba-Pliska: A - Pottery spectrum of the stratigraphically older occupation layer in which the sunken floor feature/grubenhaus No. 4 was dug; B - Pottery spectrum from the floor of grubenhaus No. 4. Key: 1 - grey fine ware, 2 - red coarse ware, 3 - red and yellow fine ware, 4 - red slipped fine ware, 5 - green and brown glazed fine ware

of the later grubenhaus settlement, could not be clearer and there was reason to assume a significant difference in time between the two phases, if not a hiatus. After grubenhaus No. 4 had been uncovered excavation of further grubenhäuser were completed in the following years in the Great Basilica's area and further to the east, with efforts now being made as far as possible to apply more careful excavation methods. The results were better but still insufficient, as must be derived from excavation documentation from areas not very far to the east of the Great Basilica. Apparently the true margins of grubenhäuser pits were not always recognized with certainty (Fig. 9). And the possible result of this is chronological confusion.³⁷

However, the stratigraphical and chronological evaluations derived from observations of the grubenhaus No. 4 and dwelling No. 3 excavations were accepted by all specialists participating in the 1976 campaign at the Great Basilica while the author was present on site. And seemingly they were still held to be valid as the next three

³⁷ Vasilev (1987, 402) does not question a late dating of at least some of these features to the transition from tenth to eleventh centuries since glazed pottery was uncovered from the grubenhaus pits.



Fig. 8. Ceramic vessels found in the fill layers of the earthen mound XXXIII of Aboba-Pliska

grubenhäuser (No. 5-7) were uncovered in the few remaining areas not destroyed by earlier excavation campaigns.

When grubenhaus No. 8 was uncovered, however, a sharp conceptual turn occurred and a curious re-evaluation and re-interpretation of the entire settlement situation started. Except for grubenhaus No. 4, which the author had excavated and which was perfectly documented, all other sunken floor dwellings were now re-dated to the earliest occupation period of Aboba-Pliska.³⁸ The existence of the thick occupation layer that had delivered the early materials was no longer mentioned. Ceramic mate-

38 This re-interpretation may be traced back to Pavel Georgiev (1981, 194-197), who dated the sunken floor features of the settlement to the eighth and first half of the ninth century without mentioning the clearly later dating of grubenhaus No. 4. Radoslav Vasilev (1987, 402) followed him as well without mentioning the “grubenhaus No. 4 problem”. It was not until 18 years after its uncovering that Georgiev (1993, 16) for the first time mentioned grubenhaus No. 4 and named a possible dating at the earliest in the second half of the ninth century (or later). And it was not stated until 26 years after the excavation that, according to the materials found on its floor, a dating of grubenhaus No. 4 even in the tenth century seemed possible (Georgiev/Vitljanov 2001, 15 – introduction written by P. Georgiev).

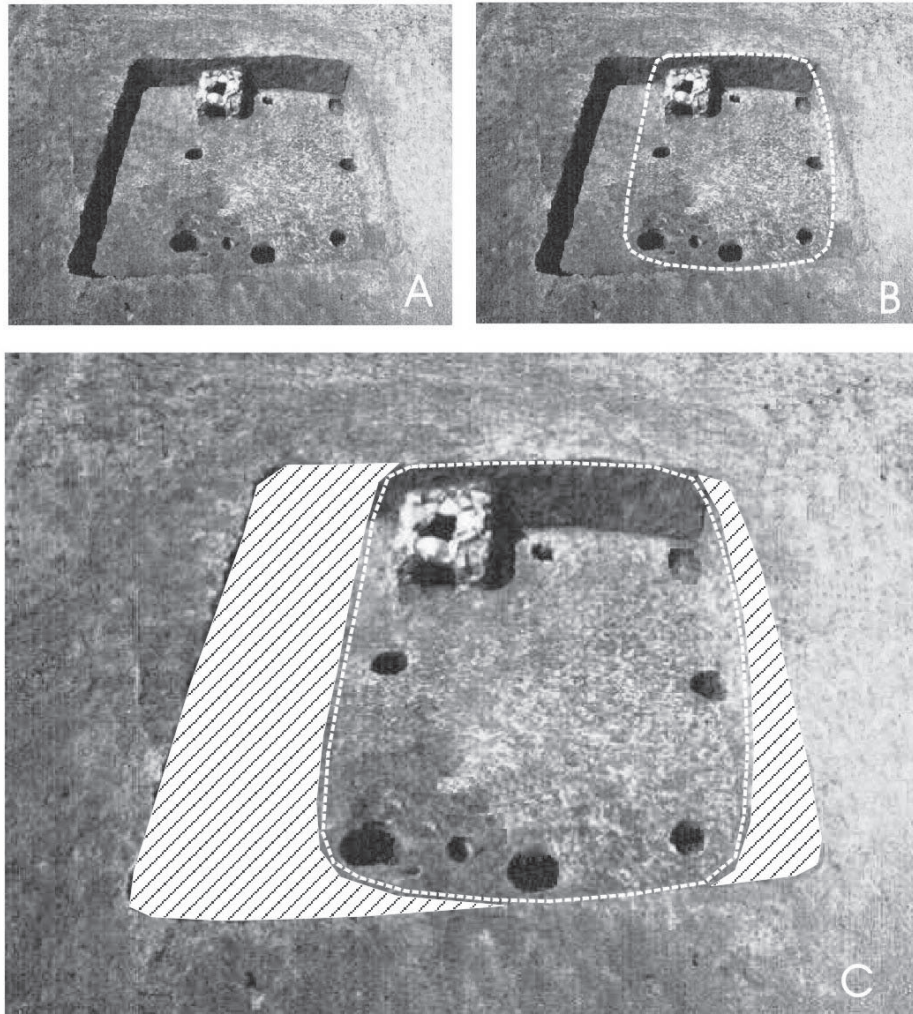


Fig. 9. Grubenhaus excavated east of the Great Basilica in the Outer Town of Aboba-Pliska, dug into older dark-grey erosion sediments or occupation layers. The true margin of the grubenhaus pit is difficult to recognize in such a case: a - photo showing the excavated deepening said to represent the grubenhaus extension and containing a stone oven and post-holes, which are in fact elements of a grubenhaus; b - probable true margin of the grubenhaus pit deduced from the excavated elements of the dwelling feature; c - mistakenly excavated areas surrounding the true grubenhaus pit, which when they deliver older finds can be about a false chronological interpretation of the grubenhaus feature

rials that undoubtedly relate to that older cultural layer were now attributed without discussion to the grubenhaus features, which as a result appeared to be contemporaneous with the non-sunken features built at ground level from the eighth and early ninth centuries. Not only was an early settlement of mixed Slavic and nomadic inhabitants

“constructed” in this way, but another more fatal question was also settled. The willful grubenhaus No. 8 did not - as was certainly expected - superimpose the stone structures of the annex buildings of the Great Basilica but was itself superimposed by these stone structures (Pl. 30-a). Considering the late dating exemplified in the case of grubenhaus No. 4 the building complex attached to the Great Basilica, which was held to be the first Bulgarian archbishop’s monastery supposedly built by AD 864, was now in danger of being dated to a much later period, perhaps even to that of Byzantium’s re-conquest of Bulgaria in the later tenth century. Such a dating of the buildings attached to the Great Basilica, which is one of the most important monuments of Aboba-Pliska and correspondingly played an essential role in the conceptual view of that place, seemed to be completely unacceptable and not at all desirable.³⁹

6. The late diffusion of grubenhäuser structures in the Pliska plain

Whatever the details of the circumstances or causes for this re-interpretation, it is nonetheless true that the stratigraphical situations both in the Asar-dere and in the Great Basilica areas were in principle largely identical. In both cases an early occupation can be attested, which consisted of habitations and domestic or craft-working secondary buildings constructed exclusively at ground level.⁴⁰ The thickness of the occupation layers that had established in both areas is considerable. And in both cases these layers were additionally superimposed by erosion material before a new style of occupation developed with grubenhäuser dug into these layers.

In the areas of geophysical investigations west and northwest of the Inner Town, which stretched over a surface of approximately 34 ha, a number of 288 dot-like anomalies were detected (Pl. 23, symbol 1a). Three of these anomalies were selected for archaeological investigations by trial trenches (No. 12, 13 and 14) and in all of these cases grubenhaus features (No. 25, 26, and 32) with heating or firing installations such as hearths or ovens were uncovered (Pl. 27). Undoubtedly it was exactly these burnt elements that produced the geophysical dot anomalies. We can therefore assume that most if not all of the discovered dot-like anomalies represent with relatively high probability grubenhäuser with heating or firing installations. In all likelihood many

39 In the corresponding publications one refers to Milčev’s Asar-dere results (e.g. Georgiev 1993a, 10, fig. 1) and it is needless to say the author cannot accept both conceptions in the light of the new excavation results and of the insights that come equally from that and from older documentation and observations.

