

Relații Interetnice în Transilvania
Militaria Mediaevalia în Europa centrală și de sud-est

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Lucrări prezentate în conferințele internaționale
Relații Interetnice în Transilvania
Sibiu, 2015-2017

Editat de / Edited by
Zeno Karl PINTER, Anca NIȚOI și Claudia URDUZIA

Editura ASTRA MUSEUM
Sibiu • 2018

Acțiune cofinanțată de Consiliul Județean Sibiu.
Se distribuie gratuit.

Descrierea CIP a Bibliotecii Naționale a României

PINTER, ZENO KARL

Relații interetnice în Transilvania : Militaria Medievală în Europa Centrală și de Sud-Vest / Zeno Karl Pinter, Anca Nițoi, Claudia Urduzia. - Sibiu : Astra Museum, 2018

ISBN 978-606-733-267-4

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94

Front cover: Pictură murală din biserica evanghelică din Mălâncrav – detaliu.

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Adress: Editura ASTRA MUSEUM
Piața Mică, nr.11, cod poștal 550182, Sibiu, Romania
Tel.: 0269 202 426, 0269 202 402
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**THE FORTIFICATION SYSTEM IN THE RHODOPE MOUNTAINS AND ITS
ROLE IN THE REGIONAL MILITARY CONFLICTS DURING THE MIDDLE AGES**

Stoyan POPOV, Dimitar DIMITROV*

Résumé: Cet article a pour but de révéler, à partir de l'analyse interdisciplinaire des sources écrites et des données archéologiques, le rôle du système de fortification Rhodopéen dans les conflits militaires entre les deux principales forces politiques luttant pour la suprématie dans la région au Moyen-Âge – le Royaume des Bulgares et l'Empire byzantin. En outre, la fonction et l'importance de la chaîne des Rhodopes et de sa ligne de défense seront également retracées dans le contexte des affrontements militaires fatals entre les États locaux et les envahisseurs d'Ouest et d'Orient, respectivement les Chevaliers de la Troisième et de la Quatrième Croisade au 13^{ème} siècle et les Turcs ottomans au 14^{ème} siècle. Les principales forteresses des Rhodopes, leurs caractéristiques de fortification et leur importance stratégique pour le contrôle de la région et de son réseau de communication routier adjacent seront soulignés..

Keywords: Rhodopes, Fortification System, regional military conflicts, Byzantium, Bulgarian Tsardom, Crusaders, Rhodopean separatists.

Fortification, especially before the gunpowder age, was instrumental for strengthening (fortis facere) via military constructions and buildings the defence of a territory in warfare but also for enhancing the effective political control over a region during peacetime. In the course of their long time rivalry for hegemony in the South-Eastern Europe Byzantium and the Bulgarian Tsardom shared a very well-developed network of fortresses and military installations, based on a constantly evolving experience combining age-old traditions and new trends. Fortress construction in both Byzantium and Medieval Bulgaria¹ was subject to a common strategic-fortification concept. The individual fortresses located in a given geographical area and designed to provide for its defence were included in fortification systems, all of which having a specific

strategic purpose. During the different periods of the existence of the medieval Bulgarian state in its borders there have been established and functioned about 21 fortification systems². Among them, with its place and significance the Rhodopean fortification system stands out³.

This paper aims to reveal on the basis of interdisciplinary analysis of the written sources and archaeological data the role of the Rhodopean fortification system in the military conflicts between the two main political forces battling for supremacy in the region during the Middle Ages – the Bulgarian Tsardom and the Byzantine Empire. Besides, the function and significance of the Rhodope Mountains Range and its defensive line of fortresses will also be traced in the context of the fateful military clashes between the local states and the invaders from the West and East - respectively the Knights of the Third and Fourth Crusade in the 13th century and the Ottomans in the 14th

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¹ Lawrence, A. *A Skeletal History of Byzantine Fortification*. – The Annual of the British School at Athens, Vol. 78 (1983), p. 171–227; Ovcharov, D. *Vizantiiski i bulgarski kreposti 5th – 10th c.*, Sophia 1977; Harbova, M. *Otbranitelni saorazhenia v Bulgarskoto srednovekovie*, Sophia 1981; Balabanov, P., Boyadzhiev, St., Tuleshkov, N. *Krepostnoto stroitelstvo v bulgarskite zemi*, Sophia 2000; Ovcharov, N., Kodzhamanova, D. *Perperikon I okolnite tvurdini prez Srednovekovieto. Krepostnoto stroitelstvo v Iztocnite Rhodopi*, Sophia 2003.

² Angelov, D., Cholpanov, B. *Bulgarska voenna istoria prez Srednovekovieto (10th – 15th c.)*, Sophia 1994, p. 298.

³ Cholpanov, B. *Rodopskata ukrepitelna Sistema*. – Izvestia na Generalnia shtab na Instituta za voenna istoria, 51(1991), p. 239 – 275; Angelov, D., Cholpanov, B. *Bulgarska voenna istoria prez Srednovekovieto*, p. 313 – 316; Boyadzhiev, N. *Krepostna sistema v Srednite Rodopi prez Kusnata antichnost i Srednovekovieto*. – In: *LAUREA in honorem Margaritae Vaklinova, I, София 2009*, p. 103 – 110.

century. The key Rhodope fortresses, their fortification features and their strategic significance for the control over the region and its adjacent road-communication network will be highlighted.

The Rhodopes (Родопи, Ροδόπη) are a mountain range in southern Bulgaria and northern Greece, part of the Rila-Rhodope massif. Its length is about 240 km, and the width is 100 km. The total area of the Rhodope Mountains is about 14 737 km², of which 12 233 km² – (i.e. 83% of the total area) are on the Bulgarian territory. It is practically the most extensive mountain in Bulgaria and occupies about 1/7 of the Bulgarian territory. The average altitude of the Rhodopes is 785 m, thus making it a medium-high mountain. To the north the mountain slopes descend steeply towards the Upper Thracian Plain. To the west, the Rhodopes reach the Avram saddle, Yundola and the valley of the Mesta River. To the south and east they extend to the coastal plains of Western (Greek) Thrace (between the Mesta and Maritsa rivers in the northeast of Greece). In terms of their geomorphology, the Rhodopes consist of three subdivisions, which are distinguished by their relief. The Western Rhodopes are the larger (66% of the area of the Rhodopes in Bulgaria) and higher (with an average altitude of 1500 – 1600 m) part of the mountains. The Eastern Rhodopes are spread over a territory of about 34% of the mountains' area in Bulgaria, constituting a much lower part (with an average altitude of 320 m). The Southern Rhodopes are the part of the mountain range that is located in Greece and they are characterized by numerous peaks of relatively low altitude. In general, considering their landscape, the Rhodopes are a large labyrinth of ridges and deep river valleys⁴.

The Rhodopean Fortification System is the second largest in the Bulgarian lands in terms of range and number of fortresses. It secures the access and communications between the Aegean Sea and the valley of the Maritsa River, between Via Diagonalis and Via Egnatia and provides control on the access to the Northern Aegean shoreline. According to B. Cholpanov, who carried out a complex

terrain research in the Rhodopes region, the mountains' fortification system consisted of 3 fortified belts: northern, central and southern⁵. In the northern Rhodopean fortified line there are about 100 strongholds, with Batkun, Tzepaina, Krychim, Stenimachos, Neutzikon (Mezek) being some of the most important among them⁶.

