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## JUSTINIANA PRIMA, THE LAST ENIGMA OF BALKAN ARCHAEOLOGY

*Abstract.* – The location of Justiniana Prima remains one of the most persistent problems in Balkan archaeology, sustaining scholarly interest since the first early modern translations of Procopius' *De Aedificiis* in the sixteenth century. Two principal models dominate. The first situates Justinian's foundation at the site of Caričin Grad near Lebane, close to Leskovac, a position underpinned by more than a century of investigation, especially of early Christian basilicas. The second, first articulated by Arthur Evans, places the city in the Skopje region, within the historical core defined by the Old Bazaar and Kale Fortress. This latter view draws on a multidisciplinary dossier: historical analysis; toponymic readings of the nearby villages of Badar and Taor – associated in the sources with Justin I and his nephew Justinian I; and roughly two decades of archaeological research at the fortress of Taor. Further contextual support derives from the Skopje aqueduct, described already by Evans and reexamined in recent rescue excavations in and around the Old Bazaar. On present evidence, any attempt to fix the site of Justiniana Prima must rest on a comprehensive appraisal of the full body of arguments and data. Selective reading skews the outcome. Ultimately, only an unequivocal epigraphic inscription can furnish secure identification of one candidate as the city founded by Justinian.

*Key words.* – Justiniana Prima, Procopius, Tauresium, Bederiana, Caričin Grad, location

The precise location of Justiniana Prima – the city established by Emperor Justinian I to serve as both the administrative and ecclesiastical center of the newly created archbishopric and the prefecture of Illyricum – remains one of the most enduring unresolved questions in Balkan archaeo-

logy. Scholarly engagement with this problem stretches back several centuries, gaining particular momentum after the sixteenth-century Latin translation of Procopius' *De Aedificiis* (*On Buildings*),<sup>1</sup> which provides the earliest detailed description of the city's foundation and its symbolic role within Justinian's imperial program.

Over the centuries, numerous hypotheses have been advanced, grounded to varying degrees in historical testimony, toponymic parallels, and archaeological data. Yet in the absence of definitive inscriptions or unequivocal material evidence, the problem remains unsettled. The quest for Justiniana Prima continues to mobilize geographers, historians, archaeologists, and linguists – especially those concerned with the wider historical significance of Justinian I's building program.<sup>2</sup> Within this framework, our discussion will focus on the principal proposals advanced to date, each offering a historical-geographical rationale for one of the two most prominent candidate sites. The first centers on Skopje, founded on the remains of the ancient city of Scupi and later marked by the growth of the Kale Fortress and the Old Bazaar. This view associates Justinian's foundation with the region surrounding the fort of Bederiana and the vicus of Tauresium – identified by Procopius as the birthplaces of Justin I and his nephew Justinian I – correlated with the modern villages of Badar and Taor near Skopje. In this interpretation, the great city of Justiniana Prima was established in their immediate vicinity. The second hypothesis emerged following the commencement of excavations at Caričin Grad, near Lebane and Leskovac in Serbia, beginning in 1912. Especially after the early publication of excavation results, this site was advanced as an alternative candidate for the location of Justiniana Prima.<sup>3</sup>

In the absence of comparable sites – whether nearby or further afield – Caričin Grad<sup>4</sup> aligns most closely with Procopius' description.<sup>5</sup> Yet can archaeological research alone resolve the many dilemmas raised about this site, or must we also consider the wider factors that shaped the placement, scale, and character of the city? The latter is indispensable. Several questions remain unanswered and require broader contextualization. Chief among them is the relation to the emperor's birthplace, followed by the status of Scupi: an administrative, ecclesiastical, and transit hub of early Roman Upper Moesia, later the capital of the late antique province

<sup>1</sup> Croke, 2019, 144–157.

<sup>2</sup> Owing to the scarcity of reliable geographical and historical data, Justiniana Prima was at times equated with various well-known ancient cities of the central Balkans. Most of these identifications, however, were dismissed by Tomaschek (Tomaschek W., 1874, 658), an assessment later reaffirmed by F. Barišić (Barišić F., 1963, 128).

<sup>3</sup> Баришић, 1963, 128; Кондић, Поповић, 1977, 163.

<sup>4</sup> Баван, Иванишевић, 2006, 109–113.

<sup>5</sup> Procopii, 1838, IV, 1, 266–267.

of Dardania, and by the fifth century the seat of a bishopric. That authority would eventually be transferred to the newly founded city and its archbishopric.<sup>6</sup> Finally, the issue of location and urban scale demands attention: the creation of a city in which “numerous inhabitants” resided, bound together by pride in their most illustrious compatriot, Emperor Justinian.

This problem has been repeatedly examined by geographers, historians, and linguists over the past two centuries, yet it was first articulated by the Austrian historian and geographer Konrad Mannert. Drawing on the testimony of ancient authors, Mannert offered a description of Dardania and of several of its principal cities, among them Scupi and Justiniana Prima.<sup>7</sup> Although unable to specify the exact location, Mannert was convinced that Justiniana Prima rose upon the ruins of Scupi or in its immediate vicinity – most plausibly at the Kale fortress in the center of Skopje. His reasoning rested on the presence of the existing fortifications, the aqueduct supplying clean water, and the close proximity of Bederiana and Tauresium, the birthplaces of Justin and his nephew Justinian. In equating Justiniana Prima with Scupi, Mannert posed a striking question: how could Procopius omit mention of Scupi itself – an important urban center whose episcopal jurisdiction was transferred to the new foundation – while recording the rebuilding of much less significant towns and forts? Despite the lapse of more than two centuries, Mannert’s observations continue to provoke debate within the scholarly community. By contrast, Wilhelm Tomaschek, in a concise review framed within the history of the medieval Serbian Orthodox Church and its concentration along the Niš–Pristina corridor, advanced the view that Justiniana Prima should rather be sought in this broader region.<sup>8</sup> He later refined his hypothesis, situating Justiniana Prima more precisely in the valley of the Toplica River, in the vicinity of Prokuplje and Kuršumlja, where thermal springs and rich mineral deposits are found. At the time, however, Tomaschek lacked the means to assess the geomorphology of the terrain in greater detail. Even so, his ideas appear to have exerted considerable influence and became firmly embedded in Serbian scholarly circles. Whether or not his suggestion directly prompted the search for the city’s true location, by the late nineteenth century<sup>9</sup> reports had begun to circulate regarding the remains of a substantial settlement in the Pusta Reka valley, within the triangle formed by the villages of Bojnik, Medveđa, and Lebane. This was the site of Caričin Grad. With the first archaeological investigations and the initial publication of their findings, the site rapidly gained prominence as a leading

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<sup>6</sup> Јованова, 2015, 219-252; Јованова, 2018, 45-100.

<sup>7</sup> Mannert, 1812, 101-108.

<sup>8</sup> Tomaschek, 1874, 658-660.