40 Two crucibles for non-ferrous metal casting were found and attributed to the older occupation layer in the Great Basilica area. A connection, however, to the structures of the grubenhäuser No. 1 und 2 as was assumed by Georgiev (1993, 34) is most doubtful since both features were nearly completely destroyed either by early medieval constructing activities or by the excavations of 1976.

more grubenhäuser may have existed in the area, but these may be invisible in the geomagnetic record because they either did not possess such burnt installations or these were damaged or badly preserved. Speaking in favor of such an assumption are another four grubenhäuser, which came to light in trenches which were not especially positioned for searching for such features (trenches No. 4, 7, 15, and 25). We are therefore certainly entitled to assume a very dense and numerous distribution of such habitations all over the Outer Town's territory or, a "sea of cottages" that filled the huge area of the Outer Town. And as long as really well observed and documented early examples of such features are missing in the territories encircled by the great earthen rampart of Aboba-Pliska, we have to assume that this distribution was related predominantly or probably even exclusively to the period from the late ninth to eleventh centuries, thus to the time following Christianization.

This picture of a massive "infiltration" of grubenhäuser into Aboba-Pliska's original settlement pattern after Christianization finds additional support in geomagnetic prospecting results at church No. 5, northeast of the Inner Town, where the distribution of dot-like anomalies around that religious building suggests the contemporaneous existence of a grubenhaus settlement (Pl. 31-a).⁴¹ This picture is very much comparable in principle with that of the fourteenth-century church of Vinica near Preslav with numerous cottages of the sunken floor type surrounding that building. The complex was excavated by Totju Totev and modeled in the Historical Museum of Shumen (Pl. 31-b).⁴²

A number of further archaeological discoveries confirm the assumption of a late dating of the massive spread of the grubenhaus dwelling type in Aboba-Pliska and in the Pliska plain. Thus geomagnetic dot anomalies detected around the Strumba stone building complex – probably a noble boyar courtyard – near to the town of Shumen with its incorporated church structure seem to relate to a scattered distribution of grubenhäuser in the immediate surroundings of this complex datable to the time after Christianization. According to surface pottery finds, the time difference between the stone building compound and the grubenhaus structures must have been at most unimportant if there was any at all (Pl. 35-a-c). The 14C result also does not exclude a dating of the complex after Christianization.⁴³

The same is true for the building complex No. 31 excavated east of the Great Basilica by Stamen Michajlov, which consists of stone structures representing a church and buildings probably of a boyar courtyard superimposing a number of grubenhäuser.⁴⁴ These dwellings certainly emerged in the post-Christianization period, as has to be

41 Geophysical prospecting was carried out by Daniel Ziemann and students of the Shumen university.

42 Totev 1996.

43 Calibrated AMS 14-C date (2 sigma 93.1 %): cal. 773 AD-981 AD (Erlangen). See the article of Henning/Milo in this volume.

44 Michajlov 1949; Michajlov/Milčev 1959; Michajlov 1963.

derived from a recent re-evaluation of the pottery finds from that post-war excavation (1945-1961). Thanks to Janko Dimitrov's detailed analysis and complete presentation of the ceramic finds from that excavation, published in 2003,⁴⁵ a considerable number of fragments of glazed pottery and similar developed types of pottery were uncovered not only in the fillings of several *grubenhäuser* in general but also with certainty on the floors of these dwellings. The published original excavation reports present only a small selection of "old-looking" pottery fragments from these dwellings, probably in order to make the suggested earlier dating of the *grubenhäuser* to the eighth and early ninth centuries more plausible.⁴⁶ On the other hand there is no reason yet to call into question the consecutiveness of stratigraphically older *grubenhäuser* structures and later stone-built structures, which is sufficiently well documented in the excavation reports. Therefore questions arise as to Dimitrov's unexplained revision of the ground plan of the excavated area. For example *grubenhäuser* No. 6 delivered glazed pottery but, according to the original description and the primary ground plan, was nevertheless clearly superimposed by the stone building complex (Fig. 10-A).⁴⁷ However, in Dimitrov's new ground plan – a point perhaps recognizable only to the insider – it appears no longer to be interfered with by the stone walls but rather added to them from outside suggesting at least synchronism with the stone structures if not a later dating (Fig. 10-B).⁴⁸ Since no convincing explanation for this revision is given we are well advised to figure on exactly the same situation that likewise existed in the area of the stone building complex 31 and in the area of the stone buildings attached to the Great Basilica: *Grubenhäuser* features in both cases belong to the post-Christianization period of Aboba-Pliska (somewhere between the late ninth and the eleventh centuries) but are regularly superimposed by stone buildings. Stone-built complexes such as the so-called archbishop's monastery and the boyar courtyard (complex No. 31) consequently relate to a more advanced, later part of this period and their existence, if not emergence, in the Byzantine period of Aboba-Pliska (after AD 972) is not improbable.

45 Dimitrov 2003.

46 Michajlov 1949, 214-222, figs 42-47 (selection from the complex No. 31 without further differentiation), Michajlov/Milčev 1959, 281-283, fig. 21 (selection from the so-called lower occupation level) and Michajlov 1963, 12-20, figs 10-15 (selection from *grubenhäuser* No. 6 and 7).

47 Michajlov 1963, 6 fig. 1.

48 It is not *grubenhäuser* No. 6 that is depicted by Dimitrov (2003, 182 fig. 1) but the borders of the excavated area around that dwelling (see: Michajlov 1963, 7 fig. 2). It is also remarkable that in Dimitrov's revised drawing *grubenhäuser* No. 6 has lost its stone oven. According to Michajlov (1963, 13 fig. 9) this stone oven clearly represented the type dug into the dwelling floor and thus was identical with that of *grubenhäuser* No. 4 of the Great Basilica area excavated by the author (fig. 6) and with those stone ovens of the two published *grubenhäuser* excavated in 1959 in the Asar-dere area (see: Milčev 1960a, 34 fig. 5, 37 fig. 9). Dimitrov still seems to favor a very early dating for that type of oven and it is a matter of speculation why that stone oven had to be erased from the original ground plan.

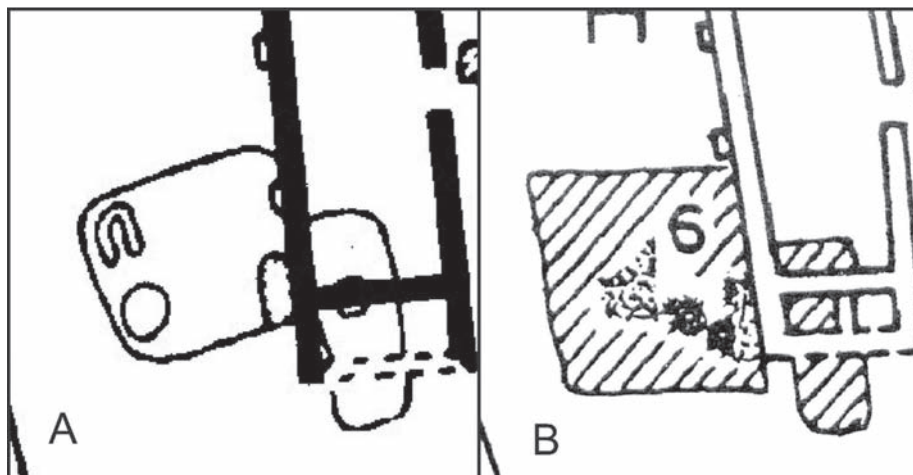


Fig. 10. Grubenhäuser No. 6 in the area of the stone building complex No. 31 in Aboba-Pliska. A - detail of the original publication of the ground plan (Michajlov 1963); B - the same detail in the recent publication of the ground plan (Dimitrov 2003). The sunken floor dwelling originally clearly recognizable by its shape and the stone oven in one corner as a standard eastern European grubenhaus, which is interfered with by later stone structures (A) and in the course of 55 years changed its appearance considerably, mutated into a kind of annex building of the stone-built complex and lost its typical stone oven. This mysterious transformation occurred after glazed pottery was attributed to the grubenhaus. As a result of this helpful metamorphosis the stone structures are no longer in danger of being attributed to the late tenth-eleventh century Byzantine period of Aboba-Pliska