The central belt includes approx. 90 strongholds, among which stand out Kryvous, Patmos, Ustra, Vishegrad, Mneakos, Perperek, Liutitza, Rodestuik, Ephraimetc.⁷

The southern Rhodopean fortified line consists of several more important fortresses, including: Anastasiopolis, Mosinopolis, Komotini⁸.

Roads and communications

The northern, central and southern fortified lines of the Rhodopean Fortification System enhanced the regional communications and secured the road network along the valleys of the Rhodopean rivers⁹.

The strongholds of the Rhodopes Fortification System were predominantly concentrated along the valleys of 9 rivers: the Yadenitsa River, the Chepinska River, the Old River, the Vacha River, the Parvenetska River, the Chepelarska River, the Maritsa River, the Varbitsa River and the valley of the Arda River¹⁰.

The Rhodopes are enclosed from north and south by the two Balkan highways of Antiquity and the Middle Ages – Via Egnatia and Via militaris, which connect the Rhodopes region to the Adriatic and Central Europe¹¹. Part of the route of Via Egnatia, east of the mouth of Mesta, passes along the southern slopes of the Rhodopes through the Xanthi, Periterion,

⁵ Cholpanov, B. *Rodopskata ukrepiteľna Sistema*, p. 249; Angelov, D., Cholpanov, B. *Bulgarska voenna istoria prez Srednovekovieto*, p. 313 – 314.

⁶ Cholpanov, B. *Rodopskata ukrepiteľna Sistema*, p. 249; Angelov, D., Cholpanov, B. *Bulgarska voenna istoria prez Srednovekovieto*, p. 314.

⁷ Cholpanov, B. *Rodopskata ukrepiteľna Sistema*, p. 249 – 251; Angelov, D., Cholpanov, B. *Bulgarska voenna istoria prez Srednovekovieto*, p. 314 – 315.

⁸ Cholpanov, B. *Rodopskata ukrepiteľna Sistema*, p. 251; Angelov, D., Cholpanov, B. *Bulgarska voenna istoria prez Srednovekovieto*, p. 315.

⁹ Angelov, D., Cholpanov, B. *Bulgarska voenna istoria prez Srednovekovieto*, p. 315.

¹⁰ Cholpanov, B. *Rodopskata ukrepiteľna Sistema*, p. 252–270.

¹¹ Asdracha, C. *La région des Rhodopes aux XIIIe et XIVe siècles*, p. 24.

⁴ Asdracha, C. *La région des Rhodopes aux XIIIe et XIVe siècles: étude de géographie historique*, Athen: Verlag der Byzantinisch-Neugriechischen Jahrbücher, 1976, p. 3 – 13; Ivanov, A. *Phizicheska geographia na Bulgaria*, Sofia 1998, p. 194 – 222; Soustal, P., *Thrakien (Thrace, Rodope und Haimimontos)*, Vienna 1991.

Mosinopolis, Maroneia, Makre, Trajanoupolis and Bera (Feres) fortresses. The section of Via Egnatia in the South-Central periphery was of key importance in the context of the Bulgarian-Latin conflict in 1205 - 1207.¹² It also had a strategic role as far as the independent domain of the Bulgarian Momchil is concerned, for Xanthi (Tsarevo) became his capital. This road artery was also actively used by the united forces of John VI Cantacouzenos (1347 - 1354) and Ummur Beg in the course of the Second Civil War (1341-1347) in Byzantium and the military conflict with Momchil¹³. On its turn, the Rhodopes connected the two highways via its inner mountain road network. There were six roads that crossed the Rhodopes and connected the Upper Thracian Plain with the Mesta and Aegean Thrace valleys:

1) From the west to the east, the first one heads to the west of Philippopolis and reaches the Batkun fortress. From there it enters the southwest of the mountain to Tzepaina. From Tzepaina the road goes west, straight to the Mesta river valley to Nicopolis ad Nestum. This is the most direct route connecting the Maritza valley with the Mesta River.

2) The second route continues from Tzepaina through the Chepino basin to the south, through the Batak Mountain to the region of today's town of Dospat and thence to the Mesta river valley near the town of Nikopolis ad Nestum. Its route coincides with that of the current Batak-Dospat road. Somewhere north of Batak the road was divided into three - to the fortress of Tzepaina and thence to Batkun and the ridges of St. Konstantin and Ilidzhik to the Pazardzhik Field.

3) The third route is known in the literature as The Western Trans-Rhodoepan Roman road. It is northeast-southwest and connected Philippopolis to Nicopolis ad Nestum. It seems that the road entered the Rhodopes in the

region between the towns of Peshtera and Bratsigovo, passing by the Vatrakhastron¹⁴.

4) The most direct road through the Rhodope Mountains to the Aegean Sea passes along the Chernatitsa ridge and is known as the Central Trans-Rhodoepan road. Departing from Philippopolis in a southwest direction, he headed for the village of Brestovitsa and began his climb to the Chernatitsa mountain. Moving south, it connected to Via Egnatia at the large Topirus road station¹⁵.

5) Antique road through the Radiuva mountain - it is designated conditionally as the Eastern Trans-Rhodoepan road. It passes on the ridge of Radiuva mountain (border between Chepelare and Lucky municipalities). From Philippopolis through Stenimachos along the valley of the Yugovska River and that of the Chepelarska River, it leads to the town of Xanthi. During the Middle Ages it was the most intensely used route from the Aegean Sea through the Rhodopes to Stenimachos and Philippopolis¹⁶. A significant part of this route was used in the pre-Roman era¹⁷.

6) Through the eastern part of the Western Rhodopes passes another route, connecting Philippopolis and the settlements from the Upper Thracian Plain to the Eastern Rhodopes and thence to the cities of Aegean Thrace. The road crossed the valley of the Chamdere River, through the Topolovski Pass (Arpagedik) and through today's village of Topolovo to Stenimahos. A crossroad was formed at the mouth of the Borovitsa River - to the south the road continued to Mosynopolis and the Aegean Sea, and to the east - along the Arda River - to Adrianople. Northwest along the Arda is the connection with the western parts of the Rhodopes.

There was also a road running longitudinally through the interior of the Rhodopes with east-west direction. In the region of the Central and Western Rhodopes, there are no preserved areas with its pavement. However in the

¹² Geoffroi de Villehardouin, *Conquête de Constantinople*, édité et traduit par E. Faral, t. II (1203 - 1207), Paris 1961 (deuxième édition), § 495; Henri de Valenciennes, *Histoire de l'empereur Henri de Constantinople*, publiée par Jean Longnon, Paris, Geuthner, 1948. (Documents relatifs à l'histoire Croisades, II.), § 568 - 570.

¹³ *Ioannis Cantacuzeni imperatoris historiarum libri IV*, ed. Ludwig Schopen, vol. II, Bonn 1828, p. 530 - 534; Asdracha, C. *La région des Rhodopes aux XIIIe et XIVe siècles*, p. 29 - 30.

