

OSTROVSKI RAMPART. PROBLEMS OF RESEARCH AND CHRONOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the present study is to summarize the results of the archaeological excavations of Ostrovski rampart. The excavations in 2011 and 2019 clarified the main dimensions of the earthwork structure and shed new light on the problem of its chronology.

The Ostrovski rampart is the largest earthwork structure in present-day Northwest Bulgaria, with a linear length of about 58 km. It encloses the steppe area between the Danube River and the low hills of the Fore Balkans. The earthwork structure consists of two elements: a ditch about 3 m deep and a rampart embanked on its eastern side. During the last archaeological excavations, two sherds of Early Medieval pottery dating to the first half of the 9th c. were found at the bottom of the ditch. Calf bones were also found in the silt that partially filled the ditch. Radiocarbon analysis of the bones dates them between 767 and 900.

Different opinions have been expressed about the purpose of the earthwork ramparts. Most scholars believe that they were built to strengthen militarily important areas. The data from the archaeological map of the region show that the most significant demographic resource necessary for the construction and protection of such a large-scale fortification line existed in the first half of the 9th c., when a large number of settlements appeared between the rivers Iskar and Tsibritsa. Historical sources note that at the same time, west of Bulgaria, the political and military situation is very unstable, which is probably the reason why the Bulgarian authorities organized a preventive strengthening of the endangered West Bulgarian areas.

Key words: Ostrovski rampart, excavations, chronology, reconstruction

Introduction

The Ostrovski rampart (the entrenchment) is the largest earthwork structure in present-day Northwest Bulgaria, with a linear length of about 58 km.¹ It has been known to historians since the end of 19th c. The earliest records about it are provided by V. Dobruský (Добруски 1890, 14, 36, 38), K. Jireček (Иречек 1974, 335) and K. Škorpil (Шкорпил 1905, 528 – 530). Škorpil carried out the first field surveys and described its route (Шкорпил 1905, 528 – 530).

Two other similar earthworks lie west of the Ostrovski rampart (Hayredinski rampart and Lomski rampart). The three ramparts lie at approximately the same distance away from each other (between 35 and 45 km) across the plain on the right bank of the Danube river (fig. 1). The close proximity of the earthworks and their identical features give grounds for some researchers to assume that they were constructed simultaneously, or within a short period of time and form one uniform echeloned defense with frontal orientation to the west (Пашев 1982, 68).

¹ The approximate length of the earthwork measured by K. Škorpil is 58 km. Modern measurements made on a topographic map show that the length of the facility is about 55 km.



Fig. 1. Ramparts in Northwest Bulgaria
(Author: V. Grigorov)

Обр. 1. Землени валове в Северозападна България
(автор В. Григоров)

The aim of this study is to summarize the results from archaeological excavations of the Ostrovski rampart carried out to present date. The reason for reviewing this topic in more detail is that the excavations carried out in 2011 (Григоров 2011, 128 – 136; Григоров, Петрова 2012, 497 – 499) complement the results from the latest archaeological excavations in 2019.

The discoveries in the last decade cast new light on the problem of the chronology of the earthwork structure.

Description of the route of Ostrovski rampart

We owe the first description of the Ostrovski rampart to K. Škorpil and it has been used as the basis for all further field surveys. The earthwork represents an excavated ditch with an embankment on its western side.² In 1985, P. Ivanov (curator at the Museum of History – Vratsa) organized a field survey along the Ostrovski rampart, his aim being to map the earthwork and document with graphic profiles its current state. In the last decade, a significant part of the rampart's route has been mapped with modern geodesic tools. Aerial and satellite photos which allow remote analysis have also been used for more precise identification of the traces of the earthwork. The processed information from all field surveys allowed us to reconstruct quite fully the whole route of the Ostrovski rampart (fig. 2).

The beginning of the earthwork is registered at the eastern end of Ostrov village (coordinates: 43.671755° N; 24.143872° E). Then it crosses a deep ravine, runs along the western slope of Alibash hill and heads in a straight line to the southwest (215°). The rampart passes near Galovo village, about 2 km west of it, then crosses the Knezha – Oryahovo road, in the Marinov Geran area.

During the first surveys K. Škorpil noted that from the village of Ostrov to the place where the rampart was crossed by the Knezha – Oryahovo road, there are traces of an old road paved with stone slabs parallel to the rampart. According to him, this was a Roman road connecting Oescus with Montana (Шкорпил 1905, 530 – 531). In modern times (about the middle of 20th c.), the road was moved on the rampart itself and on the filled in and leveled ditch, and it was used by buses connecting the villages of Ostrov and Galovo until the 1970s. Today the route of the road (fig. 3) is mainly used by agricultural machinery.

From the Knezha – Oryahovo road, the rampart continues in a straight line to the southwest (215°) without changing direction. After 5 – 6 km, the rampart crosses the ravine in the Zahlupen Geran area, east of the village of Bardarski Geran, and reaches a low tumulus (fig. 4), piled up immediately in front of the ditch (coordinates: 43.542218° N; 24.014062° E). After the tumulus, the

² Up to the 1950s Ostrovski rampart was significantly better preserved, but after the introduction of heavy mechanized machinery for land cultivation, in many places the facility was ploughed and partially or completely obliterated.

rampart curves smoothly to the south and continues in a nearly straight line to the south – southwest (196°), following the watershed between the rivers of Skat and Gostilya. The rampart crosses in sequence the Varbitsa river, the Knezha – Byala Slatina road and the road between the town of Byala Slatina and Tarnak village.

Southeast of Byala Slatina, the earthwork reaches about 1 – 1.5 km to the Skat River, then continues to the south, following the river almost in parallel (fig. 2). At the turn of the Skat river, near the villages of Popitsa and Barkachevo, the rampart also turns and changes its direction to the southwest (224°). Today, in this area the earthwork is almost completely obliterated. Southeast of Barkachevo village, the rampart can be traced again, crossing the road between the villages of Barkachevo and Vranjak, passing west of Vranjak village and heading southwest (221°). After that, the rampart crosses the Ivanov Kladenets area (between the villages of Vranjak and Tlachene), in individual places the route is disfeatured. The southern end of the earthwork curves in an arc to the south and ends at the foot of the Usoya hill, west of Gabare village (coordinates: 43.319239° N; 23.889886° E) (fig. 2).

The spatial analysis shows that the route of the Ostrovski rampart was dug out almost in the middle of the plain, between the Iskar and Ogosta rivers (fig. 1). Its direction follows the main inclination of the West Danube Plain, which is to the north – northeast. The defense line encloses completely a region with a marked steppe landscape – from the Danube river on the north, to the low hills of the Fore Balkan on the south. The rampart follows the watershed between the two biggest rivers in the region – Iskar and Ogosta, and its route divides the plain longitudinally into two almost equal parts.

The field surveys of the Ostrovski rampart allow us to differentiate three sections – northern, middle and southern. The northern section of the structure has a length of about 20 km and covers the

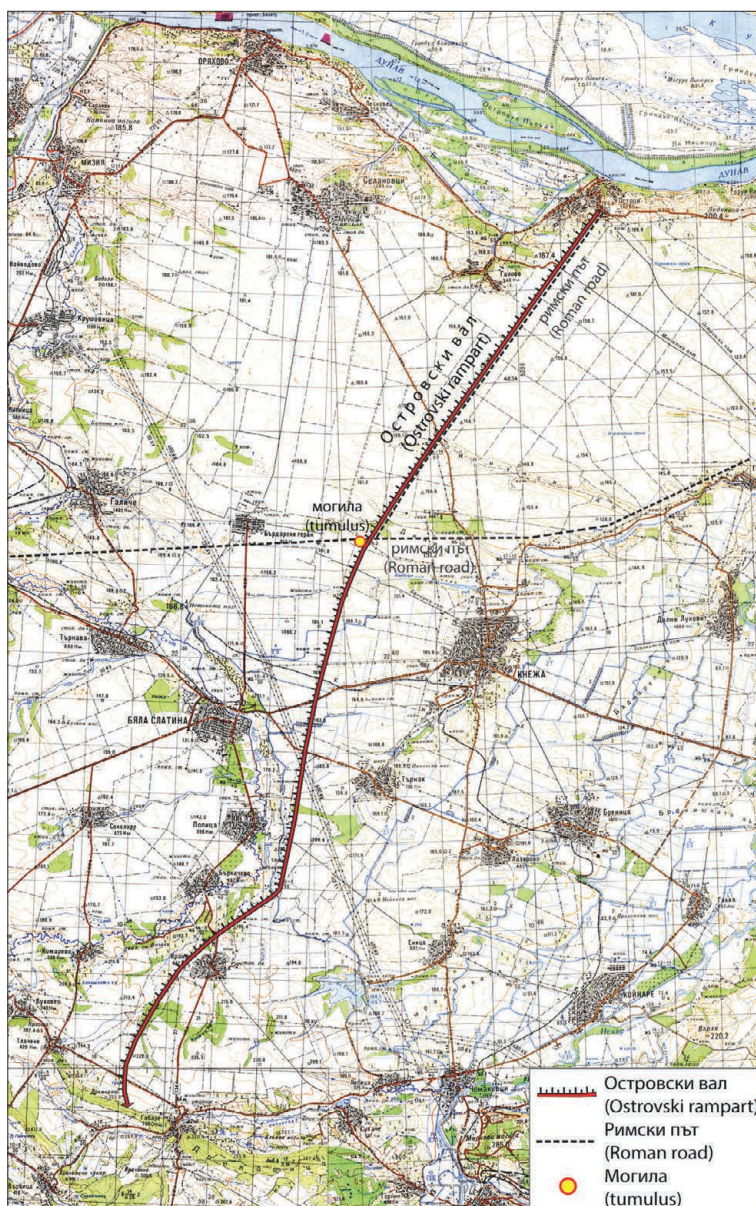


Fig. 2. Mapping the route of the Ostrovski rampart (Author: V. Grigorov)
Обр. 2. Картиране трасето на Островския вал (автор В. Григоров)

route from Ostrov village to the tumulus, registered in the Zahlupen Geran area (fig. 5). This section of the facility has the most regular linear route. The middle section of the rampart has a length of about 19 km and covers the route to the turn of the Skat river, near the villages of Popitsa and Barkachevo (fig. 6). In this section, the rampart also has a relatively regular linear routing. The southern section of the rampart has a length of about 16 km and covers the route between the villages of Barkachevo and Gabare (fig. 7). In this section, the line of the rampart curves in an arc and ends at the Usoya hill.

During the first field surveys, when the earthwork was much better preserved, K. Škorpil paid special attention to the circumstance that the northern end of the Ostrovski rampart does not reach the Danube and the beginning of the entrenchment is at 1.5 km south of the river. This fact can be explained by the Ostrovsko Marsh, situated to the west of the rampart. Before it was drained, it

occupied an area of about 20 sq. km and completely shut off access to the northern wing of the earthwork facility (fig. 5).

Another peculiarity of the Ostrovski rampart is that its southern end does not close at a full-bodied river like the other two ramparts (Hayredinski and Lomski). The hydrological characteristics of the region allow the earthwork to be completed at Skat river, east of the town of Byala Slatina (fig. 2). Instead, the builders preferred to construct twenty more kilometers of the earthwork, its route running along the Skat river almost in parallel. Thus, the full-bodied river and the coastline, over-



Fig. 3. The road near Ostrov village, built on top of the Ostrovski rampart, view to the south (Photo: V. Grigorov, April 2019)

Обр. 3. Пътят при с. Остров, изграден върху Островския вал, поглед на юг (фото В. Григоров, април 2019 г.)