Grubenhäuser excavated in a locality of the Outer Town called “selishte”, southeast of the Inner Town’s stone fortification in the immediate vicinity of the church No. 11, have to be attributed with great probability to the post-Christianization period as well. It is likely that they belong approximately to the time when this religious stone building was constructed nearby, although the excavators tend to relate at most some of these sunken floor dwellings to a system of palisade lines forming court-like structures datable by a coin find to the early ninth century.⁴⁹ Such enclosure lines have actually been attributed to the earlier development stages of Aboba-Pliska of the eighth/ninth centuries. Some of the grubenhäuser of the “selishte” locality clearly superimpose these older palisade structures and in some cases have delivered glazed pottery (e.g. grubenhaus No. 26). Moreover the geophysical measurement results of the German-Bulgarian team make clear that the extension of the grubenhaus occupation area exceeds considerably the area of the palisade enclosures.⁵⁰ The numerous cases of the sunken type stone ovens, which are known from grubenhäuser of this site, can hardly attest the early

49 Stanilov/Dimitrov/Jankulov 1991, 135.

50 See the geophysical mapping in the article of Stanilov & Dimitrov (fig. 11) in this volume.

dating that was proposed by the excavators.⁵¹ The Russian research team, which was allowed to excavate for a limited period in the Inner Town of Aboba-Pliska (1977-1980, 1983), has dated grubenhäuser with sunken stone ovens exclusively to a more advanced occupation period (from the late ninth to eleventh century)⁵² and this is in accordance with our observations from the Great Basilica area (grubenhäuser No. 4 with glazed pottery and a sunken type stone oven) mentioned above. A general chronological succession of clay furnaces, sunken stone ovens and stone ovens constructed at floor level⁵³ is improbable since our grubenhäuser No. 25 from the Asar-dere area with its clay furnace (Pl. 27) is clearly in a stratigraphically late position (dug into the erosion layer covering the early production site) and has delivered an advanced pottery spectrum.⁵⁴

A great number of grubenhäuser excavated by Todor Balabanov west of the recent rural settlement of Pliska (the former Aboba village) but still on the territory of the Outer Town were also dated to the later ninth to tenth/eleventh centuries according to the finds they have delivered.⁵⁵ Finally we have to assume that the many grubenhäuser detected in the Omurtag fortification⁵⁶ have to be connected with a time period when the khan's palace fortification, built in stone in the year 822 AD, had already lost its original function.⁵⁷ The small early medieval church that was built close to this grubenhäuser settlement most probably was just one element of it.

51 *Ibid.* Grubenhäuser No. 26, which contained glazed pottery, possessed a stone oven of the sunken type.

52 Pletnjova 1992, 54. These results are questioned from the Bulgarian side (Dimitrov 2004, and the article of Stanilov & Dimitrov in this volume) stressing the traditional view of a strong Slavic character of Aboba-Pliska long before Christianization started. Especially for this aspect, see: Dimitrov 1994b.

53 For the attempt to construct such a succession, see the article of Stanilov & Dimitrov in this volume.

54 A chronological succession of these oven types has already been excluded as a result of extended settlement analyses in the Middle Danube regions (see: Ruttkay 2002). The deep differences of opinions between Pletnjova's Russian team and the Bulgarian side about such issues is reflected in the criticism of the Russian results published in the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences' series "Pliska-Preslav" (Dimitrov 1994b).

55 Balabanov 2004b.

56 See the article of Henning/Balabanov/Milo/Ziemann in this volume.

57 The assumption of Antonova/Dremsizova-Nelčinova 1981 of an "early Slavic" dating of the earliest sunken floor dwellings in the Omurtag fortification was recently called in question by Balabanov 2004a, 125.

7. Aboba-Pliska and the Hungarian incursions (AD 895-965)

As a result of these many observations we can exclude with high probability that a huge camp-like rampart fortification filled with rural settlements of the *grubenhau* dwelling type was created in the late seventh or eighth centuries when the Bulgars arrived and settled in the Pliska plain. With the exception of a few single areas within the later Outer Town's territory, an obvious "camp" would have been largely empty until the late ninth century. A few areas were probably inhabited or used by people who had to fulfill service tasks for the palace center such as craftsmen using the water resources of the Asar-dere creek or, people living in the area where the so-called archbishop's monastery was later built and dealing at least in part as well with craft production. Thus no plausible reason can be named as to why such an incredibly large rampart-and-ditch fortification should have been constructed in the early centuries of the Aboba-Pliska complex.

The situation between the late ninth and the eleventh centuries, however, was quite different since a large population now settled in the shadow of the fortified center that may have offered protection in times of insecurity or incursions. Because of the known difficulties connected with pottery dating it is impossible to decide if the area-wide occupation of the Outer Town's large territories, which was bound to the emergence of *grubenhau* agglomerations, resulted from a gradual process that started in the late ninth century and stretched at least over the following decades or, alternatively, was connected with a short-term development or even with a relatively sudden event.

The impressive uniformity of the huge rectangular rampart fortification and the exhaustive and dense occupation, which seem strictly to respect the borderline marked by the earthen rampart defense, makes a planned process, such as a planned concentration of rural population around the stonewall-protected administrative center, seem more likely. The political events of the late ninth and the first half of the tenth centuries on the other hand obviously deliver the perfect background for deciphering the circumstances that may have caused the emergence of that unique fortified settlement complex.

In the year 895 AD, after a centuries-long period of stability interrupted only by the accidental two-week-campaign of Byzantine emperor Nikephoros I in the year 811 AD, the Bulgarian countryside for the first time experienced terrible devastation and the abduction of large numbers of captives at the hands of Hungarian invaders. Only some fortified places resisted, such as *Drastar/Durostorum* (Silistra) or *Mundraga* (Madara or Shumen), which provided shelter to the defeated Bulgarian ruler Simeon I, and probably the fortified Preslav.⁵⁸ But this was just a foretaste of what would follow forty years later. In the next year (896 AD) a turnaround took place when the Pechenegs, probably supported by the Bulgarians, succeeded in completely defeating the Hungarians in their heartlands of the Southern Bug region (Etelköz). The Hungarian occupation of

⁵⁸ Zlatarski [1927] 1971, 289-297; Runciman 1930, 146.

the Carpathian basin and decades of Hungarian raids into Western Europe followed. Subsequent to their defeat at the hands of Henry the Fowler in AD 933, however, the Hungarians avoided the west and turned their attention once again to Bulgaria in AD 935. And in the course of the next 30 years, during the reign of Tsar Peter I, there were repeated attacks. After Peter called in vain to the western emperor Otto I in 965 AD for help against the Hungarians, this difficult period ended with the conclusion of a peace treaty between Peter and the Hungarians in the same year.⁵⁹

The heavy impact of these events can be determined from the many cases of non-fortified settlements in the northeastern Bulgarian countryside, especially along the Danube's right riverbank, which were destroyed or damaged in approximately these times. Destruction layers containing finds of a kind of arrowhead, usually identified in central and western Europe as "Hungarian",⁶⁰ help to underline this picture.⁶¹ Michael Wendel has argued that after the disastrous events of AD 895 the damaged settlement of Krivina at the Danube was rebuilt and transformed into a sort of military garrison for defending the Danube border.⁶² Unfortunately the modern village of Krivina covers most parts of the ancient site and thus makes a clear judgment impossible as to whether or not Krivina had been fortified in this period. Exactly this can be proven, however, for the inland settlement of Stårmen just a few kilometers south of Krivina, this being in a similar strategic position on the same river course and overlooking the important traffic route leading south to the Balkans. The extended Polish excavations in Stårmen have proven that a rectangular earthen fortification was not built until the late ninth century and at that time encircled the central part of the former open settlement. Thus the rampart is superimposing many early medieval grubenhäuser structures of the preceding large open settlement that had existed here continuously since the seventh century. And its transformation into a fortification coincides exactly with the period of the Hungarian incursions.⁶³ Similar examples of rectangular rampart fortifications superimposing preceding early medieval grubenhäuser features have been observed in multiple sites at the Danube's right riverbank as for example in Nova Černa⁶⁴ and in Popina,⁶⁵ both in

59 For a more detailed description of these historical events, see: Ziemann (forthcoming).

60 Schulze-Dörrlamm 2002.

61 Two well explored, non-fortified early medieval settlements at the Danube River course can be named here, which must have experienced considerable destructions especially by the unexpected attack of AD 869. Both settlements have delivered Hungarian arrowheads and correspondingly rich archaeological finding situations: Krivina, district of Ruse, on top of the former early Byzantine fortification of Iatrus (see: Wendel 1986, 197-198) with multiple hoards of iron tools and coins and Garvan, district of Silistra, near to the traditional Danube crossing (Vážarova 1986, 52 fig. 49).