<sup>9</sup> Баван, Иванишевић, 2006, 17.

candidate for the location of Justiniana Prima.<sup>10</sup> In this context, mention should be made of the journey of J. G. Hahn, who visited the village of Taor. Owing to harsh winter conditions, he was unable to reach the ancient settlement itself, though he remained convinced that it marked the birthplace of Emperor Justinian.<sup>11</sup> Hahn undertook this visit on the recommendation of Consul General von Michanovich, who in Vienna had urged him to examine the villages of Taor and Badar. Their names, he noted, bore striking resemblance to those of Bederiana and Tauresium – the birthplaces of Justin and Justinian – which he regarded as Latinized forms. In this light, their non-Slavic origin appeared self-evident, a continuity later underscored by the linguist Petar Skok.<sup>12</sup>

Detailed information on the possible location of Justiniana Prima was provided by the English archaeologist and explorer Arthur Evans, a key proponent of the first hypothesis. He situated Justinian's newly founded city in the area of present-day Skopje, specifically on the acropolis of the Skopje Fortress and within the precincts of the Old Bazaar. Evans's arguments and reasoning for this identification are set out in detail in his volume devoted to research in Illyricum.<sup>13</sup> For the city's location, Evans based his reasoning on Procopius' *De Aedificiis* and *Anecdota*, emphasizing the birthplaces of Emperor Justin I (Bederiana) and his nephew Justinian (Tauresium), which he identified with the modern villages of Badar and Taor. In line with Evans's position, A. Vasiliev, writing in the mid-twentieth century, also gave his full support to this identification.<sup>14</sup> Beyond his analysis of the written sources, Evans sought to reinforce his identification of Skopje with Justiniana Prima by examining the city's built environment. In this connection, he reported that in the Old Bazaar of Skopje he perceived a Byzantine city preserved in remarkable condition. Although the structures were of Ottoman origin – stone bazaars, hammams, and caravanserais, the most prominent being Kuršumli An – Evans interpreted them as echoes of the baths and markets with which Justinian had adorned his new foundation. To this picture he added the aqueduct of fifty-four arches, constructed of brick and supported by alternating courses of stone and brick (Fig. 1), which supplied the city with water and corresponded, in his view, to Procopius' description of Justiniana Prima.<sup>15</sup>

Building on earlier arguments regarding the location of Justiniana Prima – particularly those of A. Evans – and prompted by the emerging results of excavations at Caričin Grad, Nikola Vulić introduced a new dimen-

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>11</sup> Hahn, 1868, 156–158.

<sup>12</sup> Сјок, 1936, стр. 101; Томовски, 1967, 232–239; Микулчић, 1977, 93–111, 93/4.

<sup>13</sup> Evans, 1885, 82–152.

<sup>14</sup> Vasiliev, 1950, 59; Ангеловски, Спасова, 2018, 45–54, 47, 45–54.

<sup>15</sup> Procopii, 1838, IV, 1, 266–267; Evans, 1885, pp. 149–150, Fig. 93.



Fig. 1. The aqueduct of Skopje on a postcard, end of XIX century

mension into the debate. In his concise analysis, he drew attention to Justinian's *Novella 11*, which outlines the jurisdiction and authority of the Archbishop of Justiniana Prima.<sup>16</sup> In this context, Vulić, following Evans, observed that Justinian himself located the newly founded city in "Mediterranean Dacia." He noted that Evans understood this designation as referring to the province of Dardania, rather than – as Evans had translated – the broader "Dardanian land," which denoted the wider territory inhabited by the Dardanians, stretching from Veles in the south to Knjaževac in the north. This expanse, however, did not fully coincide with the formal boundaries of the Roman province of Dardania.<sup>17</sup> Yet already the following year, the renowned French archaeologist and historian Jacques Zeiller published his study on Justiniana Prima, in which he categorically rejected Vulić's interpretation and reaffirmed the thesis advanced by A. Evans.<sup>18</sup> Alongside his detailed discussion of the affiliation and location of Justiniana Prima in relation to the newly established archbishopric, Zeiller reached a decisive conclusion: how could one deny that the city represented the direct continuation of the ancient bishopric of Scupi, when it was elevated to the rank of archbishopric with papal approval and conferred the title Justiniana Prima, endowed with primacy over the entire diocese of Dacia?<sup>19</sup> More recent scholars – including Ivan Mikulčić,

<sup>16</sup> Вулић., 1929, 45-50.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>18</sup> Zeiller, 1930, pp. 650-658.

<sup>19</sup> Zeiller, 1930, pp. 654; in the frame of the most recent research, Zeiller's line of thought assumes a renewed dimension: how can it be that such a grandiose foundation, concei-

Tomo Tomovski, Viktor Liličić Adams, and Mihailo Milinković – have revisited the question through field investigations of Bederiana, Tauresium, and Justiniana Prima. Their work has contributed new observations, yet in substance it largely reiterates the theses advanced by earlier researchers.

Encouraged by the onomastic parallels between the ancient settlements of Bederiana and Tauresium and the modern villages of Badar and Taor, situated at the southern margin of the Skopje Valley, T. Tomovski and I. Mikulčić undertook extensive surface surveys and reconnaissance of nearby ancient sites. Their investigations yielded the first substantive information on the Taor hillfort and on the remains of an ancient settlement near the village of Badar.<sup>20</sup> On several occasions, working independently, both scholars visited the ancient settlement near the village of Taor, where they determined that its ground plan was square – corresponding exactly to Procopius' description. From 2001 to 2022, however, the site was subjected to systematic investigation by the Museum of the City of Skopje under the direction of Kiro Ristov. Excavations revealed multiple habitation horizons, ranging from prehistory to the Middle Ages, with particularly intensive occupation and development during the sixth century. A detailed plan of all uncovered structures and features was produced.<sup>21</sup> It should be recalled that these investigations yielded a substantial corpus of movable material culture, including approximately 650 coins, more than half of which date to the sixth century.<sup>22</sup> In this light, the settlement at Taor emerges as the strongest candidate for identification with the ancient Tauresium described by Procopius (Fig. 2).

As for the location of Bederiana, the site near the village of Badar was first identified by I. Mikulčić, who produced the earliest planimetry and associated it with the *Praesidium* marked on the Peutinger Map.<sup>23</sup> However, continuous archaeological investigations since 2014 have yielded no evidence supporting its identification with the fortification described by Mikulčić. Instead, research has revealed a more opulent Roman villa, whose occupation – attested primarily through numismatic finds – spanned roughly a century, from the early fourth to, at the latest, the opening decades of the fifth century.<sup>24</sup> Of course, the site extends over a much

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ved by the greatest Roman-Byzantine emperor, has not been accorded proper treatment in historical scholarship – and even less so in archaeological investigation? (Ristov K. 2019, 19-20).

<sup>20</sup> Томовски, 1967, 232-239; Микулчиќ, 1977, 93-111.

<sup>21</sup> Ристов, 2013; Ристов, 2014, 361-392; Ристов, 2016, 178-185; Ристов, 2018; Ристов., 2019; Ристов, 2021, 279-289.

<sup>22</sup> Ristov, 2012; Ристов, 2019, 255-294.

<sup>23</sup> Микулчиќ., 1977, 101-105; Микулчиќ, 1982, 55, 68, 70, 103, сл.29.

<sup>24</sup> Ангеловски, Спасова, Станчевски, Денковски, 2017, 47-52; Ангеловски, Спасова, 2018, 45-54; Ангеловски, Спасова, Јакимовски., 2021, 347-355.

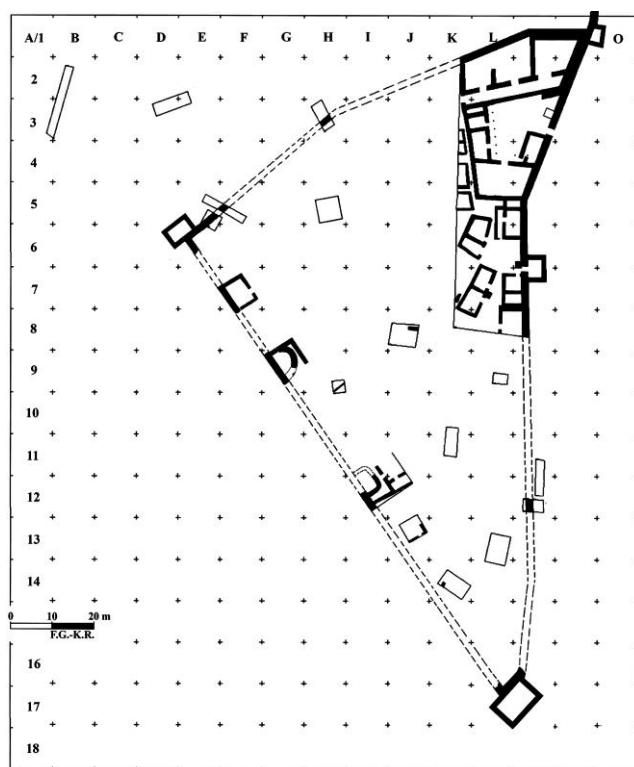


Fig. 2. Gradište, village of Taor (Tauresium)