Fig. 4. Tumulus, located near the Ostrovski rampart (Photo: V. Grigorov, June 2011)

Обр. 4. Могила, разположена до Островския вал (фото В. Григоров, юни 2011 г.)

grown with thick vegetation and swampy in places, was used as a natural barrier 1 – 2 km before the front line. One of the right tributaries of Skat river, which meanders at about 200 – 600 m before the southern section of the earthwork, was used in an identical way (fig. 7).

The southern end of the Ostrovski rampart stops next to a low hill, after which the relief becomes hilly and forested. The region is relatively closed and difficult to cross. The Vrachanski Venets hill encloses the valley of Brisha river (Gabarska river), and its numerous tributaries form parallel ravines and thus a series of natural obstacles (fig. 7).

At the two ends of the Ostrovski rampart, small earthwork strongholds have been registered, which some researchers relate to the structure of the defense line. In the northern end of Ostrovski rampart, K. Škorpiл describes an earthwork stronghold called Os-

trovsko Kale (Шкорпил 1905, 528). “It is situated at the beginning of the Okop (entrenchment) near Ostrov village, at the northern slope of Alibash hill (fig. 5). The stronghold has a trapezoid, irregular shape with dimensions: north – 250 feet, west – 200 feet, east – 170 feet, south – 60 – 90 feet. Most probably, there were entrances from the south and north” (Шкорпил 1905, 530). The fortification has not been specially excavated, but R. Rashev assumes that it was probably connected with the rampart’s guard (Рашев 1982, 65).

Three small strongholds have been registered in the southern end of the Ostrovski rampart – Brisha Gradishte (Николов 2014, 92), Dolno Kale³ and Marlenko Kale.⁴ According to B. Nikolov, Brisha Gradishte “was a temporary fortress or garrison of the Ostrovski entrenchment”.

History of the exploration of Ostrovski rampart

Despite the initial interest of Bulgarian historians in the Ostrovski rampart, its exploration at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th c. was limited only to field description and the mapping of its route, and marking the nearby archaeological sites (Шкорпил 1905, 528 – 530). It is only at



Fig. 5. Northern part of the Ostrovski rampart (Author: V. Grigorov)

Обр. 5. Северен дял на Островския вал (автор В. Григоров)

³ Registration card No. 10000634 from AIS AMB.

⁴ Registration card No. 10000633 from AIS AMB.



Fig. 6. Central part of the Ostrovski rampart (Author: V. Grigorov)
Обр. 6. Централен дял на Островския вал (автор В. Григоров)

the beginning of the 1960s that B. Nikolov and S. Mashov (the curators at the Museum of History – Vratsa) carried out large-scale field surveys in the vicinity of Ostrovski rampart (Николов 1962, 33 – 37). Their research mainly concerned the registration of a large number of new archaeological sites from different historical periods, and collecting finds which were discovered accidentally by local residents.

In 1961, B. Nikolov also carried out the first excavations at Ostrovski rampart. Unfortunately, we have no documentation from the excavations. From the scarce information published, we find out that the rampart was sectioned on the territory of Ostrov village. The structure of the earthwork is also described very briefly: “The entrenchment has a depth of 3 m, width in the upper part – 5 m and width at the bottom – 2.50 m.

The excavated clay was thrown only to the east of the entrenchment, where it was rammed and reinforced with turf rolls and hedge. Thus, an earthwork rampart was formed with a height of up to 2 m” (Николов 2014, 291).

“Asparuhov rampart” expedition (2010 – 2011)

After a long period of suspension, systematic archaeological exploration of Ostrovski rampart was renewed in the last decade. In 2010, the GEOS 92 company carried out geodesic mapping of the rampart from Ostrov village to the Byala Slatina – Tarnak road. The route was entered into a cadastral and satellite map and served as the basis of the archaeological exploration. In the following year, 2011, within the “Asparuhov rampart” expedition, archaeological excavations were carried out north of the town of Knezha.⁵ We made control archaeological sections in three places along the rampart’s route (fig. 8). Two of the trenches are located in the Marinov Geran area, on the two sides of the Knezha – Oryahovo road. A third trench was made in the Zahlupen Geran area.

In the Marinov Geran area, the earthwork has been completely disfeatured and the sections made there yielded no results (Григоров 2011, 130). A geomagnetic survey was performed along with the

⁵ The initiative for carrying out the “Asparuhov rampart” expedition came from the dentist Dr. Anatoliy Kanev, who is also the main sponsor of the field surveys. Associate Professor Valeri Grigorov (NAIM – BAS), Aleksandra Petrova (RMH – Vratsa), Tsvetina Petkova, and Angel Bachiyski (Museum of History – Knezha) took part in the archaeological exploration.

excavations. It was carried out by P. Zidarov from the Laboratory of Archaeometry and Experimental Archaeology with NBU. North of trench II, two polygons were investigated, which cross the line of the supposed earthwork. The obtained geomagnetic data presented similar results. From the east and the west of the studied strip, zones with higher values of the magnetic field are formed, which should be connected to the field boundaries of the two agricultural blocks (fig. 9). In the western end of polygon No. 2, there is a zone with low values of the magnetic field, which should be connected with the location of the dirt road. The results from the two surveys did not provide definite indications of the presence of an earthwork structure. At this stage of research, we cannot explain the

lack of an archaeological result in the Marinov Geran area. It is possible that the route was dislocated from the original line of the earthwork during the modern leveling of the rampart and the afforestation that followed. The limited scope of the two trenches I and II (with a length of 22 and 16 m, respectively) most probably does not cover the line of the ditch.

A third archaeological trench was made in the Zahlupen Geran area, where the rampart is much easier to detect on site (fig. 10). A linear sinking of the ditch is outlined and the rampart's embankment is piled at its eastern side. The study was carried out through a trench of 20 x 1 m, which crosses transversely the whole width of the earthwork and exits outside at both ends. The results of the performed archaeological section showed that the total width of the structure is about 15.50 m (fig. 11). In its upper part the ditch is 4.50 m wide and in depth its width decreases to 2 m. The bottom of the ditch is a narrow trench with a step on the eastern side, where the excavated soil for the rampart's embankment was carried out. The ditch's walls are scarped with a slope to the outside. The depth of the ditch is 3.10 m.

There is no berm between the ditch and the rampart, the rampart's embankment was made right next to the ditch, and a narrow path was left with a width of about 0.50 m. The rampart is about 10.50 m wide in its base and the preserved maximum height is 1.30 m. The rampart's embankment is mainly made of humus soil forming a layer with thickness of about 0.85 m. A layer of lighter loess soil was piled over it. On the top of the rampart, an additional humus layer was piled, probably with the aim of covering it with turf or tree-bush vegetation to protect the surface from erosion.⁶ The total denivelation of the rampart from the bottom of the ditch to the present ridge of the rampart is 4.40 m.

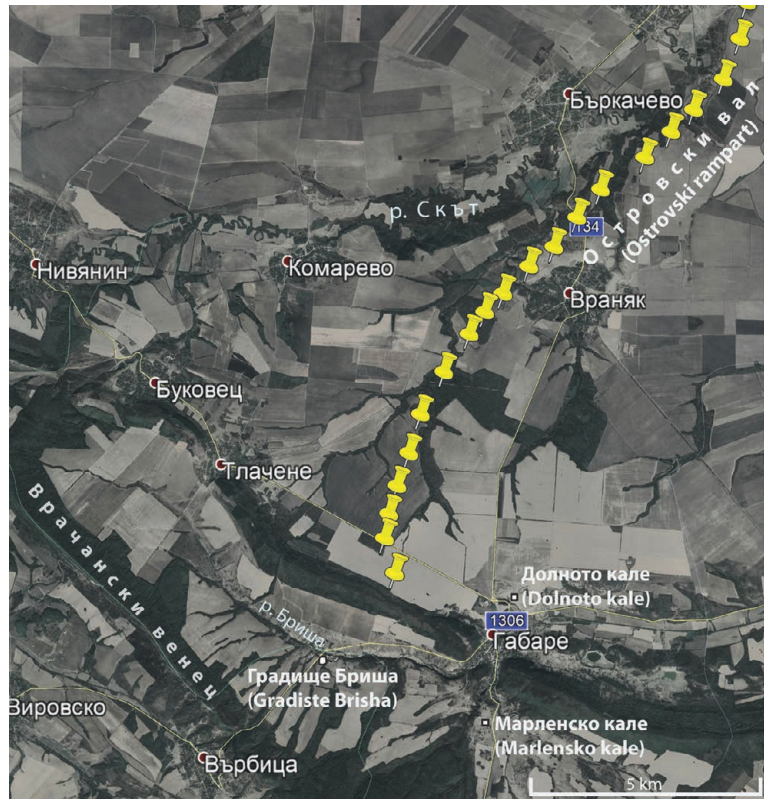


Fig. 7. Southern part of the Ostrovski rampart (Author: V. Grigorov)

Обр. 7. Южен дял на Островския вал (автор В. Григоров)

⁶ Analogous piling of humus layer on the ridge of the rampart has been documented during the investigation of another similar structure – Erkesia rampart, in East Thrace (Григоров, Василев 2007, 165).



Fig. 8. Geodetic documentation of the layout of the Ostrovski rampart (performed by GEOS 92). The yellow spots mark the placement of the archaeological excavations (trenches I, II, III, and site No. 28), the blue spots mark the polygons for the geomagnetic survey, while the white spot marks the tumulus (Author: V. Grigorov)

Обр. 8. Геодезично заснемане на трасето на Островския вал (извършено от GEOS 92). С жълто кръгче са отбелязани местата на археологическите проучвания (сондажи I, II, III и обект 28), със синьо кръгче са отбелязани полигоните за геомагнитно изследване, а с бяло кръгче е отбелязана могила (автор В. Григоров)

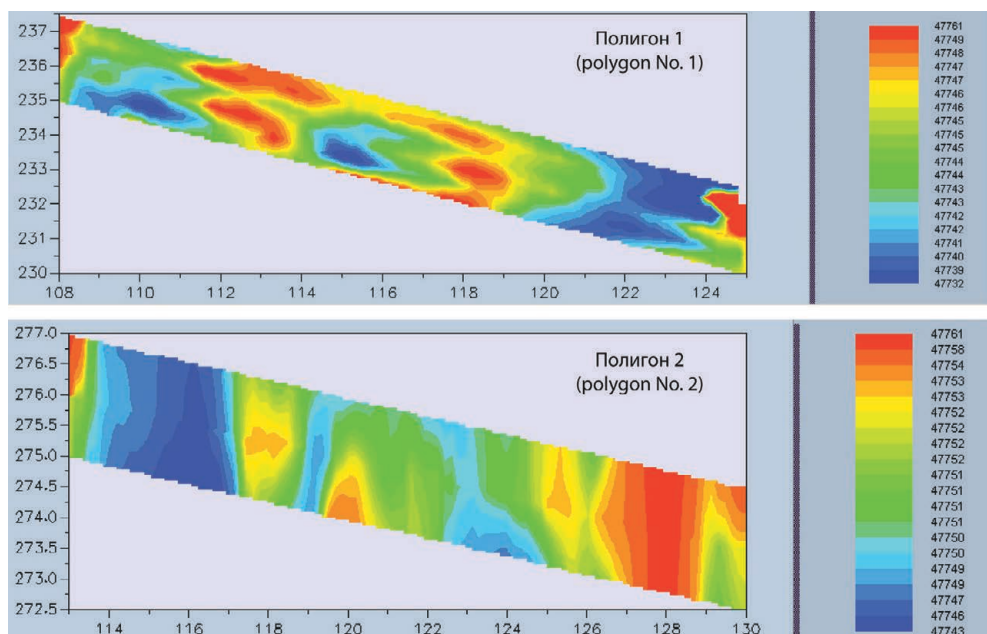


Fig. 9. Magnetograms of polygons Nos. 1 and 2 (Author: P. Zidarov)

Обр. 9. Магнитограми на полигони 1 и 2 (автор П. Зидаров)



Fig. 10. Trench III, at Zahlupen geran area, view to the north (Photo: V. Grigorov)

Обр. 10. Сондаж III, в местността Захлупен геран, поглед на север (фото В. Григоров)

Archaeological exploration of site No. 28 (Ostrovski rampart) along the route of “Balkan Stream” gas supply pipeline

In 2019, the authors had another opportunity to carry out an archaeological exploration of Ostrovski rampart.⁷ The rescue excavations were carried out in connection with the expansion of the gas transmission infrastructure of “Bulgartransgaz” EAD along the route of “Balkan Stream”. The area designated for archaeological exploration is marked as site No. 28 and is located at 3.7 km south (172°) of Galovo village (fig. 8). In this sector, the earthwork is heavily disaffected, the rampart’s embankment has been scattered and leveled (fig. 12), and the location of the assumed ditch has been completely filled in, with a dirt road passing over it.