¹⁴ Madzharov, M. *The Central Rhodopes region in the Roman road system*. - In: Thracian and Byzantine Cultural Heritage in the Rhodopi Mountains and the Northern Aegean Sea Coast, Smolyan 2013, p. 46 - 49.

¹⁵ Madzharov, M. *The Central Rhodopes region in the Roman road system*, p. 41 - 45.

¹⁶ Asdracha, C. *La région des Rhodopes aux XIIIe et XIVe siècles*, p. 38 - 39.

¹⁷ Madzharov, M. *The Central Rhodopes region in the Roman road system*, p. 45 - 46.

Eastern Rhodopes, the track of this route can be traced. It started from Adrianople to the west, crossed through Dimotica and reached the Eastern Rhodopes. A key place when entering the mountain were the fortresses of Lyutitsa (near Rogozino, Ivaylovgrad) and Rodestuik (in the village of Huhla). This route went along the Arda River, following mainly its left bank. Passing by the fortresses Ephraim, Mneakos and Ustra, it entered the Western Rhodopes. Going mainly westward, at the junction of Arda and Cherna Rivers, it continued along the River Cherna, passing near the Povisdos fortress (Podvis, Momchilova Fortress), probably passing the Prevala Pass and descending along the Shirokolushka River it reached the Beden fortress. From the Nastan district, along the upper Vacha River, the road again climbed to Borino and Dospat and then descended to the valley of the Mesta River and Nicopolis ad Nestum on the route described above. A second parallel road with an east-west direction connected the fortresses on the northern slopes of the Rhodopes. The road started from Stenimachos in the west and through the fortresses Voden, Peristitsa (Perushtitsa) and Krychim reached Batkun and thence to Tzepaina. King Michael II Asen (1246 - 1256) moved with his troops when he invaded the Byzantine territory and took away the towns of Stenimachos, Peristitsa, Krychim and Tzepaina. The same route was used shortly thereafter by Nicaean Emperor Theodor II Lascaris (1254-1258) at his counter-campaign against the Bulgarians. It was used earlier by the Byzantine army during the campaign against the separatist Ivanko¹⁸.

Stages of development of the Rhodopean Fortification System

Because of its favourable geographic and climatic conditions as well as strategic location the Rhodopes have been inhabited since ancient times. Archaeological studies show prehistoric monuments dating back to the late Paleolithic age (19,000-15,000 BC). The first fortifications in the Rhodopes were built by the Thracians. Due to the poor military strategic importance of the mountain, during the Roman rule, no fortresses were built in the region, and the old ones were gradually abandoned¹⁹.

¹⁸ Asdracha, C. *La région des Rhodopes aux XIIIe et XIVe siècles*, p. 35 – 40.

¹⁹ Damyanov, D. *Thracian and Byzantine Cultural Heritage in the Central Rhodopes. Studies of the Late*

With the beginning of the Slav invasions, the conditions in the region changed drastically. In the 6th century the Empire made desperate attempts to protect its Balkan provinces through massive construction of fortified posts. The Rhodope Mountains are no exception in this respect²⁰. The majority of these fortresses were destroyed during the great Slavic-Avar invasions at the end of the 6th – the beginning of the 7th century. 6th – 7th century was the time of permanent settlement of the Slavs on the territory of present-day Bulgaria.

With the incorporation of the region to the Bulgarian state from Khan Krum (799-814) and finally from Khan Presian (836-852), it became a frontier. However, there are no existing fortresses registered until the second half of the 10th century. An explanation for this, according to us, can be found in several directions: 1. in the policy of the Bulgarian rulers, whose efforts were directed at strengthening of their power in the West-Bulgarian lands along the rivers Vardar and Struma; 2. The military campaigns of the Bulgarian rulers from the 9th-10th centuries were undertaken towards Northern Greece (along the rivers Vardar and Struma) and Constantinople (Via Militaris or along the Black Sea coast or Eastern Thrace). The great battles of this time between the two empires took place in the area of Eastern Thrace.

Sure data about the functioning of the fortress system in the Rhodopes in the Middle Ages we have from the second half of the 10th – the beginning of the 11th c. The restoration of some old early Byzantine fortresses in the Rhodopes began at that time. Initially, this was probably due to the wars of Basil I with the Bulgarian Tsardom, which is why he needed a strong control over the local Bulgarian population through the construction of fortified sites. Pecheneg wars from the mid-second half of the 11th century are the other catalyst of fortress construction in the region. There are shelter-fortresses for the local population, as well as residential fortresses for the governors of the region. Most of them are on the sites of the old late antique strongholds, using or restoring their fortifications. The period of the

Antiquity fortresses near Smolyan and the village of Koshnitsa. – In: *Thracian and Byzantine Cultural Heritage in the Rhodopi Mountains and the Northern Aegean Sea Coast*, Smolyan 2013, p. 23 – 25.

²⁰ Damyanov, D. *Thracian and Byzantine Cultural Heritage in the Central Rhodopes*, p. 26.

11th– 12th centuries is a time of restoration of the defence and communication system of the Empire in the region. This is particularly true for the 12th century with the three crusades that crossed the Balkans and the establishment of the *pronoia* institution. The restored fortresses have a different destiny. Some of them ceased to function in the first half of the 13th century, affected by the Bulgarian-Latin and Bulgarian-Nicaean wars. Others survived till the Ottoman invasion in the second half of the 14th century, and others (for example, Tzepaina and Stenimachos) even afterwards.

For the most part, the restored and newly built fortifications are located in naturally fortified places. The foundations of the fortress walls have been laid on a rugged rock that has sometimes been further worked to create a "bed" for the building. In most cases, there is a direct visual link between the fortified posts²¹.

Typology and construction - fortificational features of the fortifications of the Rhodopean fortification system.

Typologically²², the fortifications of the Rhodope Fortification System are divided into:

1) "Towns" (civitates, πόλεις) with their main characteristics: the concentration of a population of diverse social status that engages in various activities, including crafts, living in the heart of the town and in suburbs; presence of a market; building of Christian temples; domination of the respective town in the settlement structure of the area. This category includes Stenimachos, Tzepaina and Xanthi, and possibly Krychim and Batkun. For example, the urban fortress of Tzepaina, which was the centre of the Rhodopean governor and subsequently independent ruler, despot Alexius Slav, was built on a cone-shaped peak at an altitude of 1136 m. It included a fortified town core with an inner town (fortress) and a suburb or an outside town suburbs. The walls of the

fortified town core have a length of 640 m and a thickness of 1.8 m. They cover an area of 25 decares²³.

2) The second group are small towns, or "fortified semi-urban civilian settlements". Here we can include Perishtitsa, Vatrakhastron, Voden, the fortress at the mouth of the Borovitsa River, the fortress "St. Petka" near the town of Peshtera and eventually the Kulata-Gradot near Rakitovo. They occupy a relatively large area - about 10 acres (for example in Voden (15 decares), St. Petka in Peshtera (15 decares), etc.). They have solid fortification facilities - walls, towers, gates. One of the biggest medieval fortresses not only of this type, but also in the Rhodope Mountains is Mneakos. It is situated on a mountain hill above the left bank of the Arda river at an altitude of 587 m and has a total area of 20 decares. In peacetime the fortress was preserved by a small garrison that inhabited the southern part of the fortress. In wartime, however, the peasants from the surrounding villages have entered into the stronghold with their families, flocks and household goods. The large space fortified with a fortification wall allows people to bring in and out whole flocks of sheep and cattle as well as additional food supplies while also engaging in defense²⁴.