larger area, which in some subsequent research will provide more specific results in the direction of confirming or rejecting these assumptions. In connection with the location of Bederiana, there is another location that is also mentioned by A. Evans. It is the location of the Markovi Kuli castle, near the village of Letevci, which through reconnaissance and surface prospecting of the terrain, first I. Mikulchich and T. Tomovski identified as a medieval fortified border guard town of Kozhle.<sup>25</sup> Later V. Lilchich Adams accepted A. Evans's conclusion and identified it with Badarsko Kale (Bederiana), dating it to the period 4th - 6th century, mainly based on the discovered coins (Fig. 3).<sup>26</sup> Based on the systematic research carried out in the period 2008-2009, and the discovered archaeological material, a prehistoric Late Bronze and Iron Age settlement, a fortified guard post from late antiquity (IV – VI century) and the Middle Ages (XI – XIV century) have been identified at this site.<sup>27</sup> However, regardless of whether

<sup>25</sup> Mikulčić, 2002, 290-292; Томоски, 1999, 29-35.

<sup>26</sup> Лилчиќ Адамс, Атанасов, Илиевски, Ширтовски, 2022/2023, 213-217.

<sup>27</sup> Толевски, 2016, 138-173.

Bederiana will be identified with the “Praesidium” near the village of Badar, or with the locality of Markovi Kuli (Town of Kozhle), located only about 2.5 km as the crow flies south of the village of Badar, it is present on the terrain in the immediate vicinity of Taor.

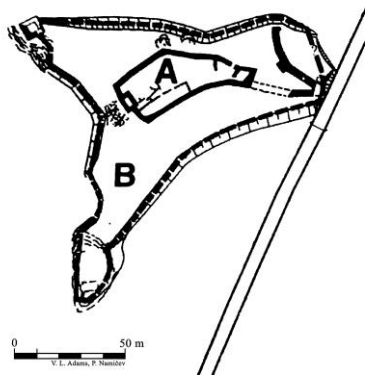


Fig. 3. Markovo Kale,  
City of Kozhle (Bederiana)

A substantial body of scholarship has emerged from the archaeological exploration of the Caričin Grad site near Lebane, long regarded as a prime candidate for the location of Justiniana Prima. Excavations conducted over more than a century have uncovered an impressive range of structures and movable material culture. From the earliest campaigns to the present, the scale and character of these finds have consistently encouraged researchers to identify the settlement with Justinian’s celebrated foundation.<sup>28</sup> In line with earlier scholars who

identified Justiniana Prima with Caričin Grad, M. Milinković pointed to yet another noteworthy location, though without departing from established views. Setting aside the toponyms Badar and Taor, he endorsed the thesis of V. Petković<sup>29</sup> and later B. Bavan,<sup>30</sup> who grounded their arguments in the archaeological remains at Caričin Grad. Milinković himself, however, acknowledged a critical gap: no inscription has yet been discovered to confirm the site’s identification with Justiniana Prima.<sup>31</sup> At the same time, he drew attention to another site, located 14 km north of Caričin Grad near the village of Zlata, where the remains of a large early Byzantine fortification – comparable in scale to Caričin Grad – were identified. Building on the ideas of Hodin, V. Popović advanced this as a second potential Serbian location for Justiniana Prima.<sup>32</sup> In this context, however, Milinković emphasized that such proposals could only be substantiated through systematic archaeological investigation, which alone could determine whether the site near Zlata represents Justiniana Prima or perhaps Bederiana – while once again setting aside the toponymic evidence of the village of Badar in the immediate vicinity of Skopje.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Баван, Иванишевић, 2006, 109-113 (the bibliography includes the principal studies devoted to the investigation of the Caričin Grad site); Ivanišević V., 2016, 107-126.

<sup>29</sup> Кондић, Поповић, 1977, 8.

<sup>30</sup> Баван, Иванишевић, 2006, 66-69.

<sup>31</sup> Милинковић, 2009, 239-246; Милинковић, 2015, 190-228.

<sup>32</sup> Кондић, Поповић, 1977, 167.

<sup>33</sup> Милинковић, 2009, 241-244; Милинковић, 2015, 190-236-248.



Decades of intensive research have firmly entrenched the view that Caričin Grad should be identified with Justiniana Prima. Yet the connection remains incomplete, leaving a gap that has prompted many Macedonian scholars to favor the alternative hypothesis equating Justiniana Prima with Skopje. Here, however, a fundamental difficulty arises: Skopje is conventionally identified with the ancient city of Scupi, whose continuity is traced through the Kale Fortress and its extensive eastern “suburb.” This area went on to form the nucleus of the medieval city (10th–14th century), continued through the Ottoman period (15th–early 20th century), and remains the historic core of modern Skopje.

A considerable number of monographs, studies, and articles have examined the foundation, development, and historical continuity of Scupi, tracing its trajectory up to the devastating earthquake of 518 and its modest vestiges into the latter half of the seventh century.<sup>34</sup> By contrast, when attention shifts to the Kale Fortress, a conspicuous gap emerges: the entire span from the sixth to the tenth century remains largely undocumented. To address this lacuna, systematic archaeological investigations of the Skopje Kale have been undertaken on several occasions,<sup>35</sup> culminating in the extensive campaigns of 2007–2012, during which the fortress was subjected to near-complete exploration.<sup>36</sup> The investigations produced unexpected insights into the life of the Kale. Alongside the dominant prehistoric strata, evidence of activity was uncovered from the early classical period (fifth–fourth centuries BCE). Notably, refuse pits and small structural remains were identified, interpreted as possible cult pits, suggesting that the Kale may have functioned as a ritual center for the inhabitants of surrounding settlements in the central Skopje Valley.<sup>37</sup> With the expansion of Paionian culture in this sector of the Balkans, numerous settlements arose in the valley, displaying marked southern influences. Emerging from the earlier Iron Age cultural substratum, they came to embody the region’s growing political and cultural ascendancy.<sup>38</sup>

Following the early antiquity horizon (fifth–fourth centuries BCE), no substantial cultural deposits reappear at the Kale until the tenth century, when an intensive occupational layer emerges and continues into the trajectory of the site’s later development. This absence raises a critical question: what transpired at the Kale and in its immediate environs during the long interval from the third century BCE to the tenth century CE, given that no cultural strata from this period have been identified within the

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<sup>34</sup> Јованова, 2018, 45–46 (f.n. 1 and forward).

<sup>35</sup> Гоцкова, 1955; Микулчић, 1982.

<sup>36</sup> Митревски, 2016, 9–18.

<sup>37</sup> Митревски, 2016, 151–165.

<sup>38</sup> Соколовска, 1990, 9–34; Ристов, 2020, 110–121; Митревски, 2022, 111–161.

fortified area?<sup>39</sup> In the absence of fully conclusive evidence, the most recent systematic investigations of the Skopje Kale have nonetheless yielded modest remains from the Roman and Early Byzantine periods (first–sixth centuries). Among the finds were some forty coins, three military fibulae, and several ceramic vessels, recovered from later layers without clear stratigraphic context. Most date to the imperial period and suggest that the site functioned intermittently as a guard post for the city of Skopje.<sup>40</sup> To this must be added a particularly rare discovery: part of a bronze candelabrum unearthed during the 1967 excavations.<sup>41</sup> Such objects are known to have been used by the military and, on typological grounds, this example is dated to the final decades of the sixth century. It provides direct evidence that a garrison was stationed at the Kale, almost certainly tasked with the defense of the city.