⁷ Associate Professor Valeri Grigorov (NAIM – BAS), Assistant Professor Svetlana Venelinova (RMH – Shumen) and Evgenia Naidenova, PhD (MH – Oryahovo) took part in the archaeological exploration.

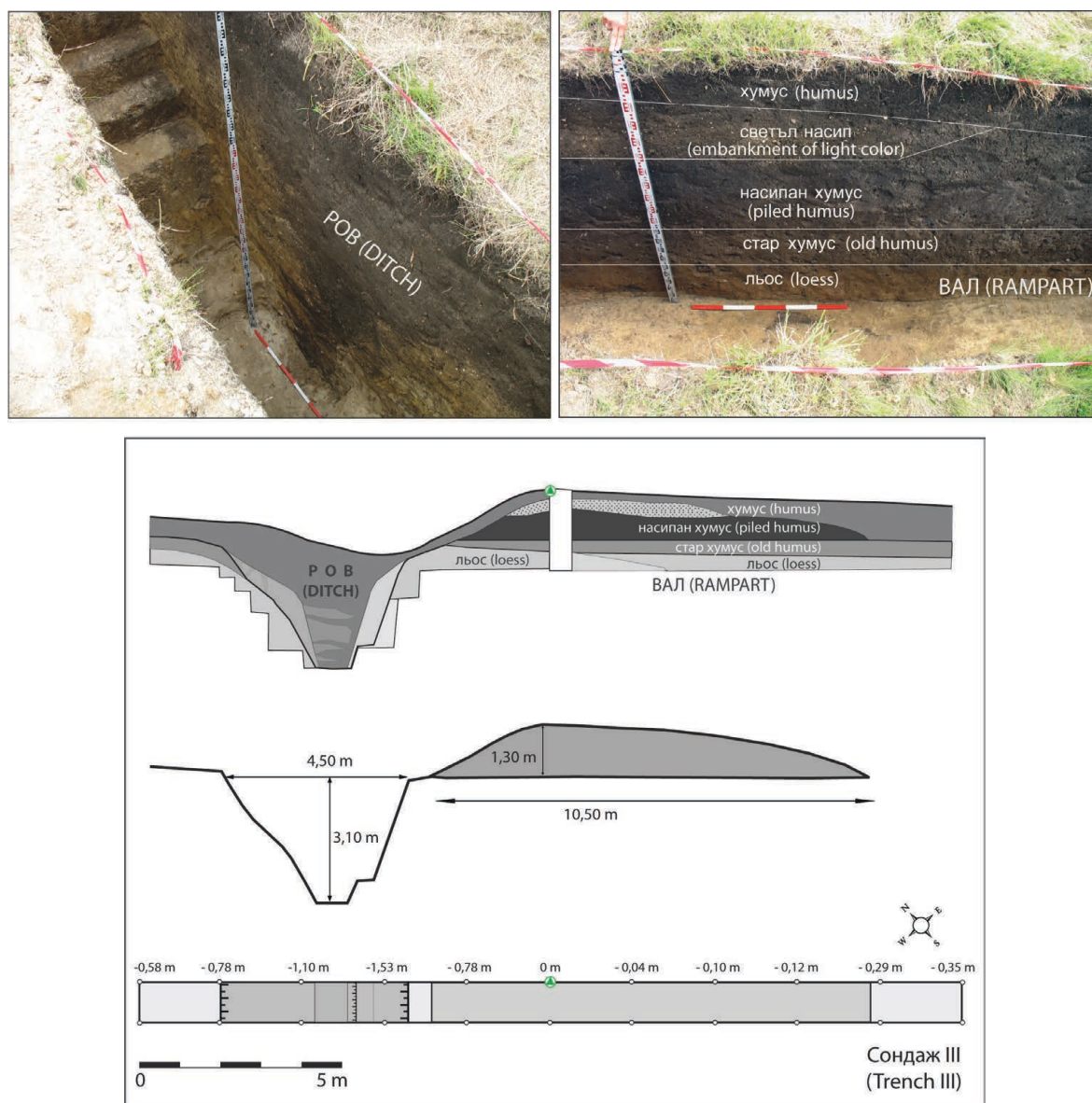


Fig. 11. Trench III. Photo and graphic documentation of the earthwork structure (Author: V. Grigorov)

Обр. 11. Сондаж III. Фото и графично заснемане на земеното съоръжение (автор В. Григоров)

Exploration of the site began with a geophysical survey⁸ using an electrical resistivity method. Two tomographic profiles with a length of 47 m were drawn transversely to the earthwork (fig. 13). The results obtained are identical, and at both profiles the earthwork was identified by the higher values of electrical conductivity compared to the surrounding terrain.

The archaeological exploration was carried out through two trenches of 35 x 2 m. They are oriented along the southeast – northwest axis and cross transversely the whole width of the earthwork and exit outside at both ends (fig. 14). During the excavations, a third trench was opened, 40 x 2 m, positioned in parallel to the first two, as well as several smaller trenches, located at the eastern end of the easement land.

⁸ The geophysical survey was carried out by Atanas Kisyov, Assistant Professor at the University of Mining and Geology in Sofia.



Fig. 12. Site No. 28 (Photo: V. Grigorov)

Обр. 12. Обект 28 (фото В. Григоров)

Stratigraphy of the structures

The latest structures are documented in the eastern end of the site, where 13 holes from a solid pillar structure were uncovered, positioned in a line, oriented northeast – southwest (fig. 14). The holes were detected immediately under the turf layer, have a diameter of about 0.60 – 0.65 m, and are dug to a depth of 1.40 m (fig. 15). A piece of nylon was found in one of the holes, in another – a piece of sheet metal, evidencing the modern origin of the structure. We subsequently received additional information from an elderly resident of Galovo village, according to which electricity supply pillars were placed at that location in the 1960s/1970s and removed at the beginning of the 1990s.

In the next stratigraphic level, thousands of holes with a diameter of 5 – 8 cm were uncovered in the whole explored area. They are registered at 0.50 – 0.70 m under the present surface and reach the loess in depth (about 1.70 – 2 m). The holes have the nature of vertical canals and, because of their great length, they were sectioned and documented in sequence at different levels (fig. 16). Small rodent bones were found in some of the holes. Consultations with experts-biologists⁹ allowed specifying that this was probably bioturbation by rodents (European ground squirrels).

The earliest archaeological structure is the earthwork. Unfortunately, in the area designated for exploration, the rampart is completely disfeatured, which did not allow us to determine its characteristics and dimensions. It was established in the profiles of the sections that the embankment was subsequently scattered and leveled and forms a homogeneous compact humus layer, about 0.40 – 0.50 m thick (fig. 17).

The ditch was registered in the western end of the easement land, in trenches Nos. 1 and 2. In the upper layers the ditch's outlines are not clearly separate, they are definitely documented at a depth of 0.90 – 1.10 m from the present-day surface where its width is over 4 m (fig. 18a). At the border with the loess, the width of the ditch decreases to 2.20 m (fig. 18b) and at the bottom the width is 1.70 – 1.73 m. Measured from ground level, the ditch is 3 m deep (fig. 19).

Several layers of fill are documented in the ditch's profiles (fig. 20). The bottom is covered with a layer of brown-black alluvial soil, then a grey-brown layer, the upper part of the ditch is filled with brown mixed soil and dark brown compact one. In trench No. 1A, in the alluvial layer of the ditch,

⁹I would like to thank Professor Zlatozar Boev and Associate Professor Yordan Koshev for their expert opinion.