3) Third group are the military fortresses with permanent garrison (φρούρια). They act as military posts for the protection of roads and passes and for control over a certain territory built by the central government. Military fortresses usually have an area of 1 to 10 decares - such were the fortress near Devin (with an area of 8 decares), the one in the locality Turluk (with an area of approximately 5 decares) near Smolyan, and Kaletso (with an area of 2 decares), near the village of

²¹ Damyanov, D. *Thracian and Byzantine Cultural Heritage in the Central Rhodopes*, p. 26 – 27.

²² About the typology see in general: Koledarov, P. *Kum vuprosa za razvitieto na selishnata mreza i neinite elementi sredishnata i iztochnata chast na Balkanite ot 7 do 18th c.* – *Izvestia na Instituta po istoria*, XVIII, 1967, p. 89 – 146; Poliviannii, D. *Srednovekovniat bulgarski grad prez 13th – 14th c.* Ocheretzi, Sophia 1989; Poliviannii, D. *Balkanskii gorod 13th – 15th c. – tipologia i spetsifika razvitiia*. – *Etudes Balkaniques*, 1, 1984, p. 28 – 50.

²³ Georgieva, S., Gizdova, N. *Srednovekovnata krepost Tzepaina (Arheologicheskoto prouchvane 1961 - 1964)*. – *Izvestia na Arheologicheskia Institut*, 1966, XXIX, p. 41 – 56; Gizdova, N. *Tzepaina – rodopska tvrдина*. – In: *Srednovekovniat zamuk v bulgarskite zemi 12th – 14th v.*, Sopot 1987, p. 70 – 75. Tzonchev, D. *Opisanie na vushnite steni na krepostta Tzepaina*. – *Izvestia na Arheologicheskia Institut*, 1966, XXIX, p. 57 – 60; Popov, St. *Novi shtrih kum zamuka na despot Alexius Slav v Tzepaina*. – *Pametnitzi, restavratsia, muzei*, 1-2, 2016, p. 55 – 60.

²⁴ Ovcharov, N., Kodzhamanova, D. *Perperikon I okolnite tvrдини prez Srednovekovieto*, p. 47 – 68.

Koshnitsa²⁵. An interesting example among the military fortresses in the Rhodopean fortification system is Ustra. It is situated at an altitude of 1015 m and its area is only 1286 sq. m.²⁶

They were built on difficult to reach peaks, some of which rocky and unsuitable for life but fortified for the sake of security. In most cases, there is a direct communication (visible connection), allowing them more effective protection and organization during a threat. Inside, there are quite a lot of undeveloped spaces, allowing the defenders to manoeuvre and sheltering more people and possibly animals from the surrounding villages.

In the category of settlement structures with occasional and temporary inhabitation are the shelter-fortresses, raised on initiative and with funds of the local population. They are also built on hard-to-reach and naturally protected heights, providing maximum protection. They are distinguished by the fact that their walls are usually built on mud solder and are thinner, without towers and additional fortification facilities. They play no significant role in the defence of the territory. The size of shelters varies depending on the terrain between 2 and 10 decares (for example Momchilova Fortress has an area of about 4 decares). Their cultural layer is thin. They either lack building debris, or they are located only in separate buildings with a non-solid construction. The purpose of shelter-fortresses is to provide temporary shelter and protection for a population whose permanent habitat is elsewhere, usually somewhere nearby. Because of the limited capabilities of the local population, this type of

fortifications are built and maintained with minimal labour and financial costs. To the group of fortified safe-havens in the Western Rhodopes we can refer to Pika Kale in the village of Byaga, the fortress in Yundola, the fortress in the Gradishte area near the town of Kostandovo, Momchilova fortress and others.

During the different historical periods the dynamic and change in the settlement hierarchy are possible.

The building technique²⁷ of the medieval fortress walls is usually a cracked stone, bonded with a different quality mortar with a gray-white or yellowish colour. In a great part of the Rhodopes fortifications, the construction is opus implectum with larger semi-worked stones and filling of rough, smaller stones of mortar. The walls have embedded a network of horizontally laid wooden beams, longitudinal and transverse. These peculiar belts stand at a height of 0.90 – 1.30 m apart. In Bulgarian science it is accepted that the beams forming the belts are called “santrachi”, and the network itself – a santrach system. The purpose of the santrach belts is to align the masonry and achieve greater resistance to the not very thick but relatively high wall. Wall thickness varies between 0.80 and 3 m, depending on the location of the wall and the level of natural protection.

In the period 11th–14th century the gates of the fortifications in the Rhodopes²⁸ can be divided in three types. The first type is usually a break in the fortress wall, as the gate is not protected by a defensive facility (the fortress in Turluk locality, near Smolyan). The second is a system of interruption in the curtain, protected by one or two flanking (Lyutitsa fortress²⁹), or located adjacent towers (Kryvous, Bashevo vill.; Mneakos, Shiroko pole vill., Kardzhali district). The third type of gate is the most sophisticated. It is located in the tower-gate (Patmos fortress, Borovitsa vill., Kardzhali district; Byalgrad fortress, Gugutka vill., Ivaylovgrad district). Most interesting is the probable solution of the castle entrance of the medieval city of Tzepaina. Due to the lack of interruption in the fortress wall of the castle,

²⁵ Boiadzhiev, N. *Medieval fortresses in the municipality of Smolyan*. – In: *Thracian and Byzantine Cultural Heritage in the Rhodopi Mountains and the Northern Aegean Sea Coast*, Smolyan 2013, p. 63 – 72. In the middle of the 13th c. those three fortresses were burnt and abandoned due to the military conflict between the Bulgarian Tsardom and The Empire of Nicaea; Boiadzhiev, N. *Momchilovata krepost prez Srednovekovieto*. – *Izvestia na Regionalen istoricheski muzei Smolyan*, 2 2016, 19 – 40; Damianov, D. *Rannovizantiiska I srednovekovna bulgarska krepost pri Beden – Sredni Rodopi*. – In: *Laurea in honorem Margaritae Vaklinova*, 1. София, 2009, 111–128; Damianov, D. *Srednorodopskite kreposti. Smolyanskata krepost v mestnostta Turluka*. – *Izvestia na Regionalen istoricheski muzei Smolyan*, 1, 2011, p. 7–43.

²⁶ Cončev, D. *Le château medieval Овстра dans les Rhodopes*. – *Byzantinoslavica*, XXXV, 1964, p. 254–260. Balkanski, Iv. *Iztochnorodopski kreposti*, Sophia 1977.

²⁷ Harbova, M. *Otbranitelni saorazhenia v Bulgarskoto srednovekovie*, passim.

²⁸ Ovcharov, N., Kodzhamanova, D. *Perperikon I okolnite tvurdini prez Srednovekovieto*, passim.