62 See his article in this volume.

63 Hensel 1980, 139 fig. 44 and the article of Kurnatowska & Mamzer in this volume.

64 Milčev/Angelova 1971, 17-23.

65 Vážarova 1956, 58 fig. 45.

the district of Silistra. These rectangular rampart fortifications are archaeologically attested all along the Bulgarian Danube riverbank. And there are many positioned along the inland traffic routes as for example the rampart fortification of Chuma, in the district of Razgrad, which must have been attacked heavily or was destroyed even in this period of unrest as large numbers of Hungarian arrowheads suggest.⁶⁶ There is no room for the curious assumption that these fortifications would have been starting points for town developments as was suggested by Stamen Michajlov, who did not exclude a dating even to the seventh century.⁶⁷ And in no way whatsoever could they have worked as early forts against the sixth/seventh-century Slavic incursions into the Balkan Peninsula as the interpretations of the Nova Černa excavations might suggest.⁶⁸ Nor were they elements of a gigantic early defense system, settled in the late seventh century by Bulgars in an area south of the Danube for the protection of their “state territory” against the Byzantines, through which Rašo Rašev has sought to explain the mysterious rectangular standard fortifications in northeastern Bulgaria.⁶⁹ Archaeological analysis of the construction situations of some well-explored fortified sites of that type, and the datable finds from these fortifications, clearly indicate that most probably we are dealing here with the “Bulgarian solution” to problems caused by the Hungarian incursions into Europe. And this solution was not so different from those, which were found contemporaneously in western and central Europe: Fortified refuges for the rural population, which also served as military fortresses manned by peasant-soldiers, sprang up everywhere in the eastern parts of the Frankish empire and a new elite cavalry force was created. Widukind of Corvey described in detail the rapid emergence of this western system between the Rhine and Elbe rivers.⁷⁰ Developments in the bordering Slavic lands looked quite similar in principle but differ in some details as a result of particular traits in society.⁷¹

When the Hungarians appeared for the first time, suddenly and unexpectedly, south of the Lower Danube in AD 896, the countryside was certainly easy prey for them. However, when they returned forty years later they might have found a better armed and well-protected country.

It seems impossible to imagine that the ruling center in the Pliska plain was not affected by these important developments. We know that the Hungarians coming from the Bug River area must have crossed the Danube River somewhere in the surroundings of the old *Durostorum* (modern-day Silistra) and when continuing their raid in the direction of Preslav they necessarily must have passed through the Pliska plain.

66 Rašev/Stanišev 1987, 150 pl. 49.

67 Michajlov 1982; *idem* 1967, 140.

68 Milčev/Angelova 1971.

69 Rašev 1982.

70 Widukind I/38.

71 Henning 1997.

Hungarian arrowheads found in Aboba-Pliska suggest that the fortified complex was at least attacked if not actually seized.⁷² Some of these finds even come from the area inside the stone fortification of the Inner Town and we have therefore to assume that the stone fortress of Aboba-Pliska itself was certainly attacked.⁷³ Did Aboba-Pliska consist until this time only of that inner stone fortification that encircled the palace compound? Was a strong and possibly strategic concentration of people in the area surrounding the old palace and ruling center, which was still at least an important religious place, just one of the conclusions drawn from the first experiences with the Hungarians in the year AD 895? And was another consequence the encirclement of the Outer Town area with the huge rectangular rampart-and-ditch fortification, which in principle represents the same solution, but on a much bigger scale, as it was adopted in Stärmen exactly at the same time and certainly in many more places? Archaeological trenches through the outer rampart line of Aboba-Pliska have delivered early medieval pottery materials from the bottom of this earthwork, which testifies to an earlier occupation.⁷⁴ This is an observation very similar to the situation found in Stärmen and in other places that were fortified in this period. Such an archaeological picture would fit well with the information from the written sources about the defeated Bulgarian ruler Simeon I who did not seek shelter in the flatland places of the Pliska plain in 895 AD but in better protected fortresses (Silistra, Mudraga). The best explanation for all these circumstances is the assumption of a much later emergence of the typical outlook of the “megapolis” of Aboba-Pliska than formerly assumed: There are many reasons, therefore, for interpreting the huge earthen rampart fortification, and thus the emergence of the Outer Town of Aboba-Pliska, as the central element of a country-wide military and defense build-up in the first half of the tenth century, intended to protect these southeastern European territories against the Hungarian incursions. Needless to say, this fortification process was centrally stimulated and conducted.

8. Aboba-Pliska: A palace island in a cottage sea (Conclusions)

Taking into account that the huge dimension of the Aboba-Pliska rampart fortification was very probably not the result of an economic development, but rather a military and strategic answer to heavy political problems with which a strongly centralized society

72 Vitljanov 1993, 122 pl. 1; *idem* 1996, pl. 3.

73 See the Pliska catalog in this volume, No. 11 (Hungarian arrowhead from the Inner Town near to the southern fortress wall); Michajlov 1949, 213 fig. 41, No. 12 (Hungarian arrowhead from the Inner Town c. 100 m west of the palace centre).

74 Rašev 1982, 97; *idem* 1985a, 10.

was more or less suddenly confronted, we are certainly entitled to ask if the Aboba-Pliska complex as a whole may be considered a true city.

Although serious evidence is largely missing for economic exchange relations between the predominantly agricultural population of the Outer Town and craft working in the vicinity of the palace center, we should nonetheless characterize the core structure of Aboba-Pliska as a city. However, it was a sort of planned palace city not comparable in principle with the dynamic town developments in contemporaneous Western Europe.

The location of that palace city was initially chosen irrespective of the ancient network of roads, being placed in the middle of a large plain without access to any river or major traffic route. Thus long distance trade cannot be seen as a decisive factor for the establishment of the palace compound, although it may have played a certain role in its further history, e.g. at the end of the ninth century when quarrels are reported over the status of the Bulgarian traders in Constantinople, which triggered a military conflict with Byzantium and the first fatal Hungarian incursion of AD 895. Finds of scales both for coins and commodities and of lead weights from Aboba-Pliska, which attest trading and exchange activities, have to be dated to this period after Christianization.⁷⁵

In the eighth to earlier ninth centuries the Asar-dere production area in particular was oriented first of all towards the raised standard of living in the palace center of the Inner Town. This craft production, dependent upon the residence of rulers and predominantly serving their needs, continued to exist inside the Inner Town after the Asar-dere production area was abandoned.

The German-Bulgarian research campaigns in the Outer Town have uncovered several new defense lines, consisting of earthen rampart or stonewall lines with ditches in front of these lines (Pls 23 and 28) or with ditches alone (Pl. 25). These results shall be discussed in more detail elsewhere. The exact dating and a determination as to the function of the ditch lines uncovered in the so-called Poluostrov area (Pl. 25) are still open to debate. However, a correlation between the newly discovered defense lines north and east of the Inner Town's stone fortification (Pls 23 and 28) and the fate of the Asar-dere production area on the one hand, and the stone fortification of the Inner Town on the other, may be described as follows: The broad ditch visible in trench No. 20 (green line) must have been created first of all in addition to the northern front of the stone fortification, which was already existent (blue line). As a next step the fortification line sectioned in trench No. 19 (yellow line) was created, and finally the rampart-ditch line sectioned in trench 15 (red line) was built. The erosion model of the Asar-dere area (Pl. 24b) demonstrates that very probably this line (red line) provided a channel for the colluvium materials to flow over the Asar-dere production area. In other words the defense building activities (green, yellow and red line), in addition to the stone fortification already in existence, took place when the Asar-dere production activities were declining or had already ended. The final development stage in this suc-

75 Vitljanov 1992 (scales); Dončeva-Petkova 1981 (lead weights).

cession is represented by grubenhous No. 30 (Pl. 28, section 15), which was established when the defense line (red line) had lost its function. This seems to be the period when a much bigger solution for the defense of the Aboba-Pliska complex was developed: the construction of the earthen rampart of the Outer Town. In this period at the latest several workshops or craft quarters consisting of glassmaking installations and smithies emerged in the Inner Town or were transferred to this better protected area. The unusual displacement of many kinds of firing installations into the protected territory of the Inner Town, which happened until the late ninth century and would have caused extreme danger for living quarters, has certainly to be explained in light of the political events described above.⁷⁶ This was just a small transformation of the palace town in continuous existence in the center of the Aboba-Pliska fortification.