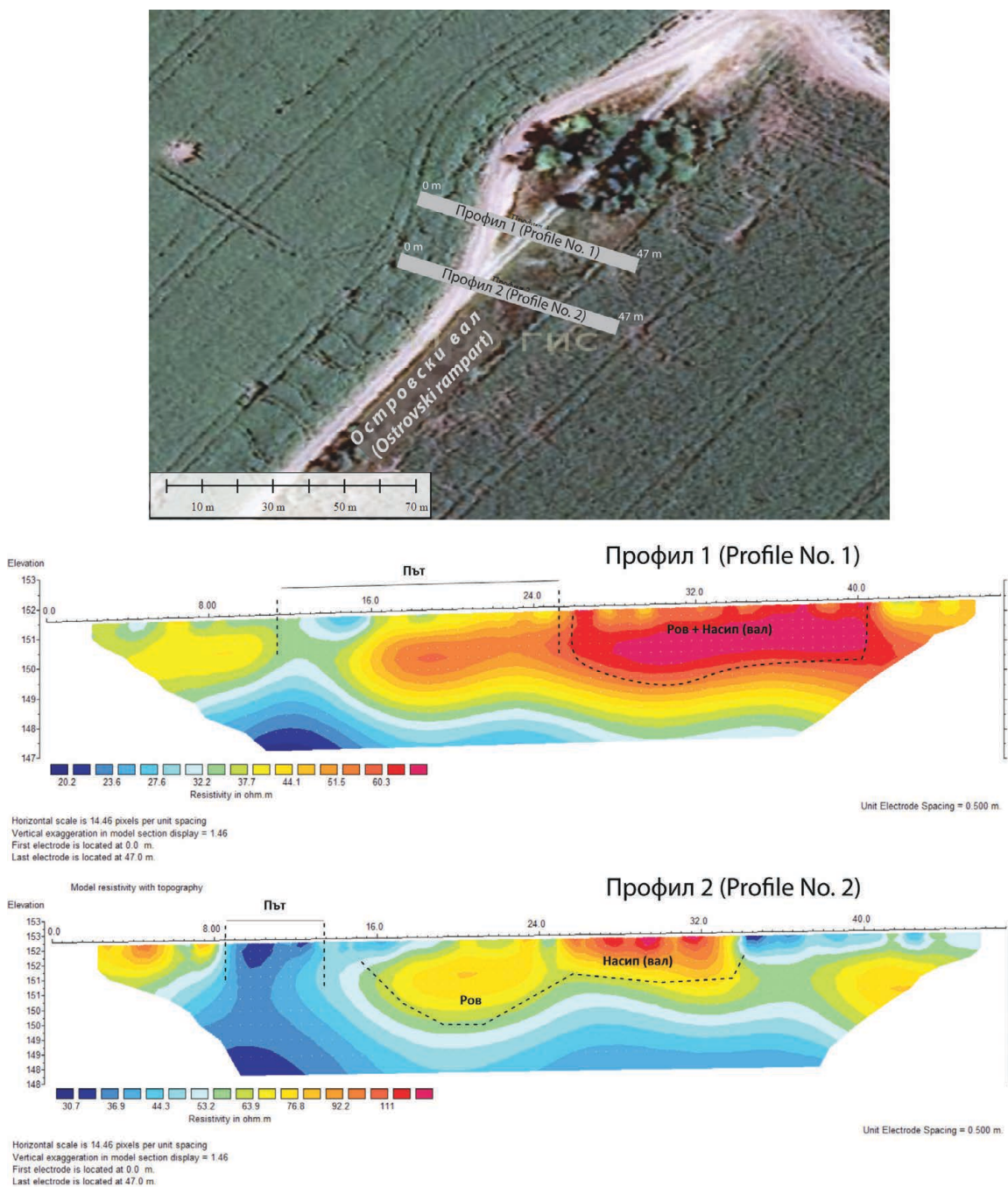
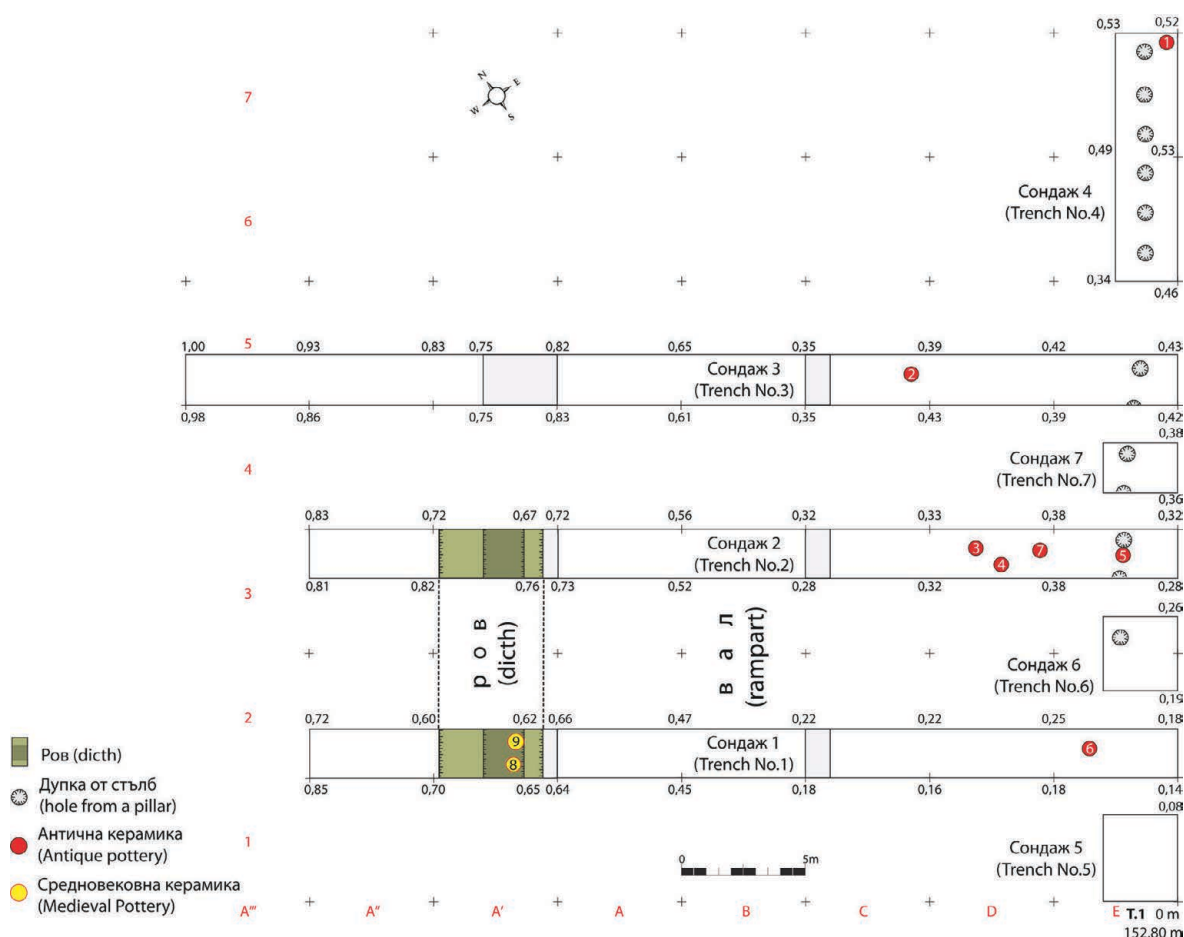


Fig. 13. Geophysical survey of site No. 28, tomographic profiles (Author: A. Kisyov)

Обр. 13. Геофизично изследване на обект 28, томографски профили (автор А. Кисьов)

two fragments of early medieval ceramics were found, and in trench No. 2A, 1 meter above the bottom of the ditch, we found bones from a calf.

In order to clarify the nature of the fill in the ditch at a micro level, Prof. G. Aleksiev carried out sediment laboratory analysis of 4 samples taken from the northern archaeological profile in trench No. 1A'. The analysis includes: sieve analysis of fraction 0.05 to 2.00 mm and hydrometric analysis of fraction < 0.05 mm after treatment with hydrogen peroxide (H_2O_2) for presence of clay or organic matter, presented in cumulative curves or percentages for particle size, as well as through



Обр. 14. Обект 28. План на изкопите. Отбелязани са очертанията на рова и дупки от стълбове. Планиграфски са отбелязани откритите керамични находки: с червено кръгче – антична керамика; с жълто кръгче – средновековна керамика (автор В. Григоров)

HCL – for establishing carbonates within the lithological-stratigraphic and lithological-facial vertical sediment section.

The following lithological-stratigraphic sequence was established in the vertical sediment section: in the top two layers (samples Nos. 5 and 6), chernozem humus layer with thickness up to 2 m was identified, enriched with organic matter including fine clays (up to 24 – 30 %) and siltstone (up to 55 – 64 %) and a transitional horizon with thickness of about 1 m (samples Nos. 7 and 8), comprising mainly siltstone and pockets of humus matter and bedrock (loess) of fine, small and coarse sand.

Samples	Clay (%)	Siltstone (%)	Sand (%)
No. 5	23.39	64.15	12.46
No. 6	29.37	54.92	15.71
No. 7	16.13	71.35	12.35
No. 8	19.45	67.28	13.27



Fig. 15. Holes from a pillar structure documented in trenches Nos. 2, 4, and 7
(Photo: V. Grigorov)

Обр. 15. Дупки от стълбова конструкция, документирани в сондажи 2, 4 и 7 (фото В. Григоров)

Chronology of Ostrovski rampart

The chronology of Ostrovski rampart is a major problem that has not found a satisfactory solution for more than a century. Different opinions arose at the very beginning of the exploration of the “West Bulgarian” ramparts. V. Dobruský assumes that they are from Roman and Celtic times (Добруски 1890, 37), whereas K. Škorpil relates them to the early period of the Bulgarian state (Шкорпил 1905, 530).

Despite the lack of specific archaeological evidence for dating the ramparts, Bulgarian historiography widely supports K. Škorpil’s opinion of their Early Bulgarian origin. V. Zlatarski and researchers after him have assumed that the “West Bulgarian” ramparts were constructed in the early period of the Bulgarian state, and that they marked the west border of Bulgaria from the time of Asparuh (Златарски 1970, 152; Рашев 2008, 37). On the grounds of historical sources which mention Bulgarian

expansion to the west after 818 (ЛИБИ 1960, 42 – 43), it is assumed that by that time the border reached the three ramparts (Аладжов 1975, 114). Under the influence of the established opinion among Bulgarian historians, local teachers and ethnographers started to call the three ramparts “Asparuhovi” (Asparuh’s).

The first attempts to find archaeological artifacts related to Ostrovski rampart were in the 1960s, when B. Nikolov and S. Mashov carried out large-scale archaeological surveys. A number of Medieval settlements and necropolises have been registered in a wide perimeter around the Ostrovski rampart near the villages of Galiche, Bukyovtsi (present-day town of Mizia), Dolni Lukovit, Gabare, Borovan, the town of Knezha and in the Gostilya area, north of Knezha (НИКОЛОВ 1962, 33 – 37; НИКОЛОВ 2014, 30, 92, 99, 150, 183). The archaeological excavations of Zh. Vazharova which followed provide more detailed information about some of the sites. Three early Medieval necropolises have been excavated near the village of Dolni Lukovit, necropolises near the villages of Galiche, Mihaylovo and Bukyovtsi have also been partially excavated (Въжарова 1959, 20 – 22; Въжарова 1976, 173 – 247, 262 – 263, 265). For the necropolis near the village of Galiche, it is as-

sumed that it contained over 500 graves, i.e. it is related to a settlement with quite a large population (Въжарова 1976, 220). In the past years, during rescue excavations in the town of Oryahovo, 6 earlier Medieval graves were discovered in the yard of “Sv. Sv. Kiril i Metodiy” school (Торбов, Ганецовски 2009, 730 – 731).

The multitude of archaeological field surveys in the region have been a major contribution to completing the register of the Archaeological Map of Bulgaria (Luka 2015, 439, fig. 2). A significant number of archaeological sites were discovered during the comprehensive surveys along the routes of the large gas transmission projects “South Stream”, “Nabuko” and “Balkan Stream”. Therefore today we have much more complete archaeological information about the region. The data outline a

well-developed network of settlements and necropolises during the Early Middle Ages, with a high concentration around the ramparts (fig. 21).

Archaeological excavations show that a large number of the settlements appeared in the 9th c. (Въжарова 1959, 22; Въжарова 1965a, 123 – 126, 188; Въжарова 1965b, 231, обр. 1a, 245; Въжарова 1976, 418 – 421; Fiedler 1992, 332 – 342, 458 – 461, Taf. 52, 53, 54, 55, 56). The rapid increase of the population in that period is related to an organized influx of migrants from other regions (Рашев 2008, 149) and captured Christians from East Thrace (Григоров 2007, 95 – 96).

No traces of habitation in the immediate vicinity of Ostrovski rampart have been found so far, and there are not sufficient archaeological finds to direct us on the chronology of the earthwork. For a long time, the only artifact which was directly connected with the rampart was the sword from the village of Galovo. B. Nikolov claims that the weapon was discovered in the embankment of the rampart during tillage with tractor (Николов 1962, 36 – 37, обр. 9; Николов 2014, 103). The find is extremely interesting and has been the subject of various studies. Initially the sword was defined as “Early Bulgarian” (Николов 1962, 37, обр. 9; Николов 2014, 291), and later – as “Byzantine type, manufactured somewhere in the Balkans in the 9th – beginning of the 10th c.” (Йотов 2004, 41 – 42, табло XXIX – 421). In recent years, S. Kamburov has made a justified reinterpretation of the find, relating the sword “with the Arab military tradition from the early Caliphate period” (Камбуров 2017, 270).

During the archaeological excavations of site No. 28, we had the chance to discover a small number of ceramic sherds which represent two historical periods – Antiquity and Middle Ages.



