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TWO ANTIGONID FORTIFICATIONS IN THE VALLEY OF THE RIVER TRESKA

Abstract. – In ancient times, the valley of the river Treska (Velika Reka) was a strategically important communication route which connected the civilized regions of the south (Pelagonia, Dassaretia) with the central Balkan cultures; it was used extensively by hostile groups who aimed at attacking and plundering the ancient cities of Pelagonia and Dassaretis. Our field survey in 2020 produced specific finds at the fortifications near Gradište village, Podvis, in the vicinity of Kičevo, and Devini Kuli near Makedonski Brod, which helped us identify a Macedonian cultural horizon from the times of the last Macedonian kings. Gradište Podvis yielded a bronze coin of Perseus and a bronze coin of the city of Oricum. The finds indicate the presence of Macedonian military units in the valley of Treska, arguably aiming to control the road and defend it against attacks by Dardanian groups.

The territory of Western Macedonia is characterized by densely concentrated, tall mountain ranges, causing great difficulties in road communication. The oldest roads led along the valleys of the rivers Vardar (Axius), Radika, Drim (Drillon) and Treska.

Among them, the valley of the river Treska (Velika Reka) (fig. 1) played a particularly important role from Prehistory, through the Early (7–4 c. BC), Middle (3 c. BC–3 c. AD) and the Late Macedonian Period (4–6 c. AD), the Macedonian Middle Ages (7–14 c. AD) until today, as a particularly important line of communication that connected the cultures in Pelagonia, the surroundings of Skopje, the region of Kičevo and their contact regions. This text will be focused on a detail of the ancient road communication in the valley of river Treska, which connected the ancient Pelagonians, the northernmost Epirote tribe of the Penestae in the Kičevo region, and the Paeonian Agrianes in the Skopje region, from the Middle Macedonian Period onwards.

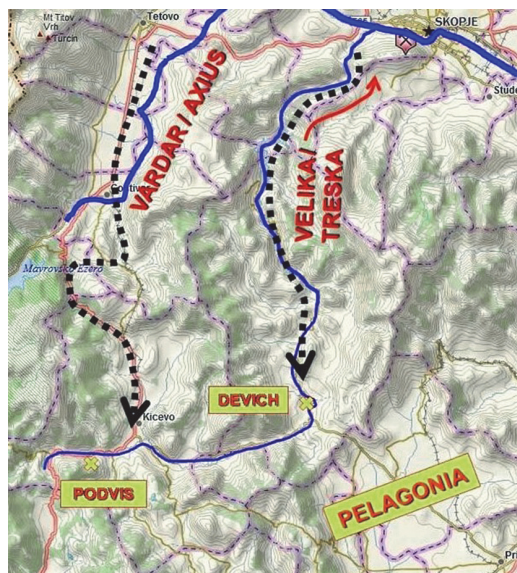


Fig. 1 Map of the region through which river Treska flows, with the locations of the ancient fortifications mentioned in the text

This period was characterized by the infamous Celtic invasion of 279 BC, during which all cities along their route suffered, including those in Macedonia.¹ In addition, from the 4th c. BC, Macedonia was constantly attacked by the Dardanians from the north, until the Dardanian War of Scribonius Curio (75-73 BC) forever pacified the eternal Macedonian enemies.² At that time, the first to be attacked were the cities of the Agrianes around Skopje and Polog, Paenonia (Sredno Povardarje / the middle Vardar valley, the valley of Astibos and Strumeshnica), Pelagonia, certainly the land of the Penestae (Kičevo) and Dassaretia in the south (Ohrid, Struga and Debrca). The Macedonian kings set up a constant defense from the times of Alexander III down to Antigonus Gonatas. However, after the death of Demetrius II in 229, the Macedonian army withdrew from the Agrianian areas around Skopje, opening way for more frequent Dardanian attacks.

Readied by the experiences of past Macedonian kings and strategists, Philip V organized a Macedonian counteroffensive to the north, aimed at defending the northern parts of Macedonian Paenonia and Pelagonia civilizations. For forty years he marched tirelessly along the border zones, building military bases and castles to control and defend river valleys and roads. His work was continued by his son Perseus until the fateful 168 BC.

¹ Hammond N. G. L. and Walbank F. W., 1988, 251-252, etc., with references.

² Papazoglu F., 1969, 137-140; see also Lilchikj Adams V., 2020, 124-154, Chapter 3: The Early Antiquity in the Valley of Skopje.