The huge and densely occupied Outer Town, however, which developed most probably in the tenth century, was nothing but a monstrous strategic defense enclosure created in order to protect the ruling and religious center of the Bulgarian realm and to give shelter to the rural population of the northeastern Bulgarian countryside in times of unrest and incursions.

Caption for Plate 28 (see Plates at the end of this volume)

Pliska: fortification and ditch system enclosing the Inner Town.

Key: 1 - natural loess, 2 - plough zone, 3 - humous ditch filling, 4 - lime quarry stones, 5 - earthen mound No. XXXIII, completely destroyed by excavations, 6 - small ditch in front of a dry stone wall probably facing an earthen rampart, 7 - large ditch probably in front of an earthen rampart enclosing two earthen mounds (probably keeps), 8 - ditch in front of a earthen rampart with facing dry stone walls on both sides, the outer facing of the rampart built out of demolition stone and reddish mortar material, 9 - solid stone fortification wall built out of large stone blocks and reddish mortar (investigated by K. Škorpil), 10 - earthen rampart with two facing dry stone walls on both sides (excavated by S. Pletneva), 11 - earthen mounds (probably keeps)

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⁷⁶ For craft working inside the Inner Town in continuation of the Asar-Dere center, see: Dončeva-Petkova 1980 and *idem* 1996 (iron working), Dončeva-Petkova/Zlatinova 1978 (glassmaking); Balabanov 1980 and *idem* 1981 (bronze working).