Fig. 16. Documenting holes from bioturbations (Photo: V. Grigorov)
Обр. 16. Документиране на дупки от биотурбация (фото В. Григоров)

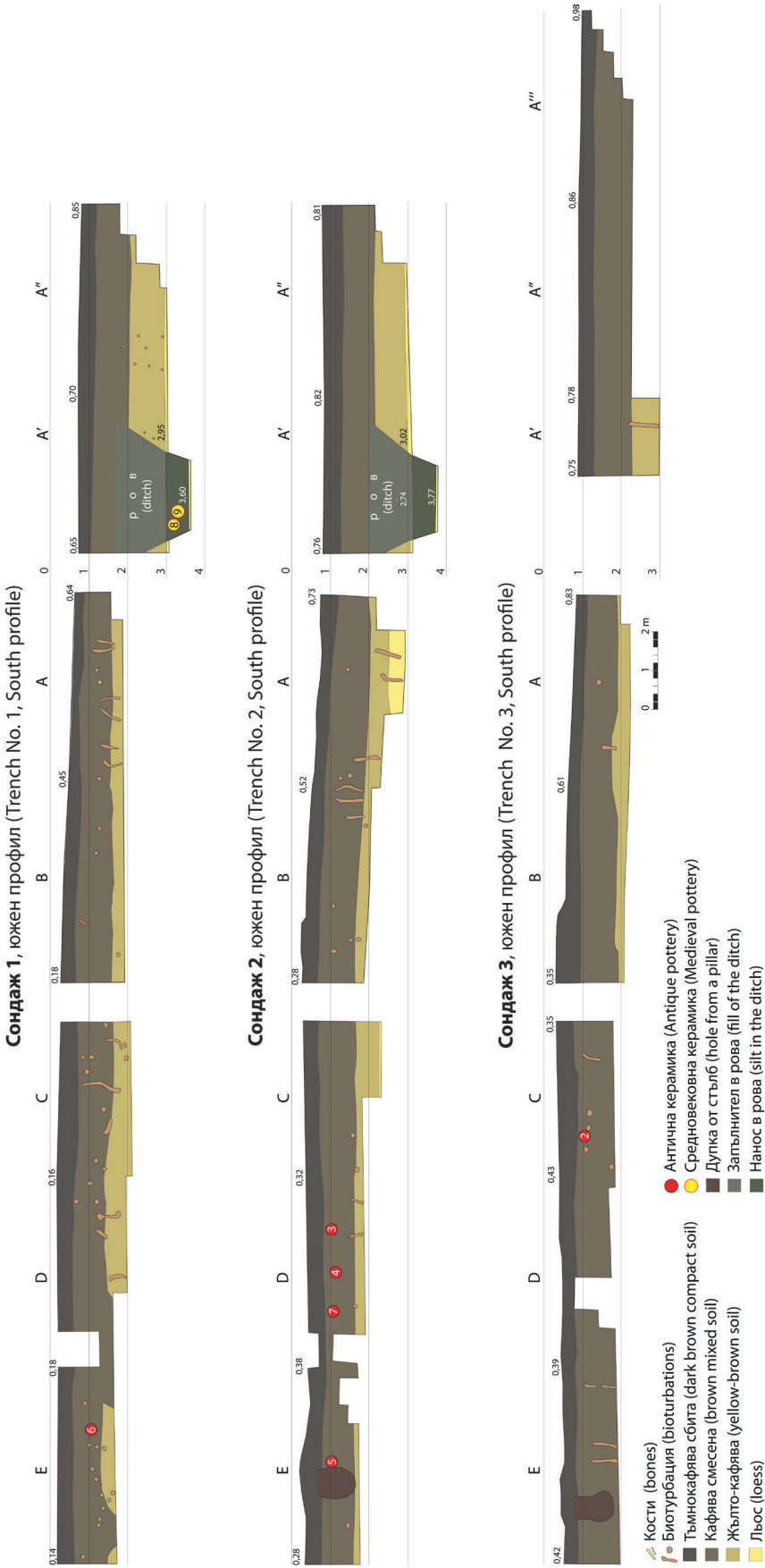


Fig. 17. Graphic documentation of the south profiles in trenches Nos. 1, 2, and 3. The stratigraphic levels of the ceramic finds are marked accordingly: red spot – Antique pottery; yellow spot – Medieval pottery (Author: V. Grigorov)

Обр. 17. Графично документиране на южните профили в сондажи 1, 2 и 3. Отбелязани са стратиграфските нива на откритите керамични находки: с червено кръгче – антична керамика; с жълто кръгче – средновековна керамика (автор В. Григоров)

The Antique ceramics (fig. 22: 1 – 7) were discovered in the area right next to the rampart, on its eastern side (fig. 14). The sherds were discovered at the ancient ground level, under the subsequently scattered and leveled embankment of the rampart. The pottery is very fragmented and damaged, probably due to numerous displacements. Some of the sherds are made of sandy clay on a slow potter's wheel, and after firing the vessels' surface acquired a brown or grey-brown colour. One of the indicative specimens is a pot rim with an intricate profile (fig. 22: 1). Another sherd is from a jug thrown on a fast wheel from purified clay with traces of red slip on the inside (fig. 22: 2). The dating of the ceramics is debatable, but the two more informative sherds can be referred to the Late Roman period (end of the 3rd – beginning of the 5th c.).¹⁰

The two fragments of Medieval ceramics are also of special interest (fig. 22: 8 – 9). They were discovered during the investigation of the ditch, in trench No. 1A' (fig. 14, fig. 20).

The sherds were found in the alluvial layer which clogged the bottom of the ditch. The ceramics come from pots made of sandy clay with incised decoration. The technological and decorative characteristics allow dating them for sure in the 9th c.

The ceramic finds discovered, although limited in number, are extremely valuable, since they represent the first archaeological evidence in immediate stratigraphic link with the earthwork. Their presence raises important questions about the possible presence of sites from the two historical periods in the vicinity of the rampart. During the field survey, however, no traces of Antiquity or Medieval sites were found in the perimeter around the earthwork.

The only information to date which explains the presence of Late Roman ceramics is the Roman road noted by K. Škorpil and registered along the rampart (Шкорпил 1905, 530 – 531) (fig. 2). Unfortunately, the excavations did not provide specific data about the road. Its route should be sought east of the rampart, in the agricultural areas which are ploughed and deep-ploughed at a big

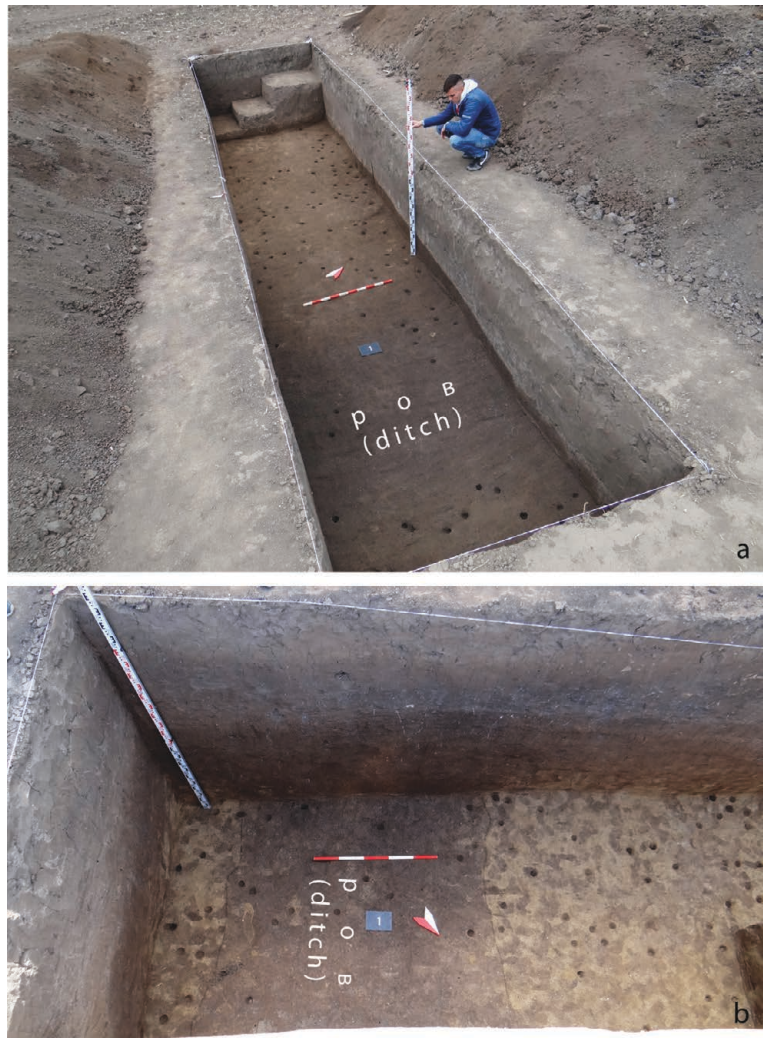


Fig. 18. Documenting the outlines of the rampart in trench No. 1: a. depth 1.10 m; b. depth 2.35 m (Photo: V. Grigorov)

Обр. 18. Регистриране на очертанията на рова в сондаж 1: а. дълбочина 1,10 м; б. дълбочина 2,35 м (фото В. Григоров)

¹⁰ I would like to thank Gergana Kabakchieva and Stiliyan Ivanov for their consultations and dating the ceramics.



Fig. 19. Documenting the bottom of the ditch in trenches Nos. 1 and 2
(Photo: V. Grigorov)

Обр. 19. Документиране дъното на рова в сондажи 1 и 2
(фото В. Григоров)

depth, which has led to the complete obliteration of its traces.

K. Škorpil mentions another route of the Roman road which crosses the “entrenchment” north of Knezha (fig. 2) and continues west to the villages of Bardarski Geran, Altimir and Sirakovo, and east – to the villages of Dolni Lukovit and Gos-tilya. In present days, the traces of this road are completely obliterated, but in the cross point between the two presumed routes, immediately before the ditch, a small tumulus has been piled (fig. 2, fig. 4, fig. 8). The above data point towards the possibility that the northern section of the Ostrovski rampart (about 20 km long) was aligned with the route of an older road. The linear precision of the earthwork structure indirectly supports this assumption. At the same time, without a solid topographic reason, the route of the earthwork changes direction south of the mentioned tumulus and makes a smooth curve southwards (fig. 8).

The Early Medieval ceramics discovered at the bottom of the ditch also require additional excavations in the region. The closest settlement site from this

period is 6 km east of the rampart, in the Partenchov Geran area. It was registered during the field surveys along the gas supply pipeline and marked as site No. 29 (fig. 23). In 2019, a significant part of the site was investigated by Y. Dimitrov and the chronology and function of the settlement was clarified.¹¹

In our efforts to solve the problem of dating the Ostrovski rampart, we also used the animal bones discovered in the ditch (fig. 24). They lie on a grey-black layer, at 1 m above the bottom of

¹¹ The Early Medieval settlement in the Partenchov Geran area is the only settlement unit in the region of Ostrovski rampart that has been more comprehensively researched for the time being. Ovens for preparing food and baking bread in large quantities, a production furnace for iron extraction and processing has been uncovered, and a well for potable water has been registered. The large number of quern and grindstone fragments, and the significant number of arrowheads stand out. According to data from the investigation, the settlement is dated in the 9th – middle of the 10th c. I would like to thank Y. Dimitrov for the information provided.