In this connection, it is worth recalling just one element from the wealth of information recorded by A. Evans about the Skopje Bazaar more than a century ago. His first encounter with the city left a powerful impression: to foreign eyes, he remarked, Skopje appeared as though it preserved a Byzantine city in near-perfect condition. While touring the Bazaar, he was struck above all by the profusion of numismatic material offered in almost every shop. The assemblage included coins of the Macedonian kings, early Roman issues, and autonomous coinages from Thessalonica, Stobi, Pautalia, and Viminacium. Yet what most impressed him was the sheer abundance of coins from the reigns of Anastasius, Justin, and Justinian, as well as later Byzantine emperors.<sup>42</sup> After his three-month sojourn in Skopje, Evans's host marked his departure by presenting him with a large bronze coin of Justinian – probably a follis.

In the absence of detailed archaeological evidence, particularly for the period after the fourth century BCE, Evans's testimony – if accepted as reliable – allows us to infer that the early antique city persisted on the eastern terrace of the Kale, within the zone of the Old Skopje Bazaar along the Serava River, until the close of the sixth century. Corroborating this are several finds. Most notable is a bronze vessel (Fig. 4) uncovered during the construction of the Arka Hotel in the central part of the Skopje Bazaar, immediately beside the Serava.<sup>43</sup> Equally significant is the

<sup>39</sup> Митревски, 2016, 9 - 49.

<sup>40</sup> Митревски, 2007; Манева, 2019, 327-470, pp. 370-371; Манева, 2020, pp. 342-344.

<sup>41</sup> Kuzmanoski, 2017, 71-81.

<sup>42</sup> Evans, 1885, 148-149.

<sup>43</sup> On the basis of its form and workmanship, the bronze vessel is assigned to the Hellenistic period (third–second centuries BCE). In connection with the hotel construction, the owner reported that the establishment took its name – *Arka* – from a wall with arches belonging to an ancient structure, uncovered in the courtyard at a depth of roughly 2.5–3 m, together with numerous decorated marble fragments from a Byzantine building. Unfor-

discovery of a necropolis belonging to this settlement, located roughly 700 meters east-southeast of the Skopje Fortress. Found accidentally during the construction of a multi-storey garage adjacent to the Skopje Basic Court, the necropolis contained a dense concentration of both inhumation and cremation burials. The evidence suggests that the inhabitants of the Bazaar area interred their dead here from the late Hellenistic period to the end of the Roman imperial era (third century BCE to early fourth century CE).<sup>44</sup> Given the density of interments, the necropolis clearly extended far beyond the confines of the building where it was uncovered. This evidence strongly suggests that the area of the Old Skopje Bazaar was the scene of sustained and intensive occupation.

One possible explanation for the stationing of the Legio V Macedonica and Legio IV Scythica in the area of the long-abandoned Paeonian settlement on Zajčev Rid<sup>45</sup> lies in Roman military strategy, which favored establishing camps in close proximity to existing local settlements. Since the community near the Kale appears to have been the only settlement in this part of the Skopje Valley at the time, it would have been entirely logical to position a major legionary camp roughly 4 km to the west, on a broad, uninhabited plain beside the Vardar River.<sup>46</sup>

From the early first century, when these legions were stationed in the region, the settlement expanded over the following centuries into an urban center of some 43 hectares, riva-

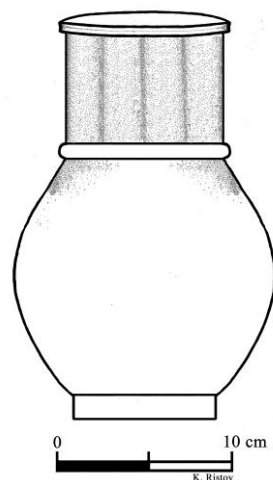


Fig. 4. A bronze vase  
(Arka Hotel, Old Bazaar)

unately, beyond the owner's testimony, no independent confirmation of this discovery exists. It should be noted, however, that the hotel's owner is a trained civil engineer, whose education would have enabled him to recognize architectural styles and historical building techniques with some accuracy.

<sup>44</sup> The necropolis extended across the entire footprint of the construction site, covering an area of approximately 0.25 ha. Regrettably, aside from an on-site inspection by Kiro Ristov of the Museum of the City of Skopje, no documentation was possible: the graves had already been destroyed by excavation, and construction of the building was underway. According to informal accounts from individuals involved in the building of the faculties and surrounding residential complexes, the necropolis continued northward through the faculty complex, extending toward the Sultan Murat Mosque and as far west as Krste Petkov Misirkov Street.

<sup>45</sup> Ристов К., 2020, 111-113; Митревски Д., 2019, 127.

<sup>46</sup> Јованова, Ончевска Тодоровска, 2018, 15-19; the hypothesis that a legionary camp of one of these two legions already existed in the area prior to their attested stationing (n. 4) is rejected, since no historical, archaeological, or epigraphic evidence has yet been found to support it. Јованова Ј., 2018, 46-50.

ling the larger cities of the Roman Empire. Scupi flourished and prospered until the early sixth century, attracting the attention of ancient authors who celebrated its prominence as a Roman city. Meanwhile, life in the zone of the Old Skopje Bazaar persisted, though with diminished intensity. The Kale, originally a stronghold of early antiquity, was adapted into a fortified outpost guarding the eastern approach to Scupi.

During Scupi's period of economic and military ascendancy, a bridge was constructed over the Vardar south of the fortress – today's Stone Bridge<sup>47</sup> – facilitating movement along the road running down the river's right bank. Some 20 km further south, near Oreshani and Taor (Tauresium), the Vardar was bridged again to connect with the north–south transversal at Katlanovo. This alignment was dictated by the presence of Lake Katlanovo (Kaplan), which extended from Katlanovo and Taor in the south to cover much of the Skopje Valley in the north.<sup>48</sup> This conclusion is corroborated by the discovery of a milestone near the Gazela factory, approximately 9 km south of Scupi along the described road. The inscription records its erection during the reign of Emperor Marcus Aurelius in 162 CE.<sup>49</sup> The subsequent development of the Old Skopje Bazaar proceeded, but with severely limited resources and markedly reduced intensity. A decisive rupture came with the catastrophic earthquake of 518, which devastated the Skopje region and its wider hinterland. The scale of destruction was unprecedented, and its consequences weighed heavily on the lives and fortunes of the population.<sup>50</sup> Scupi was left in ruins, its buildings largely destroyed, prompting part of the population to relocate to neighboring settlements, including the zone of the Old Skopje Bazaar. There, the construction materials of many houses enabled them to withstand the force of the earthquake more successfully. In the ensuing period – throughout the sixth century and into the early seventh – urban life at Scupi came to a complete end. The buildings of its final construction phase were systematically dismantled and disintegrated,<sup>51</sup> with much of their material either reused in the formation of small new residential units or transported for incorporation into the architecture of surrounding settle-

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<sup>47</sup> Whether the bridge assumed its present form under Roman rule or was reconstructed in later periods lies beyond the scope of this discussion. What can be stated with certainty is that a bridge existed here as a necessary crossing point, quite possibly even in pre-Roman times.

<sup>48</sup> Evans, 1885, 101-103; Ристов, 2019, 2019, 190-191. In years of heavy rainfall, the lake expanded to a considerable extent, with its waters reaching as far as the village of Aračinovo to the northeast and the settlement of Aerodrom to the northwest. Today, the basin of the former lake has been transformed into arable land, regulated by a system of drainage channels designed to pump out the still-active waters.

<sup>49</sup> Јованова, 2005, 149-154.

<sup>50</sup> Gračanin, 2005, 25; Јованова, 2018, 67-69.