In 199 BC, in Pelagonia, Philip fought the Roman army of Publius Sulpicius Galba.³ At one point, warned of the Roman-Dardanian alliance and the Dardanian danger from the north, he tasked his son Perseus to organize the defense of the *fauces / angustiae Pelagoniae*.⁴ The Dardanians could invade Pelagonia through seven straits.

1. Barbaras, between the villages of Barbaras and Debreshte;⁵
2. Zavoj, between the villages of Bogomila and Gostirazhni;
3. The land between the villages of Drenovo and Koshino;
4. Bučin, near the village Bučin;
5. Kletovnik, between the villages Oraov Dol and Desovo;
6. The enclosure northeast of Prilep, and
7. Pletvar, between the villages Belovodica and Pletvar.

In order to explore the routes that the Dardanians used in order to penetrate towards Macedonia, during 2020, we implemented the project “Pelagonia Straits – Archaeological Field Survey 2020” organized by the Center for Archaeological Research in Skopje in cooperation with the Faculty of Philosophy in Skopje.⁶ The most direct target points of the Dardanian breakthroughs were the passages of Barbaras, Zavoj and Kletovnik. We therefore concentrated our research on these three passages during the summer months; during autumn and winter months that followed, we explored the corridors along the river Treska, as well as the Polog–Kičevo line.

Our attention was especially drawn to two bronze coins of a more distant provenance. These coins indirectly attest the presence of the Macedonian army of Philip V and Perseus at two military fortifications of a certain strategic importance.

1. Gradište, Podvis village, on the river Treska, Kopačka near Kičevo

The fortification of Gradište, above the village of Podvis, was researched and published in 1996.⁷ It was a small, but rather strong fortification on a particularly dominant elevation, with views of the Kopačka area (fig. 2), through which the road communication between Kičevo and Debrca, along the river Treska, led since ancient times. The fortification was built by the Macedonian army of king Perseus. Later, the same became relevant again, especially in the 6th century AD.

³ Лилчиќ Адамс В., 2009, 47, 207-226.

⁴ Lilcic (Adams) V., 2000, 2-72.

⁵ Lilcic (Adams) V., 1997, 30-51.

⁶ We kindly acknowledge the financial and technical support by Ms. J. Bubev, as well as P. Radev, Ž. Rendev, G. Treneski and A. Paskov. The preliminary results were presented at the international conference in Struga (3-5 September 2020), organized by the Faculty of Philosophy in Skopje (Viktor Lilčić Adams, *Fauces Pelagoniae*).

⁷ Lilcic (Adams) V., 1996, 73, 76.

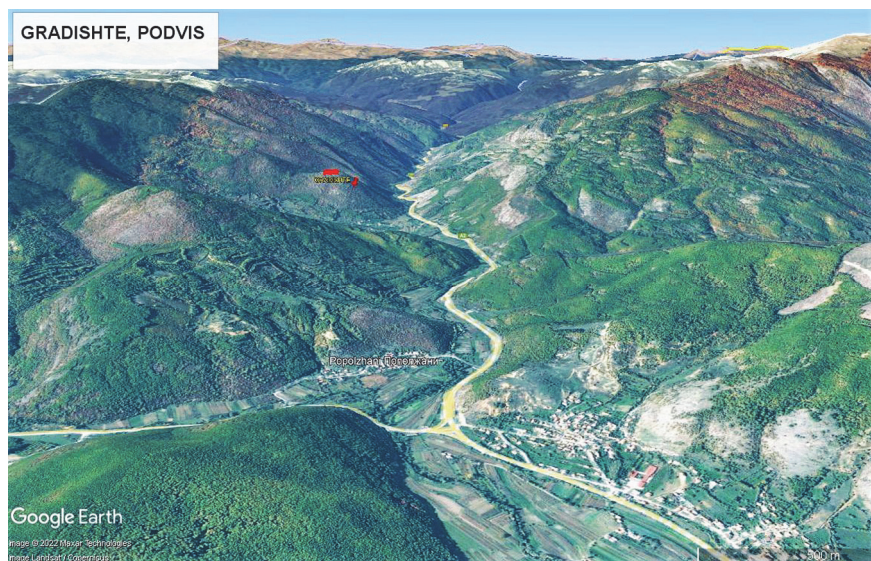


Fig. 2 Gradište Podvis, view from the east (source: Google Earth)

The fortification is located on a hill 963 m. high. The fortified area measures 105x45 meters (fig. 3). It was protected by a rocky ridge that ends on the east side, with a residential terrace to house the soldiers on the west side. During the research campaign in 2020, we discovered two significant bronze coins from the oldest phase of the fortification:

1. Perseus (179-168), bronze coin (fig. 4), Group I, Type III according to N. Sheldarov.⁸

Av. Head of the hero Perseus, right

Rv. Eagle with lightning in its claws. In the field to the right is Perseus' monogram. In the field below, under the lightning, an A.