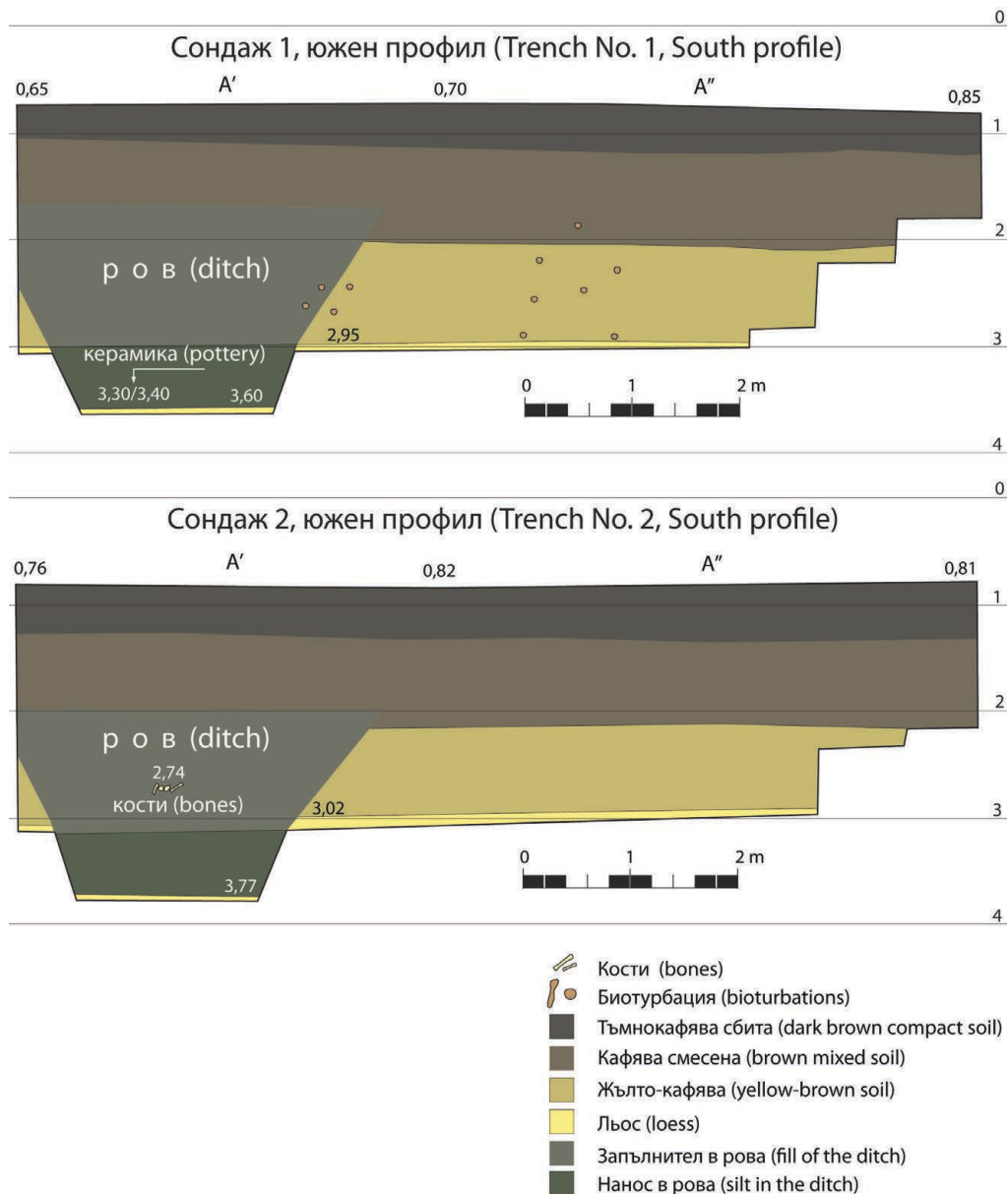


Fig. 20. Graphic documentation of the profiles of the ditch in trenches Nos. 1 and 2 (Author: V. Grigorov)

Обр. 20. Графично документиране на профилите на рова в сондажи 1 и 2 (автор В. Григоров)

the ditch, in trench No. 2A. The stratigraphic position suggests that the animal remains got there at a moment when the ditch was filled in about 1/3 of its authentic depth.

A sample of the bones was submitted for radiocarbon dating in the Scottish Universities Environmental Research Centre in Glasgow (SUERC). Calibrated data determine a dating period between 767 and 900 (fig. 25). Within this wide time range three narrower phases are outlined, the stratigraphic coordination with the ceramics discovered at the bottom of the ditch giving priority to the dates 802 – 845 or 853 – 885. The analysis of the bone material gave us the possibility to date a stage of the clogging the bottom of the ditch with a one-meter layer of deposits.

The analysis of the results brings out the almost complete overlap of the dates of the Early Medieval ceramics and the radiocarbon dating. This means that the animal bones got into the ditch

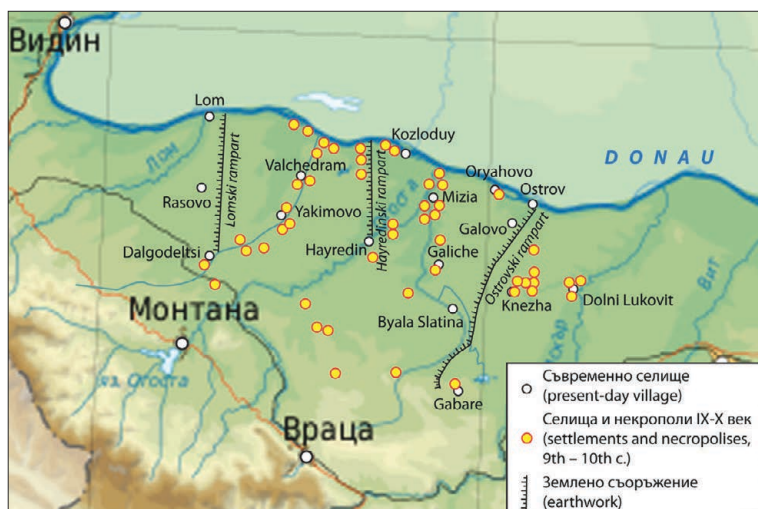


Fig. 21. Earthwork ramparts in Northwest Bulgaria on the background of the Early Medieval settlement system (Author: V. Grigorov)

Обр. 21. Землени валове в Северозападна България в контекста на ранносредновековната селищна мрежа (автор В. Григоров)

very soon after the ceramics. The accelerated clogging of the ditch's bottom can be explained mainly with the dynamic erosion processes, characteristic of this type of earthwork. They usually have a short service life in their original state. Another factor for the rapid accumulation of an alluvial layer on the bottom of the ditch is the topography of the region. Along the earthwork, the ground level at site No. 28 is lower compared to the surrounding relief and during heavy rains, sludge flowed down by gravity from the higher parts of the structure (fig. 23).

Reconstruction of Ostrovski rampart

The data from the archaeological investigations of Ostrovski rampart which have been carried out so far allow us to reconstruct the form of the earthwork (fig. 26). The most complete and reliable information we have is about the ditch. It has been documented in different sections of the feature and has identical dimensions. The ditch is about 3 m deep, width in the upper part – 4.50 – 5 m and at the bottom it narrows down to 1.70 – 2 m. The ditch walls are scarped with a slope to the outside, which was done to protect the edges of the pit from erosion and collapse.

The soil excavated from the ditch was mounted on the eastern side. Layers have been piled up in sequence, forming a rampart with a width of 10 – 11 m at the base. The rampart's height has not been preserved in its original state, but can be hypothetically reconstructed at about 2 m. The ridge of the rampart is towards the front line (western) side of the earthwork and has a slope of about 30 – 35°. B. Nikolov states that the rampart was rammed. No such data were established during our excavations in another section of the feature. The embankment of the rampart has a normal structure, slightly compacted, but with no indications of intentional ramming. The total denivelation of the feature from the bottom of the ditch to the presumed ridge of the rampart was about 5 m.

The construction of such an impressive in scale earthwork, which was many kilometers long, required the mobilisation of a large number of workers and various experts. The implementation of the construction project could be divided in two main stages. The first stage is related to the engineering works on routing the earthwork. They required a detailed examination of the topographic and hydrographical characteristics of the region. The linear planning also required advance removal of the shrub and tree vegetation in a wide line along the whole length of many kilometers.

The second stage is related to the excavation works for construction of the earthwork. Reconstructed metric data of the earthwork allow estimating of the workforce used. One linear meter excavated from the ditch contained about 9 – 10 m³ of soil. A humus layer (about 1 – 2 m³) was additionally piled on the ridge of the rampart, probably excavated from the rear side of the earthwork. The total volume of the soil excavated along the whole route is about 600,000 m³. At an

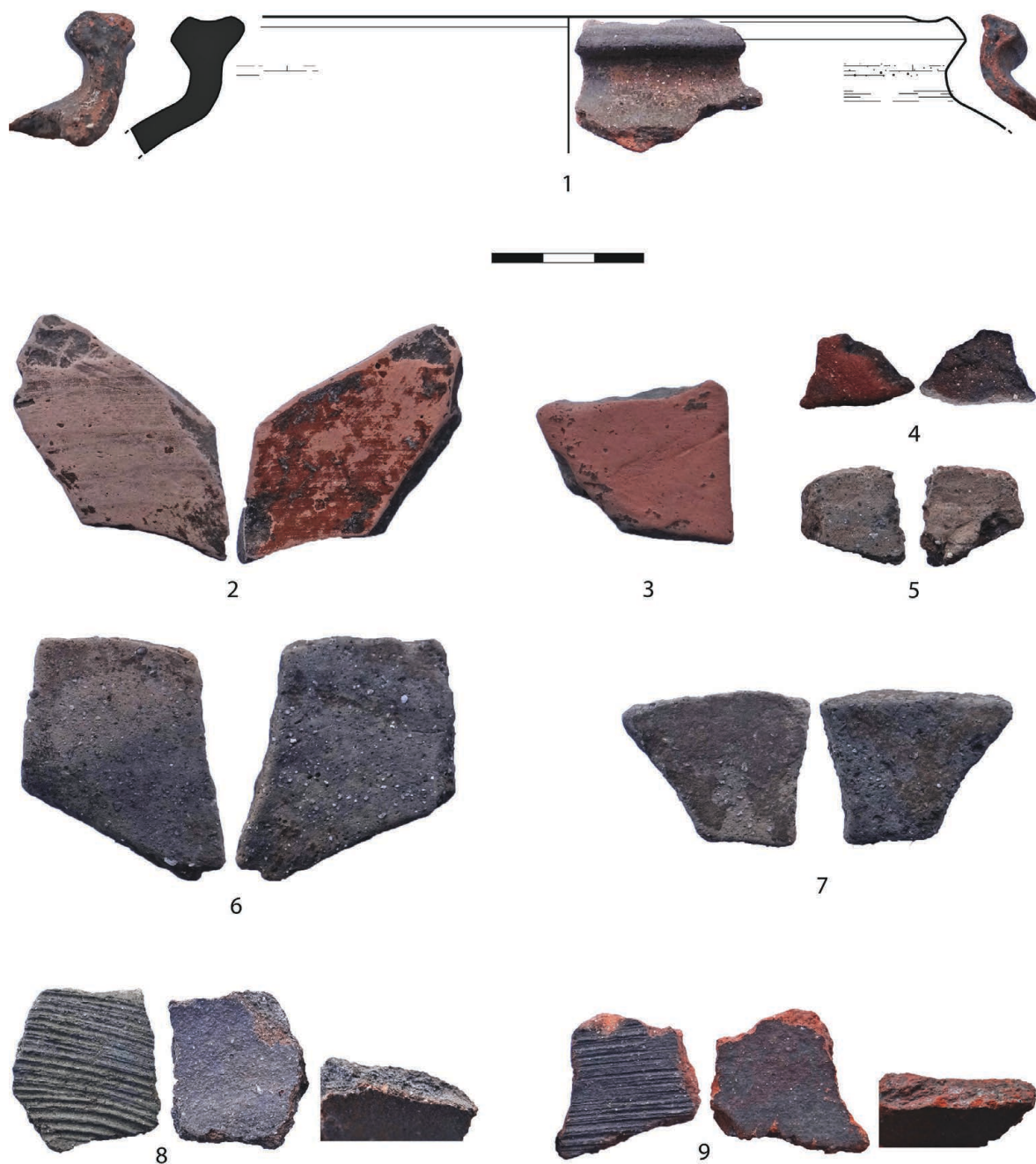


Fig. 22. Pottery from site No. 28: 1 – 7. Antique pottery; 8 – 9. Medieval pottery (Authors: V. Grigorov and S. Venelinova)

Обр. 22. Керамика от обект 28: 1 – 7. антична керамика; 8 – 9. средновековна керамика
(автори В. Григоров и С. Венелинова)

average excavation rate of 1 m³ per man-day,¹² about 5,000 people were necessary for 120 working days for the excavation of the ditch. Another group of workers had to take out the soil and pile it on the inside, forming the embankment of the rampart.