²⁹ Georgieva, V. *Portata na krepostta Lyutitsa do Ivailovgrad*. – In: *Eurika*, Sophia 2009, p. 511 – 517.

the entrance was probably located at a height accessible by a wooden staircase. It was protected by the tower here, the only one on the route of the curtain.³⁰

The towers built on the fortress walls in most cases are quadrangular, but there are also exceptions such as Mezek (cylindrical towers), Byalgrad (oval), Lyutitsa³¹ (U-shaped, oval and polyhedral) and Perperikon (polyhedral). Apart from defensive towers, in some Rhodope fortresses donjons are built. There are representatives of both groups of donjons: 1. those which play a major role in the defense of the fortress, located at the fortress wall, sometimes protecting the entrance of the stronghold (Vishegrad, Visegrad vill., Kryvous, Ustra, Ustren vill., Kardzhali district; Stenimahos); 2. donjons with a minor role in the defense of the fortress. The towers of the second group are free-standing (Tzepaina, Dorkovo vill., Velingrad district; Patmos; probably also in the castle of Mneakos; Byalgrad; Asara, Zvezdel vill., Kardzhali district; probably Lyutitsa).³²

The water supply of the Rhodope fortresses was mainly realized through the construction of water reservoirs. There are such reservoirs in the ground floors of many of the donjons (Lyutitsa, Mneakos, Byalgrad, Ustra, Tzepaina, et all.) or free standing in the fortified space (Mneakos, Tzepaina, et all.). The inner side of the walls of the water reservoirs are coated with two layers of pink, hydrophobic mortar, between which a layer of ceramic fragments of vessels or intentionally made ceramic elements of rectangular shape and relief lines are embedded.³³

The Rhodopean Fortification System and its entanglement in the major regional military conflicts

The strategic position of the Rhodopes as an important road-communication zone linking

Thrace and the Aegean Sea predetermines the frequent entanglement of the mountain in regional military conflicts, which aimed at overcoming the existing fortification system that ensured effective control over local trade, resources, infrastructure and fiscal revenues.

The Bulgarian-Byzantine rivalry in the Rhodopes area

After surviving the Great Migration of the Peoples, even with great turbulence, from the 9th century on the Rhodopes became the arena of a collision between the two superpowers fighting for supremacy in the region – the Bulgarian Tsardom and Byzantium. In the 9th–10th century the Empire lost its leading position and was forced to pullout due to the Bulgarian military offensive³⁴. However, during the reign of Basil II, after a long lasted war, the empire regained its control over the Rhodopes and renewed the local fortresses. The region became an integral part of the byzantine military and administrative theme system. The fact that the Rhodopes was in geographical proximity to the emperial capital Constantinople made it necessary for the byzantine government to control more regularly and efficiently theregion. As early as the reign of Basil II (976 – 1025) the Rhodopes were divided into three themes – Mora, Achridos (the area along the middle and the lower reaches of the Ardariver) and the Smolyan theme next to the themes of Voleron, Strimon and Thessalonika³⁵.

After the Uprising of the brothers Peter and Asen and the restoration of the Bulgarian Tsardom, the military conflict for the Rhodopes region broke out again with its first sparks being ignited by the bulgarian boyar Ivanko³⁶. After killing tsar Asen he departed Turnovo and made his way to the byzantine emperor who warmly received him. Ivanko

³⁰ Popov, St. *Novi shtrihi kum zamuka na despot Alexius Slav v Tzepaina*, p. 55–60.

³¹ About Lyutitsa see: Petrunova, B. *Srednovekovnata krepost pri selo Rogozino, Ivailovgradsko*. – In: Etnos I mentalnost, Sophia 2004, p. 2712 – 276; Petrunova, B., Petrunov, Ph. *Lyutitsa*, Sophia 2018.

³² Popov, St. *Donjonut v Bulgaria prez 12th – 14th c.* – Pametnitzi, restavratzia, muzei, 1 – 2, 2006, p. 15 – 18.

³³ Gizdova, N. *Vodosnabdiavaneto na krepostta Tzepaina pri s. Dorkovo, Pazardzhishko*. – In: Prinosi kum bulgarskata arheologia, v. VI, Sophia 2008, p. 254 – 267.

³⁴ Cheshmedzhiev, D. *Belezhki za istoriata na Rodopite prez srednite vekove*. – Rhodopi, 5 – 6, 2007, p. 70 – 71.

³⁵ Kaimakamova, M. *Territorial Fortunes of the Rhodopes Region in the Period of the Second Bulgarian Kingdom (end of 12th– end of 14th c.)*. – Rhodopica, II, 1999, No 1, p. 111 – 113.

³⁶ About Ivanko see Kaimakamova, M. *Territorial Fortunes of the Rhodopes Region*, p. 115 – 116; Kaimakamova, M. *Rulers in the Rhodopes area during the Middle ages (more on the matter of the Separatism on the Balkans)*. – Rhodopica 2002, 1 – 2, p. 306 – 309; Nikolov, G. *Samostoiatelni I polusamostoiatelni vladenia vuv vuzobnovenoto Bulgarsko tsarstvo (kraia na 12 – sredata na 13 vek)*, Sofia 2011.

was appointed a governor and commander-in-chief of Philippopolis area and served as a bulwark against his own countrymen and their attempts to regain the Rhodopes region³⁷. According to Nicetas Choniates he trained his troops in warfare, strengthened them with armaments and fortified the Rhodopean fortresses making them almost unassailable³⁸. Getting more and more powerful Ivanko rebelled against the emperor and started acting as an independent ruler of the Rhodopes. Alexios III Angelos (1195 – 1203) sent the protostrator Manuel Kamytzes to pursue the rebel in the mountains. Initially, the Byzantines succeeded in subjugating some small fortresses at the foot of the Rhodopes with Krychym being among them. However in 1199 at the Batkun fortress, Ivanko's trained army routed the Byzantine troops and captured their commander Kamytzes. As it is attested by Nicetas Choniates, after the victorious battle Ivanko proclaimed himself a lord of all the small towns and fortresses which he had been raised on the heights of the Rhodope mountains. Gradually he took away from Byzantium all the towns and fortresses leading down to Mosynopolis and Xanthi and stretching towards Mount Pangaios and up to Abdera. He also subjugated the theme of Smolena and its neighbouring lands³⁹ thus taking full control over the Rhodopean Fortification system. At the same time Ivanko entered into an alliance with tsar Kaloyan of Bulgaria (1197 – 1207) against Byzantium. Unable to oppose Ivanko on the battlefield, the emperor Alexios III Angelos finally managed to eliminate him by a treacherous deceit and to restore the Byzantine power over the Rhodope mountains.⁴⁰

³⁷ *O city of Byzantium: annals of Niketas Choniates*, tr. Harry J. Magoulias, Detroit: Wayne State University Press 1984) p. 259.

³⁸ *O city of Byzantium: annals of Niketas Choniates*, p. 281.

³⁹ *O city of Byzantium: annals of Niketas Choniates*, p. 282 – 283.

⁴⁰ *O city of Byzantium: annals of Niketas Choniates*, p. 285. After eradicating Ivanko, the Byzantine emperor put in charge of the Rhodopes region John Spiridonaki, a man of his entourage. However, Spiridonaki was also won over by tsar Kaloyan as an ally against the emperor. Alexios III sent a strong army against him. Spiridonaki was defeated by the Byzantines and escaped in Moesia. Though being rather fleeting, the separatist politics of both Ivanko and John Spiridonaki destabilized the positions of the Empire in the Rhodopes and enabled the future Bulgarian military offensive in the region. Kaimakamova, M. *Territorial Fortunes of the Rhodopes Region*, p. 116.