<sup>51</sup> Јованова, Ончевска Тодоровска, 2018, 29-30; 142-147.

ments. Whether these circumstances were harnessed for the founding of a new city remains uncertain, though the convergence of events strongly favors such a conclusion. In the very year of the earthquake, Justin I – born at Bederiana – ascended the imperial throne of the Eastern Roman Empire. Nine years later, his nephew Justinian I, from Tauresium, followed him. Both sites are identified with the present-day villages of Badar and Taor in the Skopje Valley. If, as Procopius records, Justinian established his new city near his birthplace as an act of filial piety, this constitutes direct testimony that cannot be disregarded. Deeply attached to his family, his birthplace, and his childhood environment – with its landscape, its people, and their character – Justinian's first thought upon coming to power was likely to repay his debt to the land where he felt most secure.<sup>52</sup> Amid his broader concerns, plans, and efforts to secure the frontiers and stabilize the imperial administration, Justinian also seized the opportunity to rebuild cities and regions devastated by the earthquake, while simultaneously founding and reconstructing numerous cities and fortresses to strengthen both local and imperial defense.<sup>53</sup> If Justinian indeed established his new city in the Skopje area, the crucial question arises: why did he choose the zone of the Old Bazaar rather than the site of the ruined Scupi? Reflections on this issue are most often tied to the principles Justinian himself articulated in *Novella* 11 of 535, included in the final volume of his *Corpus Iuris Civilis* (*Novellae Constitutiones*).<sup>54</sup> By founding a new city, Justinian not only honored his parents but also created, through its scale and the magnificence of its architecture, a capital worthy of serving as the center of the prefecture of Illyricum and the seat of an archbishopric with powers far surpassing those of the bishopric of Scupi.<sup>55</sup>

As further support for this assumption, it is significant that the ruined city of Scupi clearly served as a quarry for construction material in the building of the new city, a point also noted by A. Evans.<sup>56</sup> The most striking evidence of this reuse appears in the northern and northeastern defensive walls of the Skopje Kale Fortress, where marked differences can be observed in comparison with the later medieval fortifications (Fig. 5). The outer face of this stretch of rampart was clad with travertine spolia, Roman stelae, and other architectural elements dismantled from the buildings and necropoleis of Scupi. The masonry technique itself recalls late antique walls built with Roman spolia, a practice well attested in both the western and eastern provinces of the former Roman Empire.<sup>57</sup> Research

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<sup>52</sup> Miller, Sarris, 2018, 163-165.

<sup>53</sup> Ciglencčki, 2009, 205-222.

<sup>54</sup> Miller, Sarris P., 2018, 163-165.

<sup>55</sup> Шукарова, 1994, 10-17; Gračanin, 2005, 9-36; Јованова, 2018, 64-69.

<sup>56</sup> Evans, 1885, 101-102.

<sup>57</sup> Микулчиќ, 1982, 120; Микулчиќ, 1999, 354.



Fig. 5. Kale, front defensive wall (Митревски 2016)

indicates that this section of the rampart was first constructed in the tenth century,<sup>58</sup> most likely prompted by the availability of abundant spolia on the eastern edge of the Kale. It should not be overlooked, however, that the incorporated spolia derived from earlier buildings that once adorned Justinian's city, during which time the acropolis itself was not yet fully integrated into the urban fabric (Fig. 6). As noted above, much of the marble decoration of Scupi's monuments was broken down, fragmented, and dispersed in the aftermath of the catastrophic earthquake. This circumstance helps explain the absence of a substantial cultural horizon from the Justinianic period on the Kale acropolis.

Yet none of the authors addressing the problem of Justiniana Prima has adequately considered that Procopius' silence on Scupi stems from the city's total destruction in the earthquake of 518 and its subsequent abandonment, as resources were redirected to the construction of Justiniana Prima nearby, on the site of the Old Skopje Bazaar. Vulić argued instead that Procopius did not omit Scupi, identifying it instead with Scupium near Serdica. The archaeological reality, however, shows only modest, rural-style dwellings at Scupi for this period – evidence that the city failed to maintain the traditions of urban life that had characterized its earlier history.<sup>59</sup>

A. Evans also reported the presence of marble spolia incorporated into the structures of the Skopje Bazaar. While touring the Lower Town, he

<sup>58</sup> Митревски, 2016, 29-32.

<sup>59</sup> Вулић, 1929, 46; Ончевска Тодоровска, 2017, 245-320.

observed numerous fragments of ancient monuments – stelae, sarcophagi, lintels, and other marble elements – either scattered across the area or reused in Ottoman public buildings.<sup>60</sup> Much of this material is no longer visible today, owing to the gradual reconstruction and restoration of the Old Bazaar throughout the twentieth century, particularly following the devastating earthquake of 1963. Nonetheless, traces of earlier Byzantine buildings have been recorded at several points during reconstruction, quietly attesting to the site's long history.

Among the many ancient remains noted by Evans, one particularly striking case came from the old ruined Bezisten, where he documented the vestiges of an ancient structure: three brick-built arches supported by square columns of finely dressed stone. Evans identified these as the remains of a section of the aqueduct that once supplied water to the lower city (Fig. 7).<sup>61</sup> This wall remnant can be dated to the late Roman period, as indicated by its masonry technique, which differs from that of the later structure in which it was incorporated. At the same time, Evans observed that its construction quality was far superior to that of the aqueduct outside the city, despite its integration into a later building.<sup>62</sup> He clearly had in mind Procopius' account, which, in describing the grandeur, beauty, and significance of the city, emphasized among other monuments the aqueduct that ensured a constant supply of fresh water. The remains in question may indeed be identified with Justinian's aqueduct, since their form and dimensions closely match those of the external structure.

When the Bezisten was built, this ancient element was reused to stabilize the roof of the large domed hall, its monumentality and solid craftsmanship ensuring its survival through the Middle Ages. This feature, in fact, seems to have dictated the precise placement and construction of the Bezisten itself: the Ottoman builders, recognizing its durability, integrated it seamlessly into the new edifice. Additional evidence reinforces this interpretation. Effectively, all buildings from Justinian's era, and most



Fig. 6. A sarcophagus used as a trough, Kale Fortress, Skopje, excavations 2009 (Митревски 2016)

<sup>60</sup> Evans, 1885, 101.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 151-152, Fig. 94.

<sup>62</sup> Today, the Bezisten has been renovated, completely losing its original form.





Fig. 7. Bezisten, Skopje, A Byzantine building (Evans 1885)



Fig. 8. The Skopje aquaduct today (photo by T. Savevska)<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> <https://marh.mk>. “Скопскиот аквадукт / VI век”, 27.04.2016



from the Middle Ages (chiefly churches), were completely ruined, their foundations now lying beneath Ottoman structures at depths of one to three meters, depending on the location within the Bazaar. Given that the Bezisten was erected in the first half of the fifteenth century, under the governorship of Ishak Bey,<sup>64</sup> it is unsurprising that its architects drew upon the preserved remains of a non-Christian structure, ingeniously adapting it into the fabric of their new monumental building.

Referring to the construction of the aqueduct outside the city, Evans concludes that its foundation was laid in the time of Justinian, noting that most of the arches carrying the water conduit were rebuilt during the Ottoman period (Fig. 8), with far lower construction quality, under Mustafa Pasha – probably in connection with his endowment for the construction of a mosque in 1492.<sup>65</sup> Most scholars, however, associate the aqueduct's origin with the water supply system of the Roman city of Scupi, particularly during its expansion in the second century, when a vast *thermae* complex and other monumental buildings were erected.<sup>66</sup> At the same time, it is difficult to assume that the aqueduct was constructed much later under Ottoman rule.<sup>67</sup> What can be stated with certainty is that the aqueduct lay in ruins until the arrival of the Ottomans, when it was entirely rebuilt along its original course to exploit the already tapped spring at the village of Gluvo, noted for its abundant capacity. Less clear is its condition during the Middle Ages (tenth–fourteenth centuries), when both the upper and lower towns must have supported several thousand inhabitants<sup>68</sup> who required substantial water supplies. Although a massive cistern, known as the “water tower,” was documented on the Kale – fed by a spring sunk deep within the tower itself – the question remains whether its yield was sufficient for the needs of the population, or whether an additional system supplemented the supply. In this context, mention must be made of the discovery of an underground water conduit running parallel to the surface aqueduct, channeling water from the Gluvo spring to the Old Skopje Bazaar.<sup>69</sup> Although the precise date of its con-

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<sup>64</sup> Павлов, 2008, 98-99.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 2008, 54-59.