In addition to the workers directly engaged with the excavation and embankment of the earthwork, a significant number of people were necessary for logistical support. First, these were

¹² Man-day is a unit for reporting the amount of work which is done by one person in one working day.

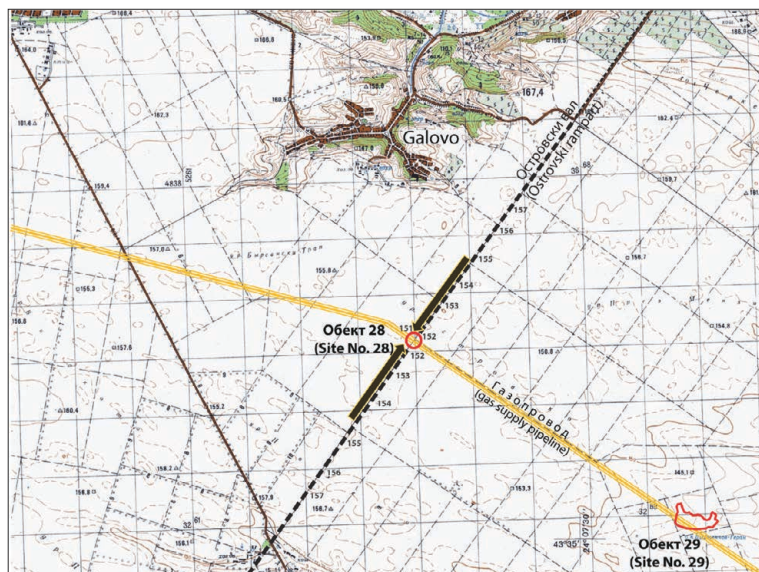


Fig. 23. Sites Nos. 28 and 29 documented along the outline of the pipeline "Balkan stream". Emphasis is set on the topography of the Ostrovski rampart and the drop of the ground at site No. 28 (Author: V. Grigorov)

Обр. 23. Обекти 28 и 29, регистрирани по линията на газопровода „Балкански поток“. Акцентирано е на топографията на Островския вал и понижението на терена при обект 28 (автор В. Григоров)

carpenters, blacksmiths and basket makers engaged with the crafting of a large number of tools and devices. It can be assumed that the usual farming tools (shovels, hoes and picks) were used for the excavation works, and that the soil was taken out with the help of wicker baskets and ropes.

To feed the multi-thousand workforce, hundreds of food and drinking water suppliers, cooks, potters and lumberjacks were also engaged. Domestic ovens used for the preparation of significant amounts of food were discovered in the Early Medieval settlement in the Partenchov Geran area. The data on iron extraction and processing and the registered well for potable

water correspond to the characteristics of such a type of logistics-orientated settlement. According to Squatriti, such large-scale construction projects and the mobilization of numerous workforce on one site over a long period were obviously implemented by force and could only be completed under the control of a central authority (Squatriti 2005, 87, 90).

Function of Ostrovski rampart

Different opinions have been stated on the function of earthen ramparts. Most researchers believe that they were constructed to fortify zones of strategic military importance. Military experts usually classify them as strategic facilities (Ангелов и др. 1983, 157). The positioning of barrier ramparts in peripheral regions often defines them as border furrows, outlining the political or demographic borders of the state (Овчаров 1971, 459; Fiedler 1989, 156). According to R. Rashev, the ramparts were constructed at a certain depth from the actual border of the state and were used as a base for control of the lands beyond the earthwork (Петров 1981, 245 – 347; Пашев 1982, 64). The system of three parallel ramparts in Northwest Bulgaria very much resembles the scheme of Avar "rings", which form an echeloned defense along the periphery of the inland territories of the state.

There is no unanimous opinion about the defense capacities of the ramparts. Entrenchments of greater length have been defined as marking rather than defensive structures (Пашев 2008, 34). Their simple earth embankment structure reflects a basic technological level in the construction of this type of fortification barriers, which, to a small extent, demonstrate common features with the more developed Roman defensive systems in terms of engineering. The great length of the structures and the lack of a system of military camps suggests that they were not guarded by a large number of soldiers. Border control at the fortification line was probably carried out by small horse patrols camping at the two ends of the earthwork, or in settlements situated behind the rampart.

The archaeological data on the structure of Ostrovski rampart show that it had two main defense components: a ditch excavated in front and an embankment in the rear. The ditch, which was about 3 m deep, served as the main deterrent and soldiers had to use additional means to overcome it. The rampart had a secondary function, but its 2-metre height provided a certain tactical advantage to the defenders. Research so far has not established traces of wooden structures on the ridge of the rampart. Such structures either did not exist or were not fixed due to the bad state of preservation of the earthwork.

The results from excavations at site No. 28 showed that the earthwork was subjected to dynamic erosion processes, which led to the rapid clogging (within several decades) of the bottom of the ditch. It is not clear whether it was used for the same functions after that. Left without special maintenance, favourable conditions for development of tree and shrub vegetation were created on the rampart and the ditch, clogged with humus soil. At a later period, the earthwork probably looked more like a barrier wall of naturally grown “hedge”.

Research has not clarified to a sufficient degree the question of the use of earthworks in real military operations. The armament items discovered during archaeological excavations are too few in number. At this stage, we can only point out the sword discovered near Ostrovski rampart (Николов 1962, 36 – 37, обр. 9), and several stone battle balls discovered in the ditch of the “Erkesia” earthwork facility (Григоров, Василев 2007, 162, 172, обр. 5). Most researchers agree that the main function of the ramparts was to temporarily hold off the offensive of enemy troops while the main military troops were mobilized and moved to the areas under threat. The most important function of the earthwork barriers was to restrict the possibilities for quick and large-scale advance of the enemy cavalry. Regardless of the disputable effectiveness of the kilometers-long facilities, their mass-scale construction in Eastern Europe suggests that they did play a certain strategic and tactical role in the defence of Early Medieval states.



Fig. 24. Bones from a calf found in situ in the ditch, trench No. 2, depth 2.74 m/R (Photo: V. Grigorov)

Обр. 24. Кости от теле, открити in situ в рова, сондаж 2, дълбочина 2,74 м/ R (фото В. Григоров)

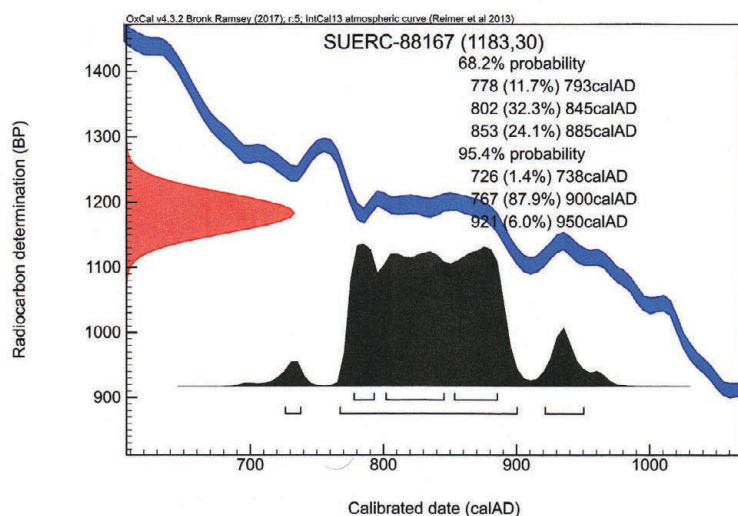


Fig. 25. Radiocarbon analysis, performed by the Scottish Universities Environmental research Center in Glasgow (SUERC)

Обр. 25. Радиоуглеродно датиране. Изследването е извършено в Шотландския университет по околна среда в Глазгоу (SUERC)

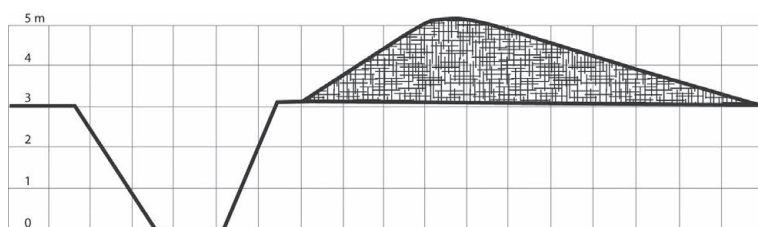


Fig. 26. Reconstruction of Ostrovski rampart (Author: V. Grigorov)

Обр. 26. Реконструкция на Островския вал (автор В. Григоров)

which we could relate to the existence of an old road without, however, excluding the possibility that it could be related to the time of construction and functioning of the earthwork. If the rampart was constructed as early as that time, the Medieval materials discovered in the ditch could be explained by a possible secondary cleaning of the ditch and re-use of the facility in the Early Middle Ages.

The second possibility is based on the Medieval materials discovered in the ditch. They are evidence that the facility was used in the early period of the Bulgarian State, probably in the first half of the 9th c., and around the middle of the 9th c., the bottom of the ditch (at site No. 28) was already clogged with a one-meter alluvial layer.

The construction and protection of such of a large-scale fortification line required the mobilisation of significant human resources. The data from the archaeological map of the region show that in the first half of the 9th c., a large number of settlements appeared between Iskar and Tsiabitsa rivers (fig. 21), with significant human resources allowing the construction and protection of fortification lines of similar scale. Historical sources mention that at that time, the political and military situation west of Bulgaria is characterized by rising instability. The collapse of the Avar Khaganate created a temporary political vacuum (ЛИБИ 1960, 42 – 43; Божилов, Гюзелев 1999, 150 – 153; Рашев 2008, 20 – 22) which provoked dynamic rearrangement of the political map of the West Balkans. The secession of the Abodrite, Guduskian and Timochan tribes from the alliance with the

Conclusion

Despite the long-standing interest of Bulgarian historians in what are known as the “West Bulgarian” ramparts and the Ostrovski rampart, in particular, their exploration is still in its initial stage. The lack of comprehensive archaeological excavations has limited the opportunities for clarifying the chronology of the earthwork for more than a century. It is only in the last decade that more complete data on the characteristics of Ostrovski rampart were obtained during systematic archaeological exploration. The finds which are in a stratigraphic relation with the earthwork are of special value and give us the chance to analyse and discuss the problems of chronology. At this stage, we can offer two chronological interpretations.