Apart from Ivanko's short independent rule (1199 – 1200) the Rhodopes remained under Byzantine control till 1204⁴¹. Then for almost a year the region was part of the newly-formed Latin Empire. After the Battle of Adrianople on April 14, 1205, when the Bulgarians and Cumans under Tsar Kaloyan crushed the Crusaders under Baldwin I (1204 – 1205), the Rhodopes were incorporated into the Bulgarian Tsardom⁴². However in 1208, soon after tsar Kaloyan's death, despot Alexius Slav, a member of the Asen dynasty, with the support of the Latin emperor Henry detached the Rhodopes region from the Bulgarian Tsardom and acted as its independent ruler⁴³.

It was tsar Ivan Asen II (1218 – 1241) who included back into the boundaries of the Bulgarian Tsardom the lost Rhodopean territories after his famous victory over Theodore Komnenos in the Battle of Klokotnitsa (today in Haskovo Province, Bulgaria) on 9 March 1230. However soon after his death the military conflicts between the Bulgarian Tsardom and the Nicean state, which was desperately trying to restore the Byzantine empire, turned the Rhodopes region into an apple of discord. In 1246 the Nicean Emperor John III Duka Vatatzes (1222 – 1254) quickly got advantage of the unstable conjuncture in the Bulgarian Tsardom following the death of the young Bulgarian Tsar Koloman I Assen (1241 – 1246). The Nicean troops invaded the Rhodopes area and took the key fortresses Stenimachos and Tzepaina as well as the fortresses and village towns that lied beside the Rhodope mountains⁴⁴.

In 1254, the Bulgarian tsar Mihail II Assen tried to win back the Rhodopean lands taken by the Nicean empire. For a short time he restored a large territory, and with no effort, brought to his side many towns. In his Rhodopean expedition the Bulgarian tsar was greatly facilitated by the local inhabitants, who "being

⁴¹ Asdracha, C. *La région des Rhodopes aux XIIIe et XIVe siècles*, p. 232 – 236; Kaimakamova, M. *Territorial Fortunes of the Rhodopes Region*, p. 113 – 117.

⁴² Kaimakamova, M. *Territorial Fortunes of the Rhodopes Region*, p. 117 – 121.

⁴³ Asdracha, C. *La région des Rhodopes aux XIIIe et XIVe siècles*, p. 240 – 242; Bozhilov, Iv. *Phamiliata Asenevtzi (1186 - 1440)*, Sophia 1994, p. 96 – 97; Kaimakamova, M. *Rulers in the Rhodopes area during the Middle ages*, p. 310 – 323.

⁴⁴ George Akropolites: *The History*. Introduction, Translation and Commentary by Ruth Macrides, Oxford 2007, p. 231.

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Bulgarians, sided with those of the same race, shaking of the yoke of those who spoke another language”⁴⁵. According to George Akropolites the towns were easy for the Bulgarians to take because most of them were left only with small garrisons, which were incapable of putting up a fight, and were also without the necessary weapons. For those reasons Stenimachos, Peristitza, Krychim, Tzepaina and all the fortresses in Achridos, except for Mneakos, were captured immediately. Ustra, Perperakion, Kryvous and Ephraim were also conquered by the Bulgarians.⁴⁶

Although the predominantly Bulgarian ethnic character of the Rhodopes population the Nicean emperor Theodore II Laskaris did not give up from the region. Besides, the Bulgarian tsardom proved incapable of providing the necessary protection and stability in the Rhodopes area. Therefore the Nicean emperor managed to take the region back quickly via mastering its fortification system. Having survived the several-month siege of the Bulgarians, in 1255 Mneakos, which was the administrative center of Achridos, was unblocked with a contra offensive action by the Nicean emperor Theodore II Laskaris. Then he selected an adequate army and sent it to the fortresses in Achridos and easily took them with machines and siege towers. Gathering the army that was with him, the emperor left for the towns in the Rhodope, and seized back the fortresses Stenimachos, Peristitza, Krychim – “very strong towns which lie facing the Rhodope mountains and guard everything behind them”⁴⁷. Patmos and especially Tzepaina were the only fortress that did not yield easily. Theodore II Laskaris was indignant that he had not conquered these fortresses as he had the others. But it was over Tzepaina that he was most distressed⁴⁸. According to the peace treaty of Regina dated from 1256 the Rhodopes region went under the Nicean Emperor’s rule and since 1261 under the rule

of the resored Byzantine empire⁴⁹. This status quo remained unchanged until the 40s of the 14th c.⁵⁰

In the course of the Byzantine civil wars during the 40s of the 14th c. the Rhodopes area turned once again into a strategic region instrumental for the overall political control over Thrace and Macedonia. John Cantacuzenos used the Turks as allies in order to strengthen his positions in the Rhodopes. At the same time his opponents, the Constantinopolitan regency sought the help of the Bulgarian tsar Ivan Alexander (1331 – 1371). He backed the anti-Cantacuzenos coalition and in return was rewarded by the regent empress Ana Savoyska with Philippopolis and eight cities in the Rhodope Mountains (Tzepaina, Krychim, Peryshtitsa, St. Yustina, Stenimachos, Aetos, Beadnos and Koznik)⁵¹. Then the Bulgarian tsar attempted to take further advantage of the civil war in Byzantium and to expand his rule over the Eastern Rhodopes. For a few months the area has two archonts: a Bulgarian one – in Perperikon, and a Byzantine one – in Mneakos⁵². After all, John Cantacuzenos forced the Bulgarian tsar to withdraw and kept the Eastern Rhodopes for Byzantium. As an award, the governor of Mora, who gave strong resistance to the Bulgarians, received in 1355 the title despot and the government of the Northern Aegean towns, to which the Rhodopes region was administratively adjacent in that period⁵³.

The civil war in Byzantium enhanced the restoration of separatist tendencies in the Rhodopes. Through his opportunistic involvement in the imperial civil conflict, where he maneuvered skilfully between the warring factions, the Bulgarian Momchil managed to form a large independent domain in the southern parts of the Rhodopes and western Thrace, located between the lower reaches of the rivers Mesta and Arda⁵⁴. In 1344

⁴⁵ George Akropolites: *The History*, 281.

⁴⁶ George Akropolites: *The History*, p. 281.

⁴⁷ George Akropolites: *The History*, p. 286.

⁴⁸ George Akropolites: *The History*, p. 292. Tzepaina endured the emperor’s attempts at conquest twice, early in the campaign and again at the end. In one of his letters Theodore II describes the fortress as difficult of access because of its location in a mountainous region and also because a forest covered the slopes of its acropolis. See George Akropolites: *The History*, p. 295, n.15.

⁴⁹ Asdracha, C. *La région des Rhodopes aux XIIIe et XIVe siècles*, p. 243 – 244.

⁵⁰ Kaimakamova, M. *Territorial Fortunes of the Rhodopes Region*, p. 124.

⁵¹ Ioannis Cantacuzeni imperatoris historiarum, II, p. 403.