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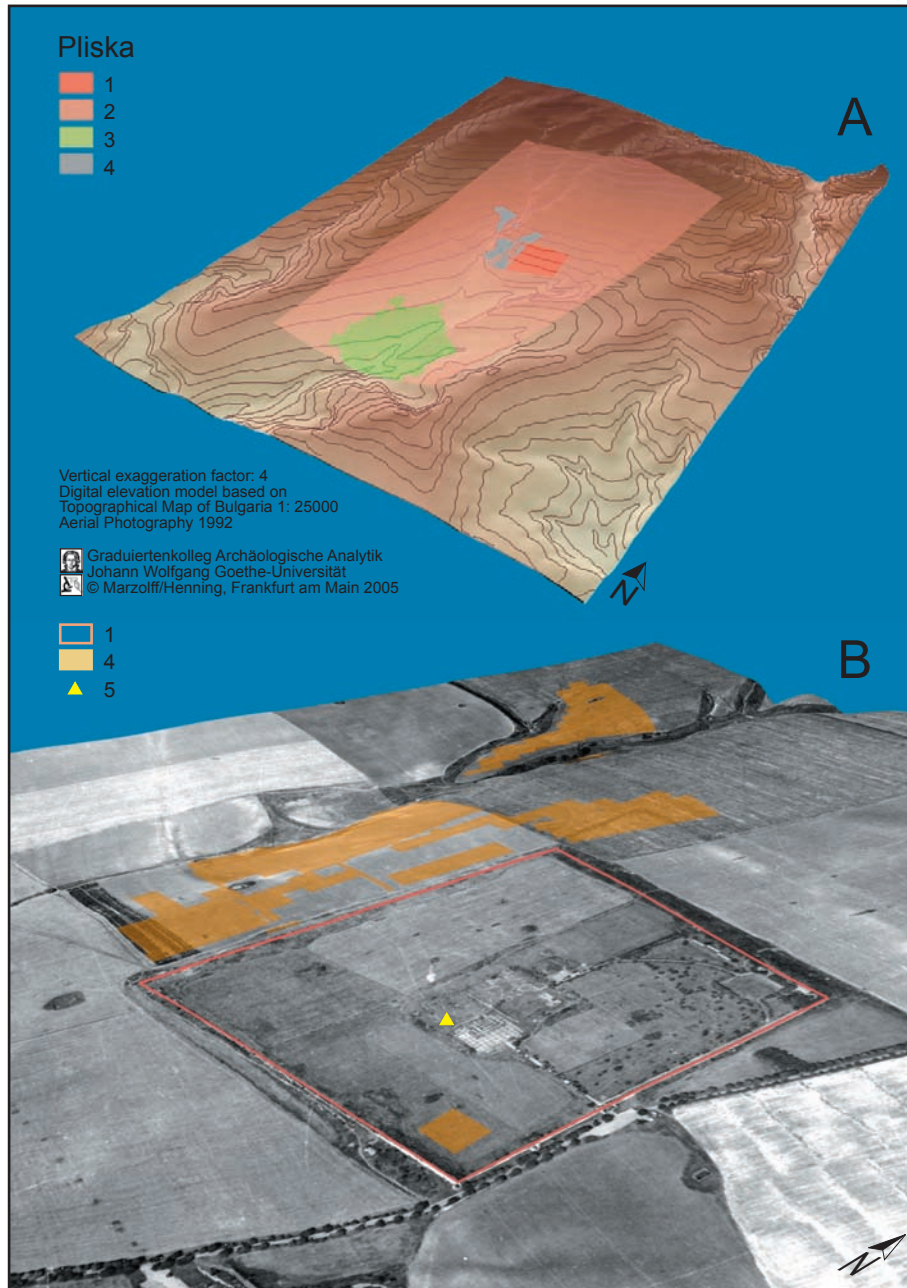
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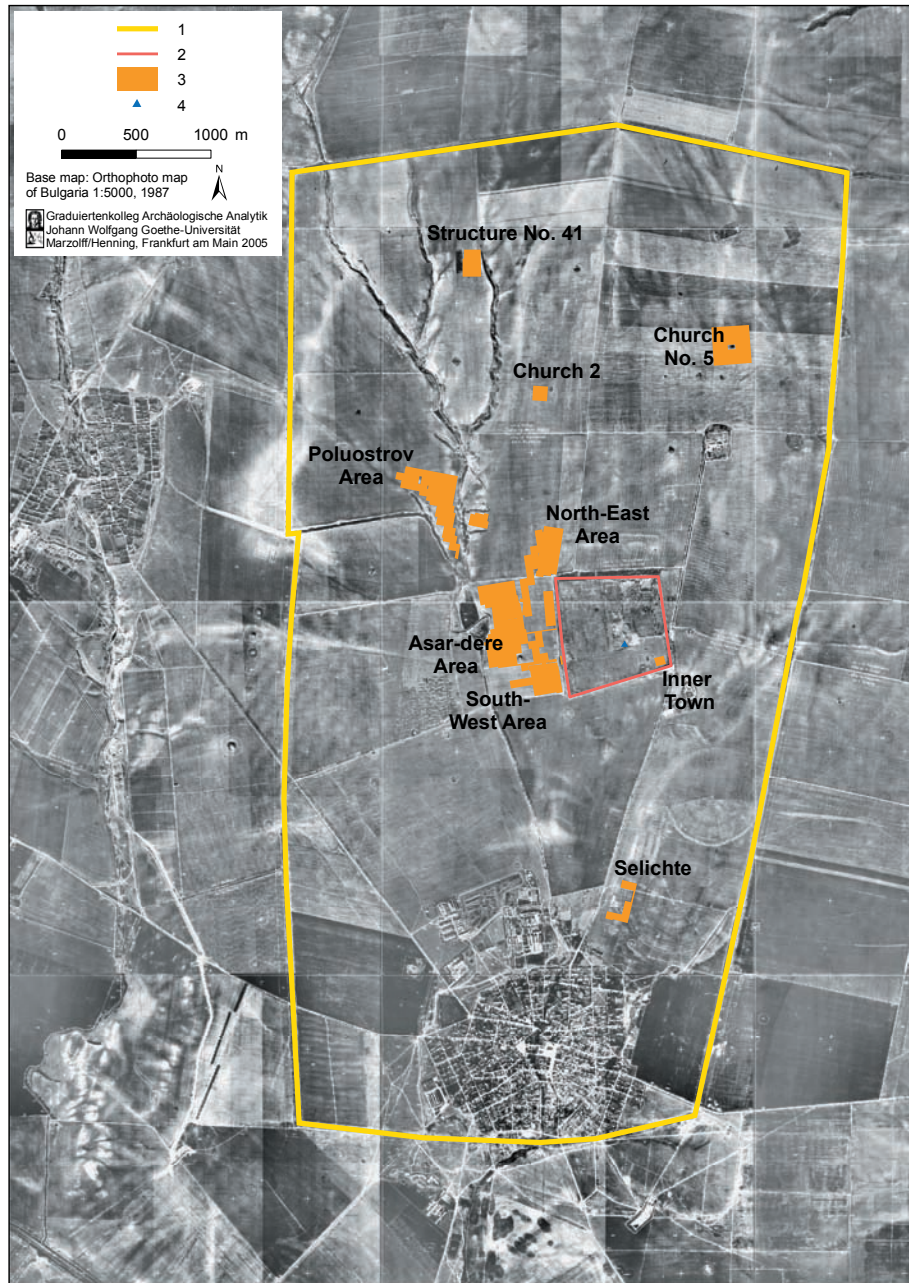
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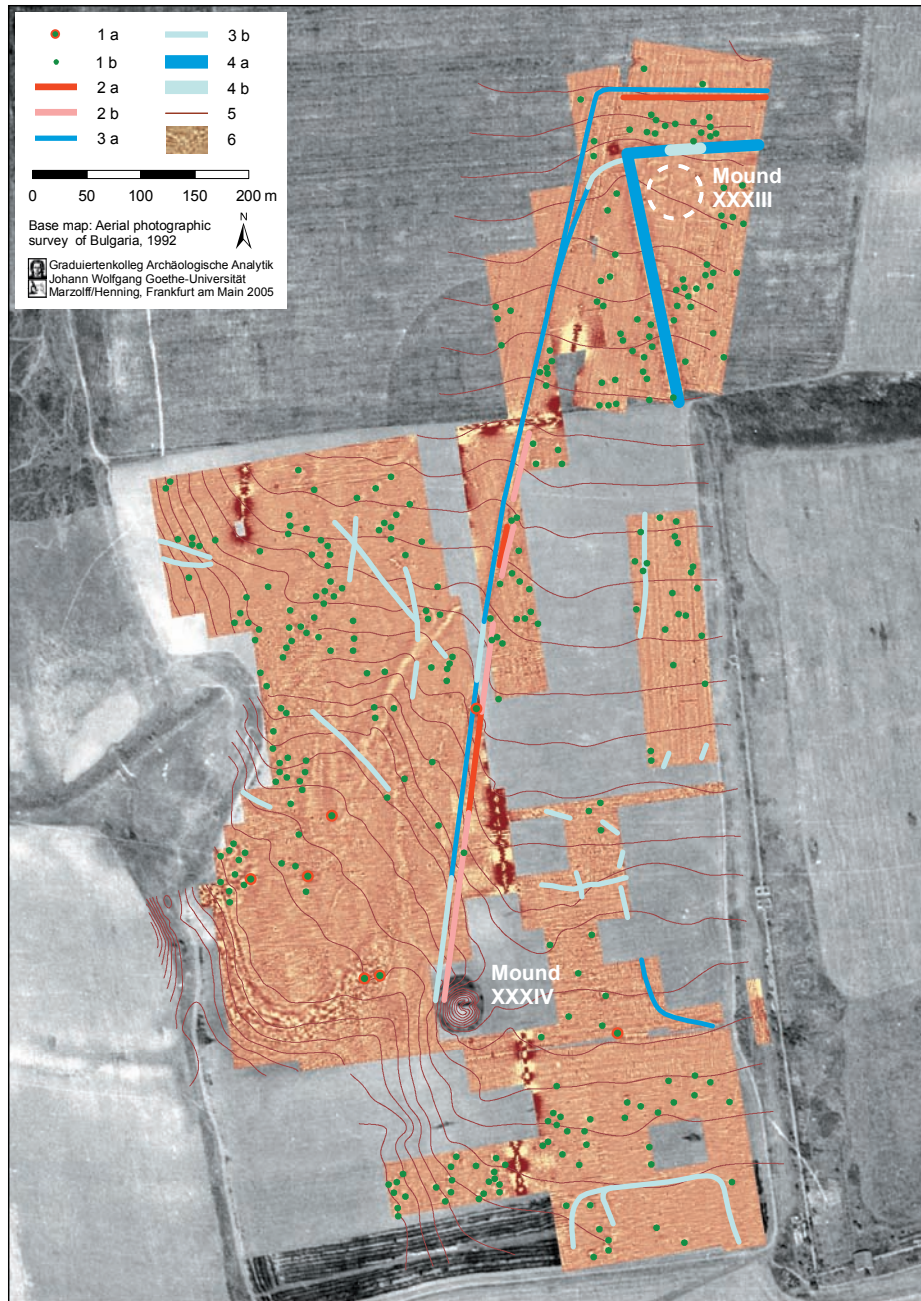
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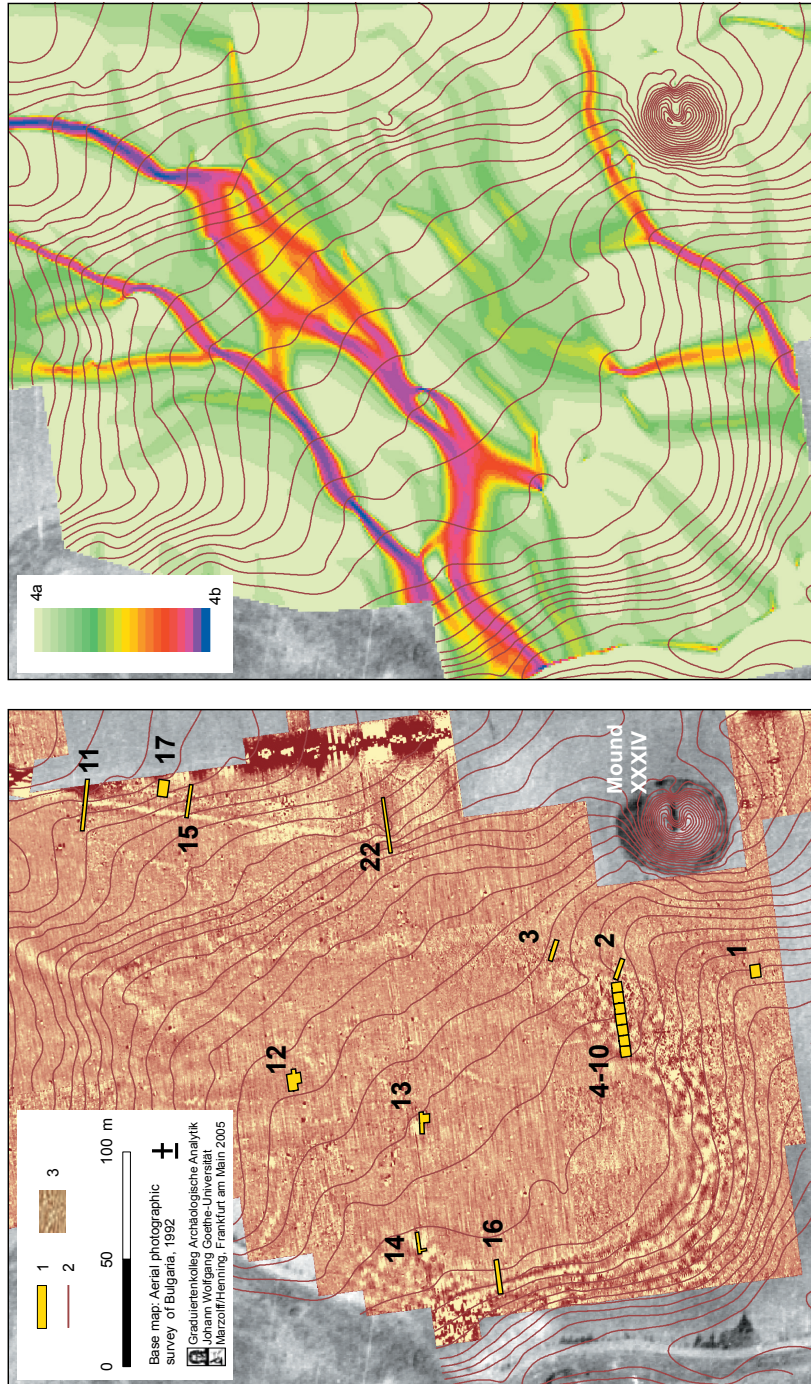
Topographic situation in 3D views with contour lines (A - total view) and with aerial photo overlay (B - core area); key: 1 - Inner Town, 2 - Outer Town, 3 - present-day town named Pliska, 4 - geomagnetic survey area, 5 - geoelectrics (section 21)



Orthophoto map of Pliska with survey areas of the German-Bulgarian expedition (1997-2001); key: 1 - earthen rampart-ditch fortification (Outer Town), 2 - stone fortification wall (Inner Town), 3 - geomagnetics, 4 - geoelectrics (secret passage of the “Krum Palace”)