<sup>66</sup> Јованова, Ончевска Тодоровска, 2018, 104-123.

<sup>67</sup> Петров, 1998, 86-111. The author dates the aqueduct to the 16th century. He based his assumption on the foundation of the building and its above-ground construction.

<sup>68</sup> Митревски, 2016, 21-49.

<sup>69</sup> Петров, 1998, 87-88, сл. 3 (f.n. 1-4). The author reports the accidental discovery of a water conduit in 1954, located about 100 m east of the above-ground aqueduct. That same year, a probe measuring 3 × 1 m was opened at the findspot, revealing remains of the underground channel at a depth of roughly 1.20 m. Beyond describing the route and pipes of the system, the author provided no detailed chronological assessment, but suggested that it represented a continuation of the above-ground aqueduct leading toward the Old Bazaar. At the same time, we traced the presumed course of this subterranean line from the

struction cannot be definitively established, the pipes discovered appear consistent with Roman, early Byzantine, and later types, reflecting the continuity of construction techniques – particularly the use of identical mortar – already in practice during the early Roman Empire. Nevertheless, it remains difficult to equate the quality of the pipes, masonry, and mortar used in Roman aqueducts with that of later imitations. Further evidence emerged in 2004 at the Gradište site near the Skopje Kale Fortress, where part of the underground water supply route was uncovered, structurally identical to the earlier find and interpreted by researchers as a conduit leading from the aqueduct to the Lower Town (Fig. 9).<sup>70</sup> In any case, this potentially significant evidence once again underscores the need to consider the existence of an economical underground alternative to the aqueduct – capable of supplying the Old Bazaar and the Kale Fortress with water during severe weather conditions and times of heightened military activity.



Fig. 9. Part of the aqueduct route discovered at the Kale necropolis (K. Ristov)

exposed section back to the source near the village of Gluvo, independent of the above-ground structure.

<sup>70</sup> Јованова, Колиштрковска-Настева, 2008, 424-426.

In its urban development, the city of Scupi undoubtedly required a substantial supply of clean water, yet extensive research has not yielded concrete evidence on this point, even though the city possessed a sophisticated network of lead and ceramic pipes as well as drainage channels for wastewater.<sup>71</sup> It has, however, been established that Scupi drew its water from a spring on the slopes of Skopska Crna Gora,<sup>72</sup> although the precise course of the conduit reaching the city has not been identified on the ground. In this context, the water supply system of Scupi may be linked to, and identified with, the later route of the aqueduct serving the Lower Town beneath the Kale. Since both drew upon the same source, it is plausible that the aqueduct was originally constructed during the life of Scupi, and subsequently its catchment and route were redirected and expanded to supply the Lower Town and the fortress. Owing both to its monumentality and to its continued utilitarian function, this major ancient structure has endured to the present day.<sup>73</sup> In the course of Skopje's modern expansion, several remains of ancient structures have come to light – such as those documented at the Arka Hotel – offering fresh confirmation of the layers of history still concealed beneath the Old Bazaar. Unfortunately, much of the earlier architecture, particularly from the sixth to the fourteenth centuries, lies deeply embedded within the cultural strata of the district. By erecting Islamic buildings directly over earlier ones – mosques above churches, hammams above earlier baths, residences and markets in continuity with their predecessors – the Ottomans clearly sought to perpetuate the sanctity of religious sites and maintain continuity in urban functions. The transformation of the Bazaar thus becomes most visible from the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, when new construction replaced earlier buildings within a planned street grid and a more coherent urban layout than before, preserved and adapted to Ottoman needs. Written sources, including references by Konstantin Asen (1257–1277), King Stefan Uroš II Milutin (1282–1321), and Vuk Branković (1376–1377), further attest to this continuity, mentioning, for example, the church of St. George – later supplanted by the Sultan Murat Mosque – as well as other monuments.<sup>74</sup> For a long time, the intentions of the new conquerors and the many secrets concealed in the basements of small shops were only assumed, yet no institution has systematically documented

<sup>71</sup> Коракевиќ, 2002, 153-156; Јованова, 2008, 206-208.

<sup>72</sup> From the Laovec spring near the village of Gluvo, water was conveyed by the aqueduct first to the city of Scupi and, in a later phase, onward to the Bazaar. (Evans A., 1885, 149; Петров К., 1998, 96-100, fig. 1).

<sup>73</sup> Contemporary evidence indicates that the aqueduct continued to supply the Lower Town with fresh water until 1912.

<sup>74</sup> Груић, 1925, 45-74; Томовски, 1975, 57-75; Петров, 1975, 75-89; Петров, 1975a, 181-247; Атанасовски, 2011, 147-162.

them. A unique opportunity arose after the catastrophic earthquake of 1963, when efforts at rehabilitation, conservation, and restoration of damaged cultural monuments – particularly those in the Old Skopje Bazaar – were undertaken alongside the construction of new residential and commercial buildings. During these conservation works on the damaged Ottoman monuments, remains of earlier structures were revealed (Fig. 10).<sup>75</sup>



Fig. 10. Remains of architectural plastic from an older building, An, Hotel Shar, Makarie Frčkovski street (photo by F. Koneski)<sup>76</sup>

<sup>75</sup> Sultan Murat's mosque: Investigations carried out in 1963-1964 (lit.: Tanevska A., 1983, 187-192; Jelen Kapan-mosque: Investigations carried out in 1975 (lit.: Aleksovska B., Ivanovski M., Miloević M., 1978, 161-167; Ishak bey (Aladža) mosque: Investigations carried out in 2017 (lit.: Ivanovska-Velkovska S., Atanasovska V., 2021, 325-334); Arasta mosque (Investigations carried out in 1967; in 2005, conservation and restoration interventions at the Office for the Protection of Cultural Monuments of Skopje; in 2010, protective archaeological investigations by the National Conservation Centre in the Republic of Macedonia; Kapan an (lit.: Nothing N., 1983, 203-205); The results of the investigations have not been published on: Bezisten and Suli An, (rehabilitation investigations of the Office for the Protection of Cultural Monuments of Skopje in 1964 and 1965); Čifte hammam (Investigations of Office for the Protection of Cultural Monuments of Skopje in 2001); Murat Pasha's Mosque (Research at the Office for the Protection of Cultural Monuments of Skopje in 1982); Kursumli an: (lit.: Evans 1885, 147); French Bank (Conservation and restoration interventions in 2005); An, Hotel Šar – excavation for a new building, at a depth of about 3 m, uncovered marble lintels and other architectural fragments. Čifte hammam (conservation and restoration research in 2002, when the Roman stele was discovered). Information on the unpublished research is available only through corresponding reports.

<sup>76</sup> <https://marh.mk>. “Продолжува рушењето на Старата скопска чаршија.” 25.01. 2023.