Metric: weight 6.20 g.; diameter 18.8 mm.; location coordinates: 960 m., N 41° 28.359', E 021° 52.681'.⁹

2. Oricum mint, 238-168 BC, bronze coin (fig. 5)

Av. Apollo's head with a laurel wreath in his hair, left

Rv. Ω | Π | Κ | Ι | ΩΝ, an obelisk of Apollo Agyieos, all in a wreath.

Metric: weight 3.90 g.; diameter 13.2 mm.; location coordinates: 962 m., N 41° 28.362', E 021° 52.631'.

Oricum was a port near the mouth of the Aous River; according to tradition, it was founded by Euboian settlers.¹⁰

⁸ Sheldarov N., 2013, 59-61.

⁹ The coin was discovered on November 25, 2020.

¹⁰ B. M. C. 7. 1-3, according Sear D., 1978, p. 187, No. 1909.

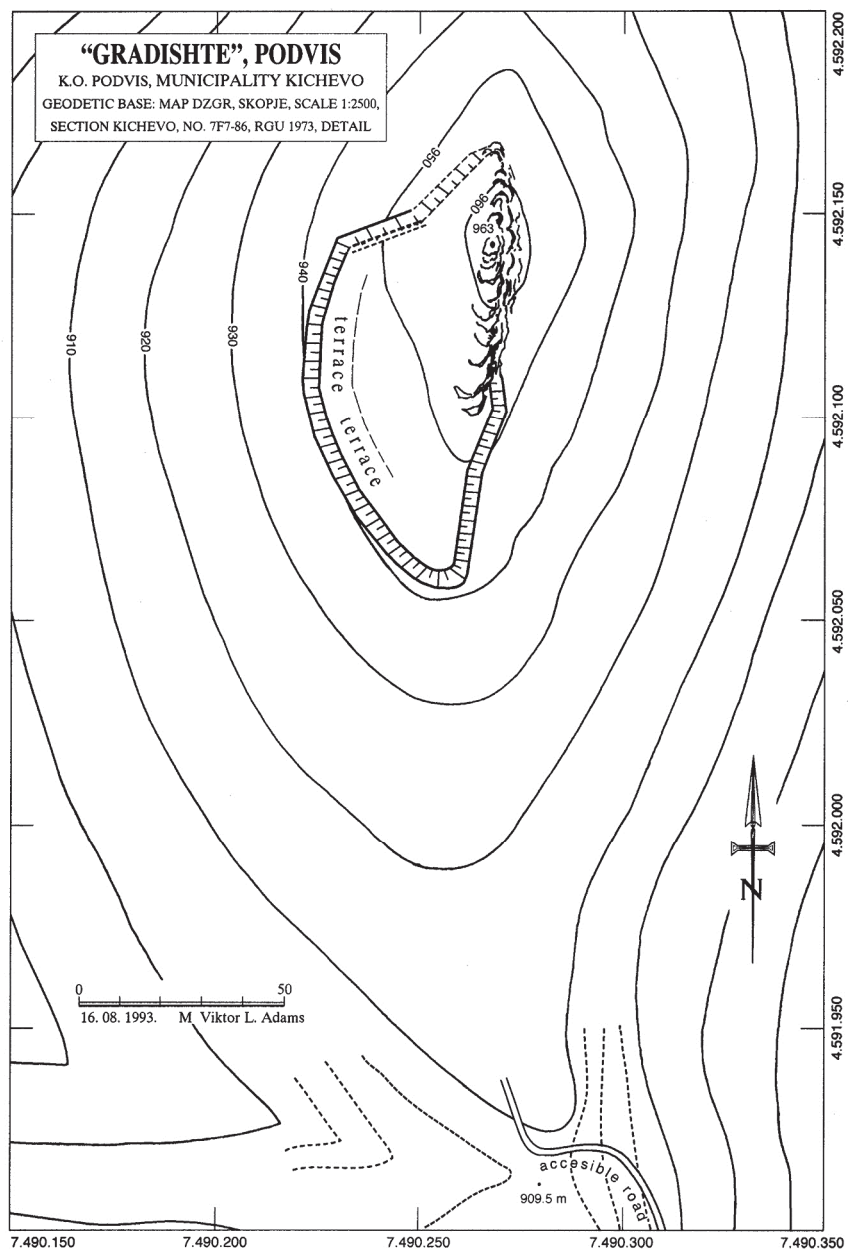


Fig. 3 Gradište, Podvis, planimetry



Fig. 4 Gradište, Podvis, coin of king Perseus



Fig. 5 Gradište Podvis, coin of the city of Oricum

2. Devini Kuli, village of Devič in the area of Poreče on the river Treska (fig. 6, 7)

This fortified ancient and medieval town was also researched and published in 1996.¹¹ It consists of a firmly fortified acropolis and a lower urban area (fig. 8). The scholarship mentions oldest cultural remains from the beginning of the early Macedonian period, but without a specific description.¹² In the absence of material evidence, I. Mikulčić is undecided about the chronology and classification of this fortress, believing that there was a fortified village at the site during late antiquity.¹³ Later, in 2002, Mikulčić considered the site as a fortified settlement from late antiquity.¹⁴ It also contains modest archeological findings from the medieval town of Devič, that occupied the same site.¹⁵

Based on the modest archeological findings, we believe that for a significant amount of time the plateau at Devini Kuli represented a