The first one focuses on the presence, right next to the rampart, of Late Roman ceramics,

Bulgarians (ГИБИ 1960, 34 – 35) significantly increased the risk of future military conflicts and predetermined the need for preventive fortification of the West Bulgarian areas.

Despite the research progress made in the last decade and the alluring optimism that the time has finally come to clarify the chronology of Ostrovski rampart, we should note that the archaeological data are still insufficient to allow reliable dating of the feature. This is why the chronological and political interpretations put forward here should be viewed as working hypotheses which will be subject to additional examination in future investigations.

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ОСТРОВСКИЯТ ВАЛ. ПРОБЛЕМИ НА ПРОУЧВАНИЯТА И ХРОНОЛОГИЯТА

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РЕЗЮМЕ

Островският вал е най-голямото землено съоръжение в днешна Северозападна България (обр. 1), с линейна дължина около 58 км. Той е известен на историческата наука още от края на XIX в. Най-ранни сведения за него дават В. Добруски, К. Иречек и К. Шкорпил, като Шкорпил провежда и първите теренни обходи и описва трасето му.

Целта на настоящото изследване е да бъдат обобщени резултатите от досегашните археологически проучвания на Островския вал. Повод да се занимава по-подробно с тази тема са проучванията, които бяха проведени през 2011 г., допълнени с резултатите от последните археологически разкопки (през 2019 г.), които поставиха в нова светлина проблема за хронологията на земленото съоръжение.

През последното десетилетие значителна част от трасето на вала беше картирано със съвременни геодезични уреди. За по-прецизното идентифициране на следите от земленото съоръжение са използвани също въздушни и сателитни снимки, които позволяват дистанционен анализ. Трасето на земленото съоръжение започва от източния край на с. Остров (координати: 43.671755° N; 24.143872° E), а южният край завършва в подножието на възвишението Усоя, западно от с. Габаре (координати: 43.319239° N; 23.889886° E) (обр. 2). Пространственият анализ показва, че трасето на Островския вал е прокопано почти в средата на равнината, между реките Искър и Огоста. Защитната линия затваря изцяло район с подчертано степен ландшафт – от р. Дунав, на север, до ниските възвишения на Предбалкана, на юг.

Теренните наблюдения на Островския вал ни позволяват да обособим три дяла – северен (обр. 5), среден (обр. 6) и южен (обр. 7). Островското блато е затваряло изцяло достъпа до северния фланг на земленото съоръжение (обр. 5), а южният му край завършва до ниско възвишение, след което релефът придобива хълмисто-горски характер (обр. 7). Хидроложките дадености на района позволяват да се използва р. Скът като допълнително естествено препятствие, изнесено на 1 – 2 км пред фронта на земленото съоръжение.

В началото на 60-те години на XX в. Б. Николов и С. Машов провеждат мащабни теренни издирвания в околностите на Островския вал. През 1961 г. са направени и първите разкопки на вала. Резултатът от тях е описан лаконично: *„Окопът показва дълбочина 3 м, ширина в горната част – 5 м и ширина в дъното – 2,50 м. Изкопаната глина е хвърляна само на изток от окопа и там е била трамбована и укрепявана с чимове и плет. Така се е получил земен вал с височина до 2 м“*.

След дълъг период на прекъсване системните археологически проучвания на Островския вал бяха подновени в последното десетилетие. През 2010 г. фирма GEOS 92 извърши геодезично картиране на вала, от с. Остров до шосето Бяла Слатина – Търнак. Нанесеното върху кадастрална и сателитна карта трасе послужи за основа на археологическото проучване. През 2011 г., в рамките на експедиция „Аспарухов вал“, бяха проведени археологически разкопки северно от гр. Кнежа (обр. 8).

Най-пълни археологически данни получихме от сондаж III. Тук съоръжението е много добре различимо на терен (обр. 10), очертава се линейното хлътване на рова, а от източната му страна е натрупан насипа на вала. Резултатите от направения археологически разрез показаха, че общата ширина на съоръжението е около 15,50 м (обр. 11). В горната си част ровът е широк 4,50 м, а дълбочина ширината му намалява до 2 м. Стените на рова са шарпирани с наклон навън. Дълбочината на рова е 3,10 м. Насипването на вала е извършено непосредствено до рова, от източната му страна. Валът е широк в основата си около 10,50 м и има запазена максимална височина – 1,30 м. Насипът на вала е изграден основно с хумусна пръст, която оформя дебел около 0,85 м пласт. Над него е насипан пласт от по-светла лъсоча пръст. Отгоре на вала е натрупан допълнителен хумусен пласт, вероятно с цел да се покрие с чим или с дървесно-храстова растителност, която да предпазва повърхността от ерозия.

Общата денивелация на съоръжението от дъното на рова до сегашното било на вала е 4,40 м.

През 2019 г. отново имахме възможност да извършим археологическо проучване на Островския вал. Разкопките бяха със спасителен характер, във връзка с разширение на газопреносната инфраструктура по трасето на т.нар. „Балкански поток“. В този сектор земленото съоръжение е силно обезличено, насипът на вала е разнесен и заравнен (обр. 12). Проучването на обекта стартира с геофизично изследване, което ни предостави предварителна информация за местоположението и размерите на земленото съоръжение. На двата томографски профила земленото съоръжение се идентифицира с по-високите стойности на електропроводимост спрямо околния терен (обр. 13). Насипът на вала е вторично разнесен и заравнен и оформя еднороден сбит хумусен пласт, дебел около 0,40 – 0,50 м (обр. 17). Ровът е регистриран в сондажи 1 и 2. В горната си част ровът е широк над 4 м (обр. 18a). На границата с лъоса ширината на рова намалява до 2,20 м (обр. 18b), а при дъното ширината е 1,70 – 1,73 м. Измерен от нивото на терена ровът е дълбок 3 м (обр. 19).

В профилите на рова са документирани няколко пласта на запълване (обр. 20). Дъното е покрито със слой кафяво-черна, наносна пръст, над него следва сиво-кафяв пласт, горната част на рова е запълнена с кафява смесена пръст и тъмнокафява сбита. В сондаж 1A' в наносния пласт на рова бяха намерени два фрагмента ранносредновековна керамика, а в сондаж 2A' на 1 метър над дъното на рова, са открити кости от теле.

Последните археологически проучвания ни предоставиха нови данни за хронологията на Островския вал. Имахме шанса да открием малък брой керамични фрагменти, които представят два исторически периода – Античност и Средновековие. Античната керамика (обр. 22: 1 – 7) е намерена в пространството, непосредствено до вала, от източната му страна (обр. 14). Фрагментите са открити на нивото на стария терен, под вторично разнесен и заравнен насип на вала. Датировката на керамиката е дискуссионна, но двата по-информативни фрагмента могат да се отнесат към късноримската епоха (края на III – началото на V в.).

Двата фрагмента средновековна керамика (обр. 22: 8 – 9) са открити при проучването на рова, в сондаж 1A' (обр. 14, обр. 20). Фрагментите са намерени в наносния слой, който е затлачил дъното на рова. Технологичните и декоративни характеристики позволяват с голяма сигурност керамиката да се отнесе в IX в.

В усилията ни да изясним проблема с датирането на Островския вал използвахме също и откритите в рова животински кости (обр. 24). Те лежат върху сиво-черен пласт, на 1 м над дъното на рова, в сондаж 2A'. Стратиграфската позиция предполага, че останките от животното са попаднали там в момент, когато ровът е бил запълнен около 1/3 от автентичната му дълбочина.

Проба от костите беше предоставена за радиовъглеродно изследване в Шотландския университет по околна среда в Глазгоу (SUERC). Калибрираните данни определят датиращ период между 767 и 900 г. (обр. 25). В рамките на този широк времеви диапазон се оформят три по-тесни фази, като стратиграфското съгласуване с керамиката, намерена на дъното на рова, дава приоритет на датите 802 – 845 г. или 853 – 885 г. Изследването на костния материал ни предостави възможност да датираме етап от затлачване дъното на рова с еднометров пласт наноси.

Данните от проведените досега археологически проучвания на Островския вал ни позволяват да реконструираме вида на земленото съоръжение (обр. 26). Най-пълна и достоверна информация имаме за рова. Той е документиран в различни сектори на съоръжението и има идентични размери. Ровът е дълбок около 3 м, широк е в горната част – 4,50 – 5 м, а на дъното ширината му се стеснява до 1,70 – 2 м. Стените на рова са шарпирани с наклон навън, което е направено с цел ръбовете на изкопа да бъдат предпазени от ерозия и срутване.

Изкопаната от рова пръст е насипана от източната страна. Последователно са натрупани пластове, с които е оформен вал, широк в основата 10 – 11 м. Височината на вала не е запазена в автентичен вид, но хипотетично може да се реконструира около 2 м. Общата денивелация на съоръжението, от дъното на рова до предполагаемото било на вала, е била около 5 м.

Изграждането на такова внушително като мащаби многокилометрово землено съоръжение е изисквало мобилизацията на огромен брой работници и различни специалисти, изпълняващи логистична подкрепа. Няма съмнение, че такъв род мащабни строителни проекти и мобилизацията на хиляди работници е можело да се реализират единствено под контрола на централна власт.

За предназначението на землените валове са изказани различни мнения. Повечето изследователи приемат, че те са изградени, за да укрепват важни във военностратегическо отношение зони. Съоръжението притежава два основни защитни елемента: изкопан отпред ров и натрупан откъм тила насип. Главна възпираща функция е изпълнявал дълбокият ров, за чисто преодоляване войниците е трябвало да използват помощни средства. Валът е имал второстепенна функция, но с височината си е осигурявал известно тактическо предимство на защитниците. Досегашните проучвания не са установили следи от дървени конструкции на билото на вала. Такива или не са съществували, или не са фиксирани поради лошата запазеност на съоръжението.

Въпреки отбелязания в последното десетилетие напредък в проучванията, трябва да се признае, че наличните до този момент археологически факти все още са недостатъчни, за да бъдем категорични при датирането на съоръжението. Откритите находки при обект 28 са първите, които се намират в стратиграфска връзка със земленото съоръжение и ни дават възможност да анализираме и коментираме проблемите на хронологията. На този етап можем да предложим две хронологически интерпретации, които трябва да се приемат засега единствено като работни хипотези, които ще подлежат на допълнителни проверки при бъдещи проучвания.

Първата акцентира върху присъствието, непосредствено до вала, на късноримска керамика, която можем да свържем с информацията за съществуването на стар път, без да изключваме обаче възможността тя да има отношение и към времето на изграждане и функциониране на земленото съоръжение.

Втората възможност се позовава на намерените в рова средновековни материали. Те свидетелстват, че съоръжението е използвано в ранния период на българската държава, вероятно в първата половина на IX в., а към средата на IX в. дъното на рова (при обект 28) вече е било затлачено с еднометров наносен пласт.

Данните от археологическата карта на района показват, че най-значим демографски ресурс, необходим за изграждането и охраната на такава мащабна фортификационна линия, е съществувал в първата половина на IX в., когато между реките Искър и Цибрица възникват голям брой селища (обр. 21). Историческите извори отбелязват, че по същото време на запад от България политическата и военната ситуация е много нестабилна, което вероятно е причина българските власти да организират превантивно укрепване на застрашените западнобългарски области.

Ключови думи: Островски вал, проучвания, хронология, реконструкция