Fig. 11. Borders of the Old Skopje Bazaar  
with the monumental complex of the Kale Fortress

After the discovery of these earlier monuments, the entire extent of the Old Bazaar was placed under legal protection (Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia, No. 130, 15.10.2008), on the basis of the Elaborate for its Revaluation prepared by the Conservation Center of the City of Skopje in 2006.<sup>77</sup> The boundaries were defined by the compact cores of both the newly discovered and the extant monumental units, with attention to their placement and function. According to this evaluation, the uninhabited zone measures 11.6 ha in the central core and 23.5 ha in its entirety, excluding the substructure and the Kale Fortress; when these are

<sup>77</sup> Previously registered as a cultural monument within the category of immovable cultural heritage of the Republic of Macedonia, Decision no. 122/75 from 02.05.1969, on behalf of the Institute for the Protection of Cultural Monuments in the city of Skopje.

included, the total uninhabited area reaches approximately 42.7 ha (Fig. 11). It is worth noting that during the Middle Ages, after Emperor Samuel's conquest and fortification of Skopje, and especially under the Komnenoi (twelfth–thirteenth centuries), followed by the Serbian occupation of the region (thirteenth–fourteenth centuries),<sup>78</sup> a large number of churches and monasteries were founded in Skopje and its environs, endowed by Byzantine emperors and Serbian rulers alike.<sup>79</sup> The impression is that these new patrons sought to preserve the sanctity of earlier church sites, thereby continuing the ecclesiastical tradition of the archbishopric of Justiniana Prima and subsequently that of Ohrid, in direct continuity with the heritage of the Scupi bishopric.<sup>80</sup>

But let us return to the sixth century in order to clarify the existence of Justiniana Prima within the framework of its defensive system. Having already considered its location, dimensions, facilities, and water supply, it remains to identify the defensive points. In this regard, during his stay in Skopje, Evans delineated with remarkable precision nearly all of the major defensive positions.<sup>81</sup> Since Justinian founded the city in his birthplace, he chose to situate it in the most favorable area for constructing monuments befitting a capital and the seat of an archbishopric of the same name, designed through deliberate spatial planning and architectural magnificence to rival the greatest centers of the Empire. In response to repeated barbarian incursions, he first encircled the city with a defensive wall 3 m thick,<sup>82</sup> and to safeguard the population he fortified nearly all the smaller surrounding settlements as well. Particular attention was devoted to several strategic points essential for the defense of the Skopje Valley (Fig. 12). To control the northern approach into the Skopje region

<sup>78</sup> Митревски, 2016, 23.

<sup>79</sup> Петров, 1969, 153–186.

<sup>80</sup> Шукарова, 1994, 127–137; Алексова, Лилчиќ, 1997, 11–20; Лилчиќ, Илјоска, 1997, 21–38.

<sup>81</sup> Еванс, 1885, 91–103.

<sup>82</sup> The entire extent of the city (excluding its suburbs) was enclosed by a defensive wall. Sections of this wall, approximately 3 m thick, have been documented beneath the ensemble of the Church of St. Spas, near the Mustafa Pasha Mosque, and under the buildings of Rubin-Karmin; further traces were found beneath the Murat Pasha Mosque along the east–west axis, and continuing across Bulevar “Krstе Misirkov” at the site of the Aladža Mosque. These data derive from reports of on-site inspections carried out during renovation, extension, and conservation works in the Old Bazaar, undertaken as part of the legal obligations of the Institute for the Protection of Cultural Monuments of the City of Skopje (today the NU Conservation Center – Skopje), and are summarized in the Elaborate of 2006 (point 5.1). Since no written sources or material evidence confirm that the substructure of the medieval city on the site of the Old Bazaar was fortified, it may be concluded that this rampart dates from the time of Justinian. In the Middle Ages, under Samuel, it was entirely dismantled, and the abundance of spolia was used to fortify the settlement of the Upper Town on the Kale with a new defensive wall.

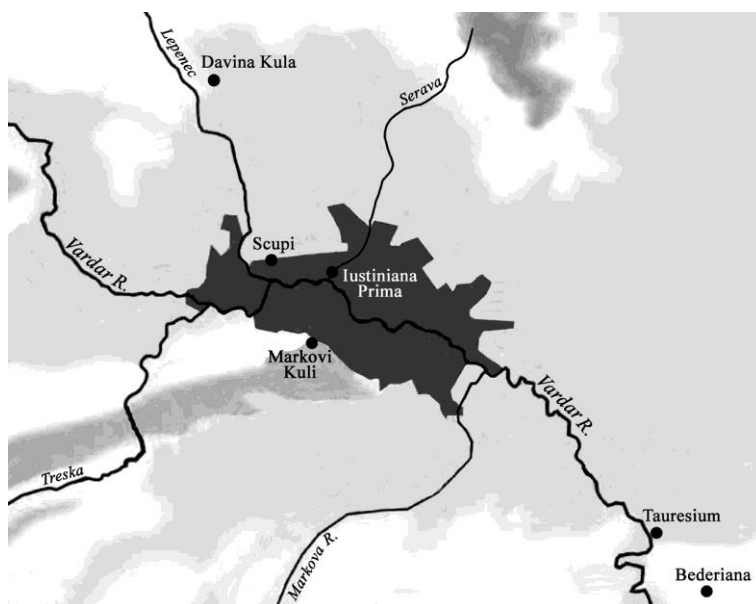


Fig. 12. Skopje with the position of Justiniana Prima, Tauresium and Bederiana

through the Kačanik Gorge, he fortified the stronghold at “Davina Kula” near the village of Čučer (Fig. 13).<sup>83</sup> In addition to this fortified position, Justinian ensured that the inhabitants of his native region had a place of refuge in times of imminent danger from the intensifying barbarian invasions by reconstructing the small watch-post on the summit of the imposing hill of Markovi Kuli, located on the easternmost spur of Mount Vodno (Fig. 14).<sup>84</sup> Archaeological research has confirmed that this fortification enjoyed a long history: it originated in the later fourth and fifth centuries as a modest castle and guard station, but in the sixth century it was expanded into a near-impregnable stronghold, defended by walls 1.60 m thick on the north and east and 2.20 m thick on the west and south, enclosing an area of about 5 ha together with a substantial fortified suburb on the east. The fortress remained in use through the tenth century, undergoing restoration, and survived until the Ottoman conquest, only being abandoned for military purposes toward the end of the sixteenth century. Supporting this conclusion are the two water cisterns on the acropolis, with a combined capacity of about 4,000 liters, cut into the rock and lined with mortar of exceptional workmanship, reinforced by specially fashioned semicircular ceramic tiles and further sealed with a thick mortar coating.

<sup>83</sup> Микулчиќ, 1982, 107-117; Лилчиќ, 2000, 30-40.

<sup>84</sup> Микулчиќ, 1999, 354; Evans, 1885, 138; Лилчиќ Адамс, 2001, 2 – 17, 13; Ристов, 2018a, 483-512.



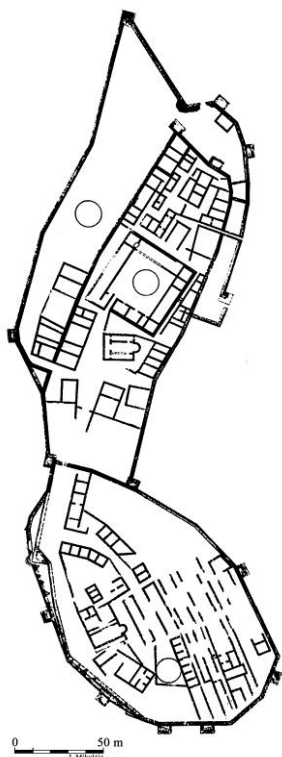


Fig. 13. Davina Kula,  
village of Chucher

The third defensive point in the system of Justiniana Prima is identified with Justinian's birthplace, Tauresium near the village of Taor, where long-term research has firmly established the presence of a defensive wall and a sixth-century garrison (Fig. 2).<sup>85</sup> Tauresium lies at the extreme southern margin of the Skopje Valley, controlling the southern access route that branches from the north–south transversal, crosses the Vardar at the village of Oreshani, and skirts the expanse of Lake Katlanovo. Smaller checkpoints were established along nearly all approaches into the central Skopje Valley and the city beneath the Kale Fortress.<sup>86</sup> This intense wave of construction activity in the sixth century within the Skopje region is striking, particularly since, in the empire's interior, most comparable settlements were still unfortified villages, only then receiving defensive walls during Justinian's vast program of military building. These fortified sites were garrisoned accordingly.<sup>87</sup> With such a defensive strategy, the city of Justiniana Prima was effectively secured. Yet historical developments soon under-

mined these efforts. Persistent incursions by the Avars and Slavs, especially in the latter half of the sixth century, severely weakened the Danubian limes. Under the reign of Maurice (582–602), the repeated invasions culminated in the capture of several key fortresses, after which the middle Danube frontier was irreparably breached,<sup>88</sup> and numerous fortified towns and villages lay exposed along the invaders' path southward.