¹¹ Lilčić (Adams) V., 1996, 78, 80.

¹² Микулчић И., 1996, 154-156.

¹³ Микулчић И., 1999, classification tables.

¹⁴ Mikulčić I., 2002, 292-293.

¹⁵ Микулчић И., 1996.

military camp of the Macedonian army of Philip V. Its size probably coincides with the established area of the late antique settlement, as well as the medieval town of Devič – 160 x 58 meters.

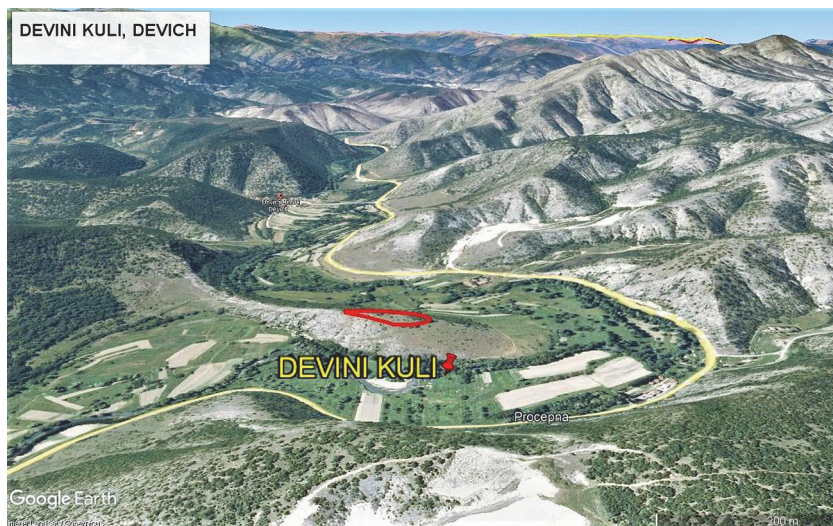


Fig. 6 Devini Kuli, Devič, south view (source: Google Earth)

During our research in 2020, we discovered a coin from the distant city of Leucas in Acarnania.¹⁶

1. Leucas mint, Akarnanian Confederacy, 219-211 BC (fig. 9)

Av. Head of Hercules with lion skin, right.

Rv. Bearded head of river-god Achelous, right, trident right above, A behind.

Metric: weight 5.41 g.; diameter 20.2 mm.; location coordinates 595 m., N 41° 32.487', E 021° 14.278'.¹⁷

The collection of the small ethnological museum in Džepčište¹⁸ contains a partially preserved handle of a Macedonian military lebes / cauldron, which originates from Devini Kuli, Devič (fig. 10). The handle has a rounded body with a faceted hexagonal profile and a flattened ball decoration with ring terminations on both sides. The size of the preserved part is 37x11 mm; body diameter 6 mm. Developed profiled zones allow dating to the 3rd century BC.

The long-term research of the military fortifications from the Early and Middle Macedonian period helped uncover many parts of bronze cauldrons (lebes), mainly handles and handle holders. In the context of these fortifications as well as the discovered coins of the

¹⁶ The coin was discovered on December 23, 2020.

¹⁷ BMC 16; BCD Akarnania 35; SNG Copenhagen 422; Sear 2313.