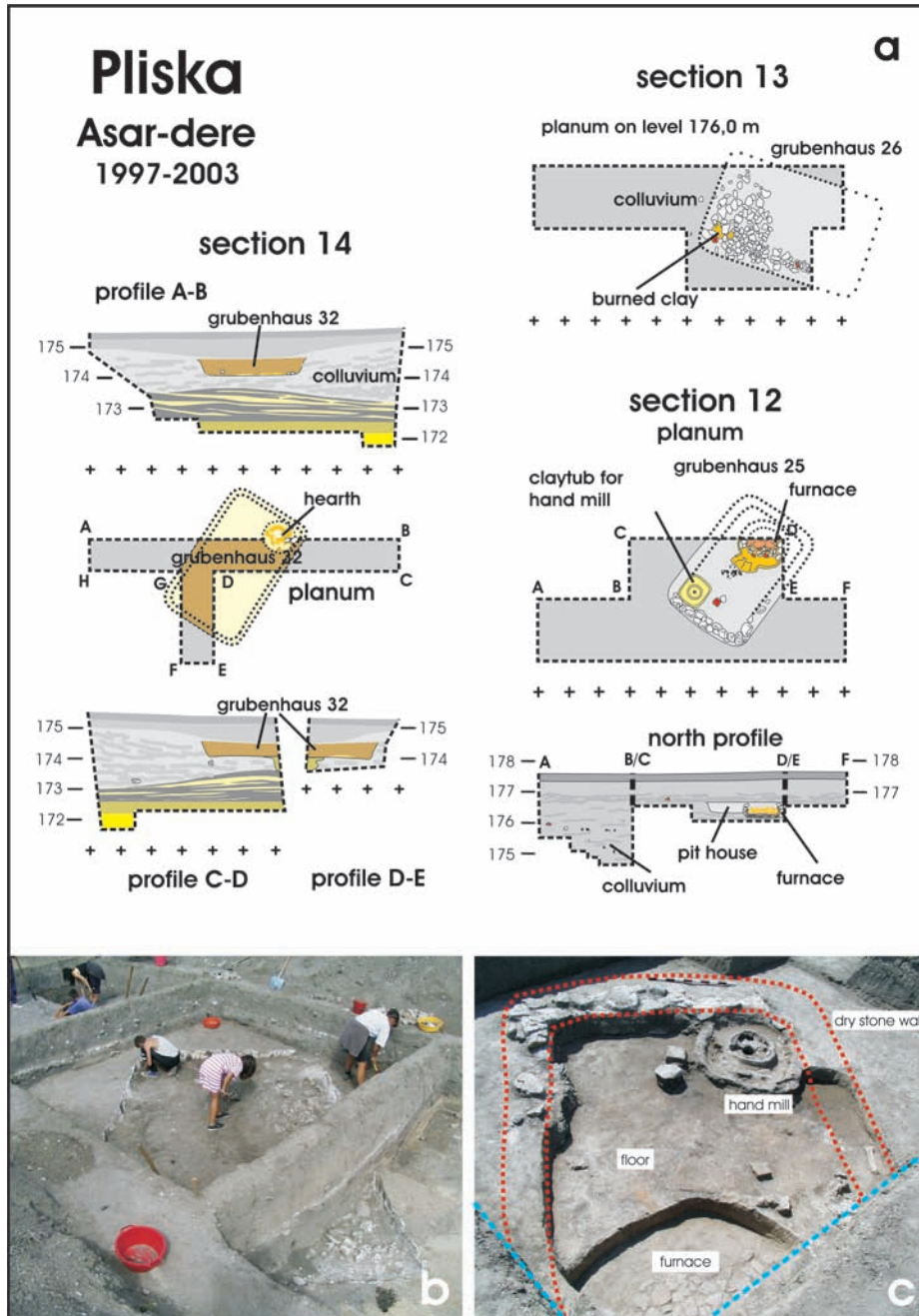
Pliska. Investigation area (1997-2001) west of Pliska's Inner Town; key: 1 - grubenhaus, 2 - rampart/fortification wall, 3 - ditch, 4 - broad ditch, a - confirmed, b - expected, 5 - contour lines (0.5 m), 6 - geomagnetics



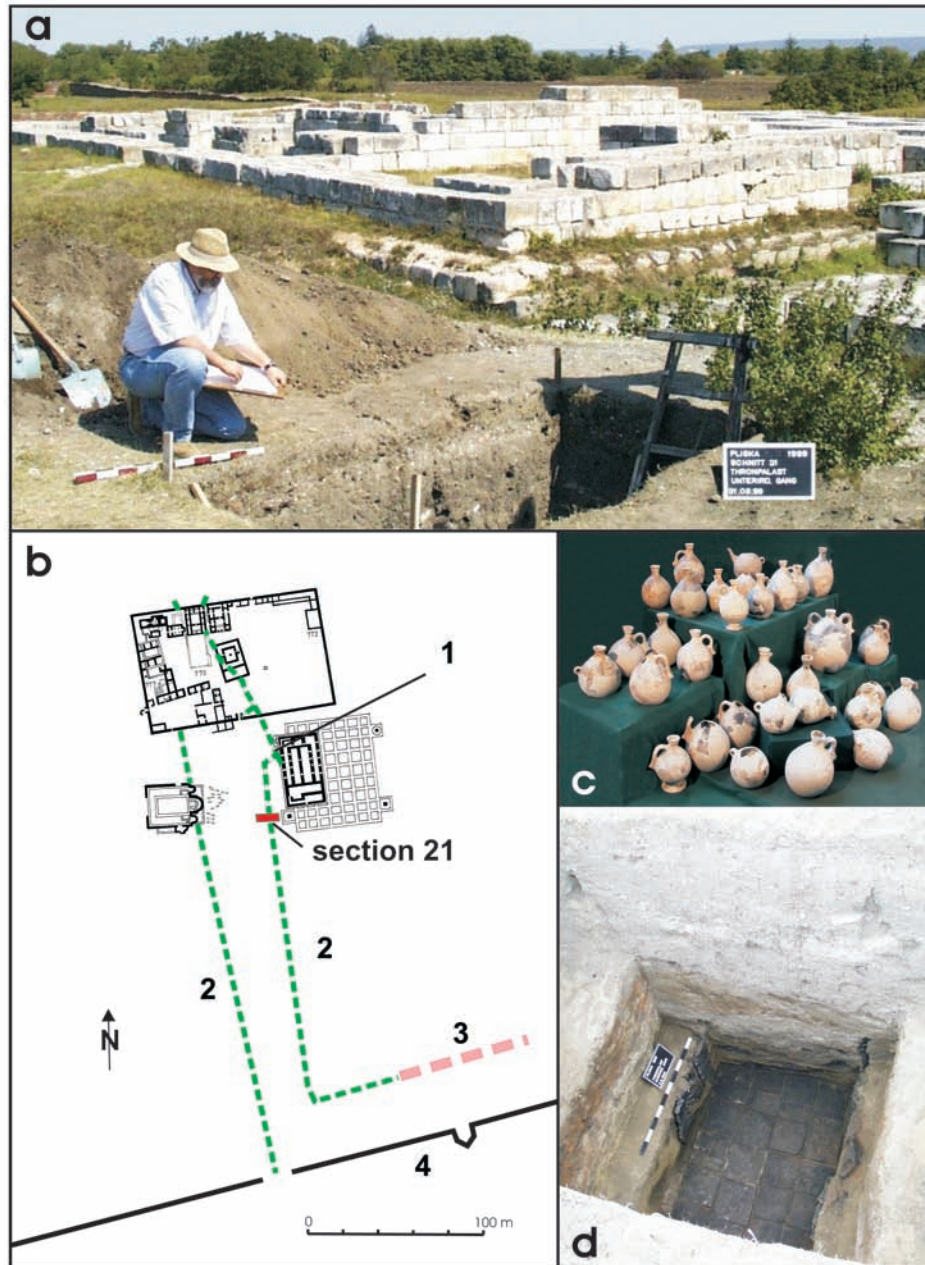
Asar-dere area west of Pliska's Inner Town: geomagnetic survey, archaeological excavation trenches and flowpath model; key left: 1 - excavation trench, 2 - contour lines (0.5m), 3 - geomagnetic survey area, key right: 4a - low potential runoff concentration (small catchment area), 4b - high potential runoff concentration (large catchment area)