⁵² Ovcharov, N., Kodzhamanova, D. *Perperikon I okolnite tvurdini prez Srednovekovieto*, p. 46.

⁵³ Asdracha, C. *La région des Rhodopes aux XIIIe et XIVe siècles*, p. 253.

⁵⁴ Asdracha, C. *La région des Rhodopes aux XIIIe et*

he captured Xanthi, which became his capital. However John Cantacuzenos, a former ally of Momchil, considered his independent domain as a serious blow to his ambitions to master the Rhodopes region on his way to the imperial crown. It seems that the Rhodopes were the key to Constantinople and the fate of the imperial authority was tied tightly with the person who was ruling the Rhodope mountains geopolitical labyrinth⁵⁵. That's why in the late spring of 1345 Cantacuzenos, reinforced with turkish troops from Aydin, marched against Momchil. The decisive battle took place near Peritheorion on July, 7, 1345 and ended with a crushing defeat for Momchil who lost his life, while Cantacuzenos regained the imperial control over the region⁵⁶.

The Crusade invasion in the Rhodope Mountains (end of the 12th – beginning of the 13th century).

The beginning of the military interventions of the Crusaders in the Rhodopes region started during the Third Crusade (1189–1192), when the crusaders devastated Thrace and carried out raids in the area of Philipopol – Adrianopol – Didimoteihon⁵⁷. In 1189, due to a conflict with the Byzantine emperor Isaac II Angel (1185 – 1195, 1203 – 1204), the crusaders, traveling on Via militaris, captured the cities of Philippopolis and Veroia. After securing the invasion of Veroia from the northeast, the german emperor Friedrich I Barbarossa (1155 – 1190), in order to protect himself from surprises from the Byzantine army who had retreated to the Rhodopes, sent his marshal, Heinrich von Kalden, “a man too warlike and experienced in war” to follow the Byzantines in the path of their retreat to Achridos. The marshal seized “the very well fortified and famous Scribention fortress (Stenimachos)⁵⁸” whose citizens were forced to

surrender and acknowledge the power of the German Emperor. Then again the marshal took over the “monastery castle”, which was above this fortress – obviously today's Bachkovo Monastery. After that the crusaders plundered and captured another ten fortresses along the northern mountainside of the Rhodopes with Permis (Perishtitsa) and Brandovei/Brandevoi (unidentified location, probably the Voden fortress) being the biggest among them⁵⁹. In the same 1189 at the Rhodopean fortress Batkun the crusaders were ambushed by the byzantine troops and the local inhabitants and suffered a heavy defeat⁶⁰. The importance of the Rhodopean fortification system for the towns and fortresses in Thracia on the way to Constantinople is evident by the attempts of Friedrich Barbarossa to conquer the strongholds located in the middle and the southern areas of the Rhodope mountains. The German emperor resumed his invasion in the region in December 1189. His troops reached the northern Aegean coast and captured the town of Enos, near the mouth of Maritza river. Afterwards, they moved along the valley of Arda river, entering a thick and naturally fortified forest, and plundered Achridos⁶¹. According to M. Kaymakamova the Rhodopes region was a strategic target for Friedrich I Barbarossa who considered its conquering instrumental for any future attack and potential seizure of the Byzantine capital Constantinople⁶².

Fifteen years later, following Barbarossa's steps, the knights of the Fourth

XIVe siècles, p. 254 – 244. Kaimakamova, M. *Rulers in the Rhodopes area during the Middle ages*, p. 323 – 329.

⁵⁵ Kaimakamova, M. *Rulers in the Rhodopes area during the Middle ages*, p. 329.

⁵⁶ *Ioannis Cantacuzeni imperatoris historiarum*, II, p. 427 – 432, 529 – 534.

⁵⁷ *Epistola de morte Friderici imperatoris* – In: *Quellen zur Geschichte des Kreuzzuges Kaiser Friedrichs I*, ed. A. Chroust, Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores rerum Germanicarum, Nova series, 5, Berlin 1928, p. 494.

⁵⁸ “castellum munitissimum ac famosum Scribention dictum”. Ansbertus, *Historia de expeditione Friderici imperatoris*. – In: *Quellen zur Geschichte des Kreuzzuges Kaiser Friedrichs I*, ed. A. Chroust, Monumenta

Germaniae Historica, Scriptores rerum Germanicarum, Nova series, 5, Berlin 1928, p. 45. In “*Historia Peregrinorum*”, another historical account of the Third Crusade, is pointed that Stenimachos was located in steep mountains and was very well naturally fortified fortress which was also protected with walls and towers (*Erat oppidum quoddam haud longe a Philippopoli in arduo montis situm nomine Scribention, tam naturali positione loci quam menibus turritis firmissime communitum*). *Historia Peregrinorum*. – In: *Quellen zur Geschichte des Kreuzzuges Kaiser Friedrichs I*, ed. A. Chroust, Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores rerum Germanicarum, Nova series, 5, Berlin 1928, p. 141.

⁵⁹ Ansbertus, *Historia de expeditione Friderici imperatoris*, p. 45; *Historia Peregrinorum*, p. 141; Kaimakamova, M. *Territorial Fortunes of the Rhodopes Region*, p. 113 – 115.

⁶⁰ Ansbertus, *Historia de expeditione Friderici imperatoris*, p. 60; *Historia Peregrinorum*, p. 149;

⁶¹ Kaimakamova, M. *Territorial Fortunes of the Rhodopes Region*, p. 115; Ansbertus, *Historia de expeditione Friderici imperatoris*, p. 58 – 59.

⁶² Kaimakamova, M. *Territorial Fortunes of the Rhodopes Region*, p. 115.

crusadel launched the second western offensive in the Rhodopes region. According the *Partitio terrarum imperii Romaniae*, the treaty signed amongst the crusaders after the sack of Constantinople in 1204, the bigger part of the Rhodopes region was included into the territorial portion of marquis Boniface of Montferrat who set up the Kingdom of Thessalonica⁶³. The dramatic events during the Bulgarian-Latin wars in 1205–1207, well described by the French chronicler Geoffroi de Villehardouin, are again connected with the struggle for control and supremacy in the Rhodopes and Thrace. Tsar Kaloyan defeated the Crusaders in a number of decisive battles at Adrianople, Serres, Philippopolis, Russia⁶⁴. Only in 1206, the brother of the captured in the Battle of Adrianople, the first Latin Emperor Baldwin, Henry of Flanders, managed to gather troops and attack the Bulgarians' bases in the Eastern Rhodopes. Geoffroi de Villehardouin is extremely detailed in his depiction of the events. In 1206 Tsar Kaloyan of Bulgaria raised the siege of the strategic fortress Didymoteicho and headed back to Tarnovo using the Trans-Rhodopean road network. The Imperial regent Henry gathered all of his army and started chasing the retreating Bulgarians. The Latins rode up to the valley of Arda River and reached the fortress of Ephraim. Shortly afterwards, the Crusaders' troops entered a very beautiful river valley over which a beautiful castle towered—“Moniac”/Mneacos⁶⁵. Here the Crusaders stayed for 5 days and decided to cut short the pursuit in order to come to Renier de Trit's rescue, who was blocked in Stenimachos by the Bulgarians for already 13 months. While the imperial regent Henry and most of his troops stayed at Mneacos, Geoffroi de Villehardouin and 8 other knights together with a venetian military unit headed for Stenimachos. Initially, they rode through the valleys of Arda and Borovitsa Rivers. Getting to the vicinities of the Smolyan village of Momchilovtsi, they likely turned northwards,

thus following the route of the Eastern Trans-Rhodopean road. Descending successively through the valleys of Yugovska and Chepelarska rivers, the crusaders finally reached Stenimachos⁶⁶. After rescuing Renier de Trit and his entourage, the crusaders rode back for three days to Mneacos where the imperial regent Henry was waiting for them. Renier de Trit told the barons about the death of the emperor Baldwin and they resolved that they would go to Constantinople and crown Henry (1206 – 1216) as the new emperor of the Latin empire⁶⁷.