¹⁸ The coin was discovered on site by Stojan Kostadinovski, a native of Sedlarce.

Macedonian kings, it is obvious that the location was a fortification of the Macedonian army. The handle of a Macedonian military cauldron clearly points to the military character of the Devini Kuli site in early antiquity. The site also yielded a silver drachma of Dyrrachium (fig. 11): on the obverse, is a cow with a calf sucking milk, on the reverse is a representation of a military shield with a rectangular shape and decoration of two lightnings.



Fig. 7 Devini Kuli, Devič, view from the west

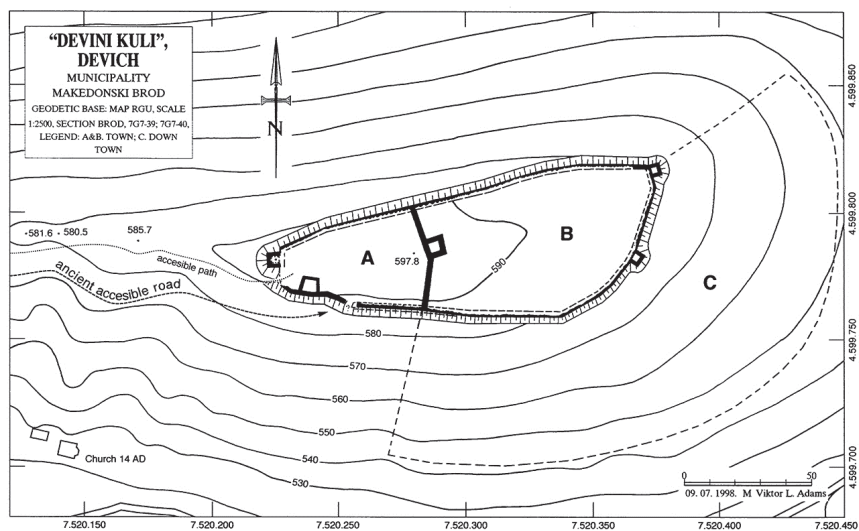


Fig. 8 Devini Kuli, Devič, planimetry



Fig. 9 Devini Kuli, Devič, bronze coin of the city of Leukas, Acarnania



Fig. 10 Devini Kuli, Devič, part of a bronze handle of a lebes / cauldron of a Macedonian soldier

The fortification of king Perseus at the site of Gradište, village Podvis in Kopačka around Kičevo, the initial part of the river Treska, can be connected with his campaign around Uscana with the aim of blocking the attacks of the Roman army from the west.¹⁹ We found a coin of King Perseus in the castle; how should we interpret, however, the coin of Oricum, a coastal city on Chaonian territory in Epirus, south of the mouth of the Aous River?²⁰ This was the port where the Roman legions first landed on Balkan soil, so Philip V, and later Perseus, conducted military activities in the vicinity with the aim of preventing the advance of the Roman forces. Sources mention that in 216 BC Philip V captured Oricum and set up his own military garrison, which the Romans later eliminated, setting up their own units.²¹ The coin of Oricum was probably minted in the first half of the 2nd century BC; therefore, it could be brought to the fortification at Podvis either by a soldier of Philip or, more likely, of Perseus – or, perhaps, a Roman soldier during the action of Quintus Maximus and Scipio Nasica who, in 167 BC, sought to devastate the territory of the tribes that sided with Perseus (according to Hammond, the Penestians).²²

¹⁹ Described in detail in: Lilcic (Adams) V., 2000, 2-72.

²⁰ Hammond N. G. L. and Walbank F. W., 1988, 153, fig. 8.

²¹ Ibid., 395-396. 567-568.

²² Ibid., 567.

During our field survey at Devini Kuli, no coins of the Macedonian kings were discovered. However, the presence of a bronze cauldron indirectly testifies to the presence of Macedonian military units.

On to the coin of Leukas in Acarnania. Current scholarship places this coin at 219-211 BC. we believe it ought to be related to the activities of Philip in Acarnania in 219/8 BC, when the coastal bases of Ambracia, Leukas and Oiniades were captured;²³ we assume that one of his soldiers brought it to the castle of Devini Kuli, Devič.

Two other ancient fortifications in the valley of Treska through Poreče produced finds from early antiquity, which indicate a possible presence of an army. A small part of a cauldron handle was discovered on Gradec Zdunje, while the site of Markovo Kale near Modrište yielded a silver drachma subaeratus of Alexander III.

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²³ Ibid., 384.