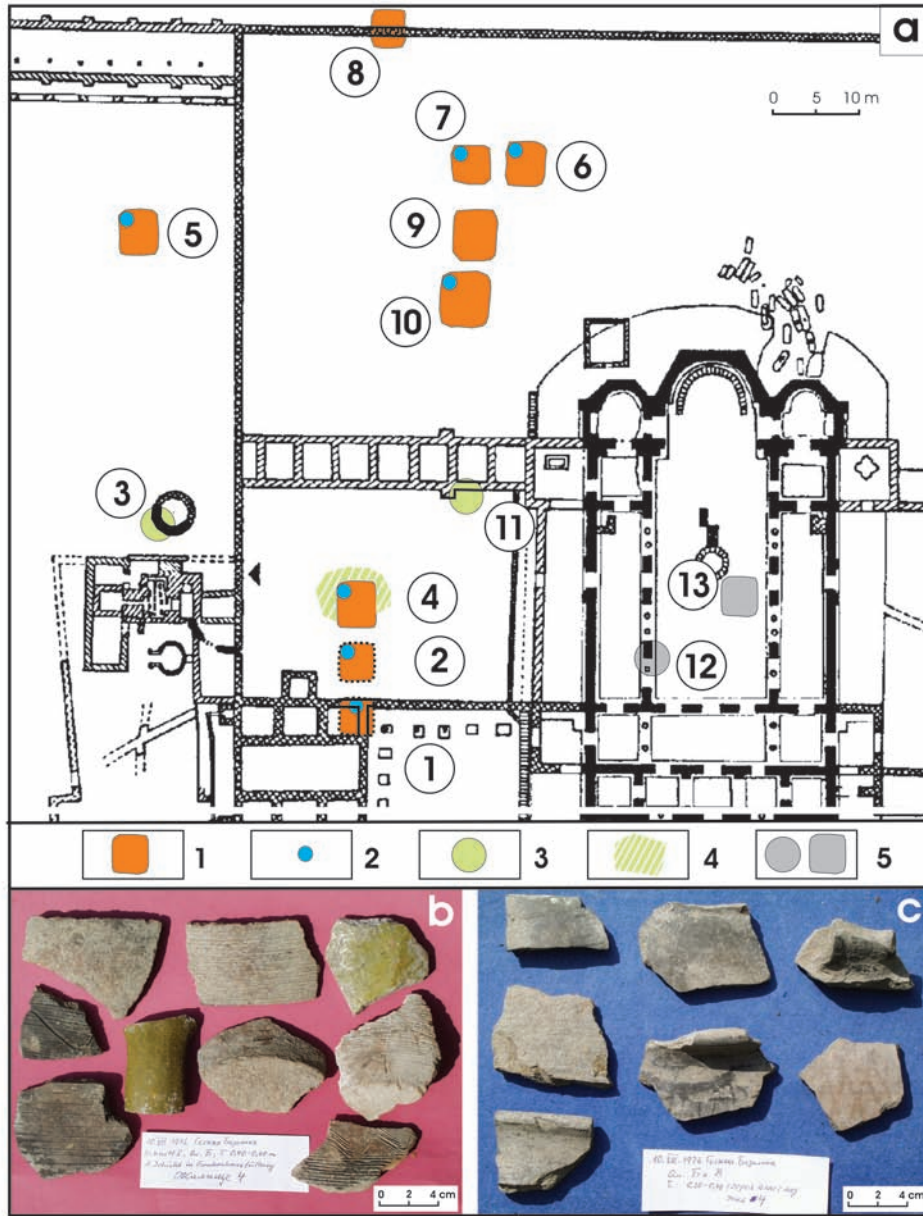
Pliska. Investigation of the Poluoostrov area in the Outer Town territory (2001); key: 1 - archaeological excavation trench, 2 - geomagnetics



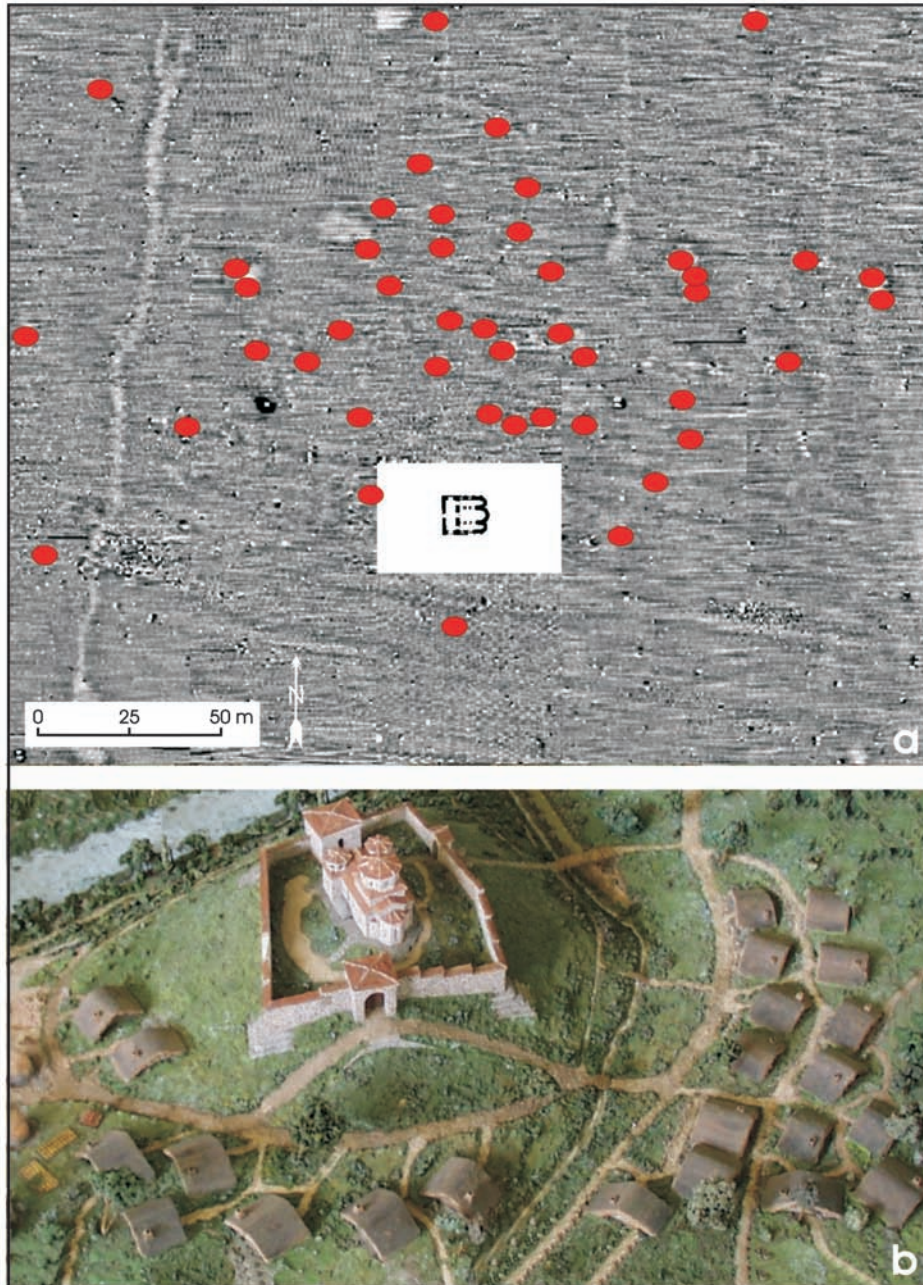
Grubenhäuser situations in the Asar-dere area: a - grubenhäuser No. 25, 26, 32; b - grubenhäuser No. 20; c - grubenhäuser No. 25



a - excavation of one of the secret passages in the Inner town of Pliska, 1999, section 21; b - the passage (2) connects the "Krum palace" (1) and the earth-and-stone fortification (3) uncovered by S. Pletneva; c - set of vessels of the yellow pottery type found in the secret passage (excavation R. Rašev); d - brick pavement and burnt timber constructions in the secret passage



a - area of the Great Basilica with excavated settlement features (numbering in circles); key: Grubenhäuser (1) with ovens (2) and detected flat settlement features (3) and contemporaneous occupation layers (4); ambiguous structures (5); b - glazed and non-glazed ceramics (between late ninth and eleventh century) found on the floor of grubenhäuser No. 4 (excavated by the author in 1977); c - earlier variations of ceramics with a high component of grey ware (eighth-early ninth century) associated with flat settlement structures and similar rests of occupation layers that were later cut by grubenhäuser



a - geophysical mapping of an area around the church No. 5. The marked in red anomalies indicate the positions of sunken structures, most probably grubenhäuser; b - reconstruction of a similar situation with grubenhäuser around the fourteenth century church of Vinitza (excavation: T. Totev)