

THE MEDIEVAL FORTRESS /BEGINNING OF 9TH – BEGINNING OF 11TH C./ NEAR THE VILLAGE OF OKORSH, SILISTRA PROVINCE

Abstract: The fortress near the village of Okorsh is situated on an tongue-shaped hill on the right shore of the dry valley Senebir, about 45 km south-west of Drastar (Silistra), 10 km south of the fortresses near Ruino and about 25 km west of the fortresses near Skala and Tsar Asen /Fig. 1/. It has the shape of an irregular pentagon, covering an area of over 45 decares. During archaeological excavations in the period 1997-1999 it was found that originally after the beginning of the 9th c. an earth fortification was situated here, defended from north-east with two ramparts with ditches in front of them. An Avar belt ornamentation, rings, adornments and a coin of emperor Basil I /Fig. 11, 18-20/ are evidences for inhabitation during the 9th c. After the beginning of the 10th c. the earth fortification is replaced by a stone fortress. Some ten dug-outs are investigated and dozens of adornments, crosses and ceramics from 10th c. are found in it /Fig. 12-13, 15-17/. The stone fortress is destroyed and burned down at the end of the 10th c. Dwellings, ceramics, a pecheneg cauldron, crosses, adornments and coins – follises class A-2 /Fig. 14/ shows that at the beginning of the 11th c. it is sparsely populated. The fortress is finally abandoned after the pecheneg invasion in 1036.

Keywords: Fortress, ramparts, Okorsh, ceramics.

The fortress near the village of Okorsh was first registered at the end of the 19th c. by K. Skorpil.¹ In the 1970's R. Rashev made sondage surveys on the fortification.² The fortress is situated on an tongue-shaped hill on the right shore of the dry valley Senebir, about 45 km south-west of Drastar (Silistra), 10 km south of the fortresses near Ruino and about 25 km west of the fortresses near Skala and Tsar Asen /Fig. 1/. It has the shape of an irregular pentagon, covering an area of over 4.5 hectares (Fig. 2). Its maximum length is about 250 m and its average width is about 175 m. Accessing the fortress from east and west is difficult, thus, there are no towers on these sides. Three rectangular towers and a deep ditch in front of them are registered at the northern wall. K. Skorpil described another ditch

* Silistra.

** Varna.

*** Silistra.

¹ К. Шкорпил. Некоторые из дорог Восточной Болгарии– ИРАИК, X /Абоба-Плиска/, София, 1905, с. 483.

² Р. Рашев. Старобългарски укрепления на Долния Дунав /VII-XI в./. Варна, 1982, с. 141, табл. XLVII-2, XLIX-6.

in front of the southern wall, which is almost refilled nowadays (Fig. 3). The walls are 3,10 – 3,50 m wide, without any fundament and built out of large and medium sized unprocessed stones glued together with mud. A remarkable fact discovered during our sondage is that the stones from the two faces at the southern wall are bigger and better made, while the emplecton is composed of smaller unprocessed stones and yellow clay /Fig. 4 and 5/. R. Rashev found a similar construction pattern during the sondage at the northern wall, but in the middle of the wall, in the emplecton, there were bigger and vertically arranged stones /Fig.6/. This reinforced the wall. A ditch is registered in front of the northern wall. The entrance is a simple break in the wall in the north-west corner, protected by tower № 1. A medieval settlement from the 9th – 10th c. is registered in the foot of the fortress, on the first terrace above flood level over the dry valley and it fits within the limits of a big ancient settlement from the 3rd – 4th c.

At first glance, in terms of its topography and fortification, the fortress near Okorsh is not essentially different from the rest of the defences in Dobruja, which are considered to have been built after the beginning of the 10th c.³ Between 1996 – 1998 large-scale rescue excavations were made, which complemented and in some aspects corrected our concept of the fortress /Fig. 2/. A second defense system was registered and investigated 165 m. north of the northern wall and it consisted of a ditch and a rampart, which restricted the access to the fortress from the line between the eastern and western bank of the dry valley /Fig. 7/.