The exact date of the city's destruction cannot yet be established, but it is certain that it was both plundered and laid waste. If the fortified settlement of Tauresium is taken as a benchmark – where the latest coins

<sup>85</sup> Ристов, 2019, 56–68.

<sup>86</sup> Микулчић, 1982, 54–117.

<sup>87</sup> Ciglenečki, 2009, 211–212.

<sup>88</sup> After the fall of Sirmium in 582, the Avars and Slavs captured Singidunum, Viminacium, and Augusta in 584. These conquests precipitated the collapse of the Danubian limes and opened the route into the central and southern Balkans (Острогорски Г., 1992, 108–109.; Баришић Ф., Рајковић М., Крекић Б., Томић Л., (Eds.), 1955, 97, 100–101, 105–107).



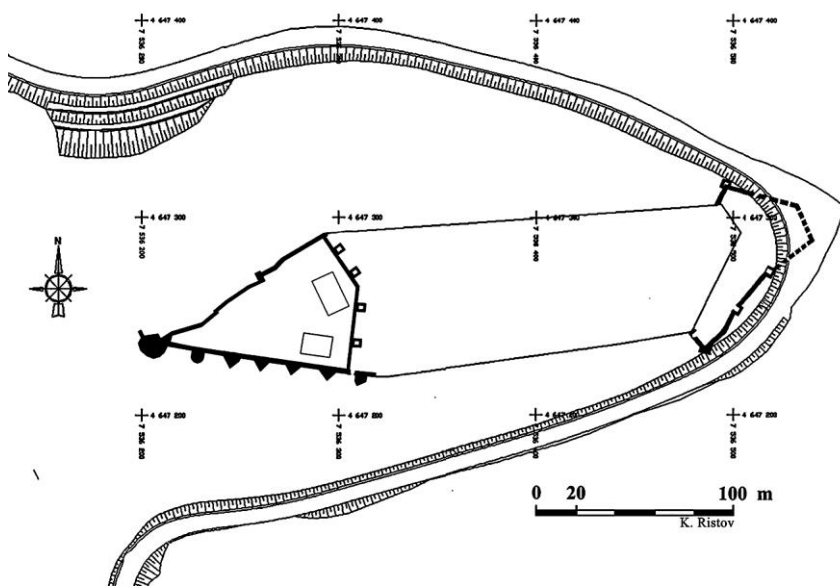


Fig. 14. Markovi Kuli (“Marko’s Towers”), Vodno, Skopje (excavated part)

discovered belong to Maurice, minted in 583/584<sup>89</sup> as a *terminus post quem* – and if we add the city’s last attestation in 602,<sup>90</sup> coinciding with the close of Maurice’s reign, then it follows that the life of Justiniana Prima had come to an end before the great Avar and Slav invasion, well in advance of the siege of Constantinople in 626.

After these catastrophic events and the destruction of the great city, the name of Scupi resurfaced toward the end of the sixth century (595), preserved through collective memory but rendered in the Slavic form “Skopis” by Theophylact Simokatta.<sup>91</sup> His reference concerns the plundering of the city by the Slavs, during which many inhabitants were taken captive. In 695, Scupi is mentioned again in the context of further Slavic conquests, at which point it was likely fully captured, as evidenced by the

<sup>89</sup> Баришић, Рајковић, Крекић, Томић, (Eds.), 1955, 108-109. Ристов., 2019, 250-251, Т. III, кат. бр. 116; It is noteworthy that after the earthquake of 518, the renewed phase of “urban” life in Skopje likewise terminates with a coin of Maurice, minted in the same year, found in a collective deposit in the central part of the city. (Јованова Л., Ончевска Тодоровска М., 2018, 29-30).

<sup>90</sup> Шукарова, 1994, 122-125.

<sup>91</sup> Баришић, Рајковић, Крекић, Томић, (Eds.), 1955, 117. It is highly probable that this term designates the city of Scupi, which, following the Ottoman conquest of the region, was transformed into Uskup (Turkish: Üsküp; Greek: Σκοπός), and in the modern period into Skopje.

large number of refugees from the Dardanian cities who fled to Thessaloniki in that same year.<sup>92</sup>

Nevertheless, after the fall and destruction of Justiniana Prima, the longer and more continuous development of Scupi once again took precedence. The new foundation became embedded within the cultural layers of the Old Skopje Bazaar and gradually passed into obscurity, although it left behind material remains of a scale and quality unusual for a provincial context. Procopius referred to the city only briefly, in highly laudatory terms, and in his *Secret History* (*Historia Arcana*) provided a more critical perspective on Justinian himself. The emperor's determination to establish a city that would function as both an administrative center and a statement of dynastic legitimacy did not survive the disruptions brought by the Avar and Slavic incursions. For them, the city's monumental architecture and wealth, rather than its imperial symbolism, would have been the most tangible features. Thus a short but significant historical episode came to an end, remembered in literary testimony but only partially traceable in the archaeological record. The remains gradually emerging from beneath the Old Skopje Bazaar may eventually clarify the city's true scale and character. Despite its brevity, Justiniana Prima's existence left a trace in local memory, where traditions and narratives concerning the city have been preserved to the present.

In conclusion, it should be emphasized that the history of the Old Skopje Bazaar presented here represents only a fragment of the long sequence of testimonies recorded by ancient authors, local inhabitants, and the many emissaries, travel writers, visitors, chroniclers, copyists, conquerors, and others who left their mark on the city along the Vardar River. At the same time, there remains a clear need for more systematic investigation of key points within the Bazaar, for renewed scrutiny of the written sources, and for a more rigorous categorization of the archaeological material. The aim of this contribution has been simply to draw attention to the problem and to encourage further sustained work on the unresolved question of the location of Justiniana Prima.

It must also be recalled that selectivity in the interpretation of both written and material evidence – usually in support of one or another hypothesis – has characterized scholarship on this issue since the early nineteenth century. Given the current state of archaeological research, such selectivity must be recognized as a serious obstacle, since it prevents historical

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<sup>92</sup> Evans, 1885, 140–141. Given this evidence, the question arises whether these references apply to the old Roman city or whether the splendid foundation of Justiniana Prima came to bear the same name. Archaeological research at Scupi for this period has revealed only modest structures of an urban character (Јованова ЈЛ., 2008, 66–69). It may therefore be concluded that the name Scupi remained deeply etched in the memory of ancient authors, overshadowing the newly built city, whose existence was both brief and fragile.

and archaeological inquiry alike from approaching a reliable conclusion. Ultimately, the location of Justiniana Prima, one of the last great enigmas of Balkan archaeology, can only be determined through the discovery of an appropriate inscription, the most secure form of evidence for identifying the city at either of the proposed sites. Until such a discovery is made, the arguments advanced on both sides, however logically reasoned, can shift scholarly opinion in one direction or the other but cannot serve as definitive proof in favor of either thesis.

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