Closely connected with the Rhodopes and the Bulgarian-Latin military conflicts is the fate of another Fourth Crusade's leader—Boniface of Montferrat, King of Thessalonica. While the armies of the Bulgarian tsar Kaloyan were besieging Adrianople, Boniface of Montferrat launched attacks towards Bulgaria from Serres. His cavalry reached Mosynopolis. On September 4, 1207, while riding on a military expedition, he was ambushed by local Bulgarians and wounded mortally with an arrow near the warm springs of today's village of Ladja (in Greek: Θέρμεις) in the area of the mountain range Gyumurdzinski snejnik in the southern part of the Rhodopes⁶⁸.

Considering the geopolitical importance of the region, Tsar Kaloian appointed his nephew Alexius Slav as a governor of the Rhodopes area and gave him the title despot. His residence was the strong-fortified fortress of Tzepaina. Alexius Slav was one of the nobles disputing Tsar Boril's ascension to the Bulgarian throne. Realizing that it would be difficult to him to stand against the tsar's army alone, Alexius Slav sought the patronage of the Latin emperor Henry and became his vassal after the Bulgarian defeat near Plovdiv in 1208. Henry promised to support his aspirations for the Bulgarian throne and acknowledged the title of despot to Alexius Slav. In 1211, he fought against Boril together

⁶³ Geoffroi de Villehardouin, *Conquête de Constantinople* § 299 – 300; Kaimakamova, M. *Territorial Fortunes of the Rhodopes Region*, p.117.

⁶⁴ Kaimakamova, M. *Territorial Fortunes of the Rhodopes Region*, p.120.

⁶⁵ Geoffroi de Villehardouin, *Conquête de Constantinople*, § 435: “Si chevauchierent par deus jors, et se herbergierent en une mult bèle vallée, près d'un chastel que on apele Moniac.”

⁶⁶ More about the route followed by the crusaders from Mneacos to Stenimachos, see in Mitko Madzharov, Miroslav Madzharov, *The fourth Crusade in the Rhodope Mountain Area to the valley of river of Arda (Archaeological data)*. – In: *Thracian and Byzantine Cultural Heritage in the Rhodopi Mountains and the Northern Aegean Sea Coast*, Smolyan 2013, p. 73 – 97.

⁶⁷ Geoffroi de Villehardouin, *Conquête de Constantinople*, § 436 – 440.

⁶⁸ Geoffroi de Villehardouin, *Conquête de Constantinople*, § 499.

with the Despotate of Epirus, extending the territory of his state and capturing the fortress of Melnik, where he moved his capital from Tzepaina in 1215, and became an autocrat with a royal court of his own. In this way the Bulgarian Tsardom suffered another blow on its territorial integrity and lost once again the Rhodopes region⁶⁹.

The Ottoman invasions

The last episode of the medieval wars in the Rhodopes is related to the Ottoman invasions. They are largely facilitated by the fierce military clashes accompanying the civil war in Byzantium and the prolonged regional conflicts between John Cantacuzenos, Umur Beg, Momchil and tsar Ivan Alexander, as the region and its communication arteries prove to be extremely important for the control of Thrace and the Northern Aegean coast. Acting like John Cantacuzenos' allies the Turks of Umur beg crossed the Rhodopes area and plundered and ruin the settlements along the lower reaches of Arda river (the district of Mora) with the fortress of Ephraim suffering the most severe damages⁷⁰. However the real Ottoman conquering campaigns began in 1373–1375, after the battle of Chernomen (on September 26, 1371) with the attack of the fortresses located on the northern slopes of the mountain – Stenimachos, Levka, Rakovica and Tzepaina, which defended valiantly for 9 months before her defenders surrendered. After them, the Batkun fortress fell. After conquering the fortresses situated on the northern slopes of the Rhodope Mountains, the Ottomans invaded deeply into the valleys of the Arda, Chaya and Vacha rivers. The fortresses Podvis, Aetos, Koznitsa, Beden and others were also conquered. Most of the fortresses successfully sustained prolonged sieges, demonstrating their enviable fortification capacity, and were conquered only after disruption of their water sources⁷¹.

⁶⁹ Bozhilov, Iv. *Phamiliata Asenevtzi (1186 - 1440)*, p. 96 – 97; Dancheva-Vasileva, A. *Bulgaria I Latinskata imperia (1204 - 1261)*, Sophia 1985, p. 80 – 95; Kaimakamova, M. *Rulers in the Rhodopes area during the Middle ages*, p. 310 – 323; Kaimakamova, M. *Territorial Fortunes of the Rhodopes Region*, p. 122; Nikolov, G. *Samostoiatelni I polusamo stoiatelni vladения*, passim.

⁷⁰ *Ioannis Cantacuzeni imperatoris historiarum*, III, p. 251 – 252; Asdracha, C. *La région des Rhodopes aux XIIIe et XIVe siècles*, p. 256; Kaimakamova, M. *Territorial Fortunes of the Rhodopes Region*, p. 125.

⁷¹ Angelov, D., Cholpanov, B. *Bulgarska voenna istoria*

Summa summarum: The dislocation of the fortification system in the Rhodopes is tied with: the existing network of trans-Rhodopean and local roads inherited from the Roman Empire; with the proximity of settlements whose inhabitants carried out the construction and provided their maintenance; and the favourable physical geographic features – the presence of naturally fortified terrain, building material and visual contact with at least one other fortress. The fortresses from the Rhodopean Fortification System served to control the roads and access to the interior of the mountain chain, while sheltering the surrounding settlements in case of military threat. The inner forts served to control the movement of people and goods along the main and local roads, performed guard functions, and also hosted the local civilian population.

The strategic location of the Rhodopes makes the region a geopolitical knot, a crossroad of various state interests, often persecuted and defended at the cost of many fierce and protracted military conflicts. At the same time, the Rhodope Mountains are for a long time a border region between the Bulgarian Tsardom and Byzantium, which makes them a more dynamic militarized zone. The attempt to control and command the Rhodopes labyrinth by building and maintaining a fortification system is only successful if there is a strong central authority to effectively manage and coordinate the defense resource of the region. Otherwise the fortified fortresses in the mountain turn into a good base for separatist rulers, with whom the region abounds in the conditions of increasing decentralization in the 12th - 14th centuries. The tragic historical fate of the Rhodopes shows that the numerous mountain fortresses, despite their excellent defensive characteristics, were able to provide effective protection only when they were included into an integrated fortification system supported by a strong centralised state authority.

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