Another (middle) defensive line was registered 95 m. south of the rampart and 70 m. north of the fortress. It is parallel to the other two lines. It includes a rampart lined with big and medium sized stones and a ditch 5 m. in front of it which is 2,85 m. wide and 1.60 m. deep /Fig. 8, 9, 10/. The rampart has two faces and it is 3.50 m. wide. The northern face is revetted with big semi-processed stones slightly dug in the thin humus layer. The southern face is composed of smaller stones dug in 0.10 m. below the medieval ground level. The emplecton consists of rammed earth together with many small stones. The evidence of conflagration suggests that the construction probably featured wooden elements as well.

The defensive system at Okorsh and more specifically the first two lines of ramparts and ditches are untypical of the stone fortresses of the *Skala - Tsar Asen* type.⁴ Earth fortifications were a well-known practice in Northeast Bulgaria in the 9th c.⁵, but there is no evidence that they continued to be built after the end of 9th – beginning of 10th c., the accepted period for the construction of the fortress at

³ **Р. Рашев.** Цит. Съч, с. 129-147; **Г. Атанасов.** Нов поглед към демографските и етнокултурните промени в Добруджа през Средновековието. В: Изследвания в чест на чл. кор. проф. Страшимир Димитров (=Studia balcanica, 23). София., 2001, с. 188-190.

⁴ **Р. Рашев.** Цит. Съч, с. 129-147; **В. Йотов, Г. Атанасов.** Скала. Крепост от X-XI в. до с. Кладенци, Тервелско. София, 1997, с. 5-20 ; **В. Димова.** Ранносредновековната крепост до с. Цар Асен, Силистренско. – Добруджа, 10, 1993, с. 54-74 ; **Г. Атанасов.** Нов поглед към демографските..., с. 188-190.

⁵ **Р. Рашев.** Цит. Съч, с. 90-125.

Okorsh and the neighbouring ones near Ruino and Tsar Asen⁶. If we follow the chronology suggested by R. Rashev we should assume that in the first half of the 9th c. the tongue-shaped hill near Okorsh was turned into an earth fortification with a ditch and rampart limiting the access from the north. The vertical cliffs at the east and west sides made any ramparts unnecessary there. At some point, most probably after the construction of the above mentioned rampart, a second one was constructed and revetted with stone and another ditch was dug. Unfortunately, there are not enough discovered artifact to make a precise estimate of the date of the construction and the burning down of the fortress. It should be noted that no ceramics or other archaeological materials were found in the space between the two ramparts. The absence of stones, of evidence of fire and of any kind of artifacts in the ditch in front of the rampart, suggests that most likely it was functional for only a short period. In contrast, ceramics from IX-X c. were found in the ditch of and behind the second rampart, the one revetted with stone. There are fallen stones and evidence of conflagration above the bottom of the ditch, which cuts into a rock. It was already mentioned that an intense fire accompanied the destruction of the rampart. In addition, between the burned rampart and the northern wall of the fortification there is evidence of habitation /ceramics, a small number of artifacts, animal bones/ but the sondage failed to register any permanent lodgings.

Still, we cannot be certain whether the second rampart was built simultaneously with or before the stone wall. If we follow the chronology of other investigated sites it appears that the fortress was built after the destruction and burning of the stone-revetted rampart. In terms of fortification it is analogous with other fortresses of this type including the defences at Ruino just 10 km away, which suggests that it was constructed after the beginning of the 10th c.⁷ In contrast to the other sites, this location seems to had been inhabited before the construction. Hints to that are the two ramparts as well as artifacts discovered during the systematic archeological excavations. Special attention should be paid to the fact that in the group of fortresses that are dated from the beginning of the 10th c. like Tsar Asen, Skala, Ruino, etc. the black-and-grey ceramics with polished stripes constitutes 4 – 5% of the total amount of ceramics found, while at Okorsh this figure is about twice as high – approximately 8% /Fig. 11/. Apart from the black-and-grey pots with tunnel-shaped handles typical for the 10th c., there are fragments of pots with a polished decoration in a net-like pattern /Fig. 11, j, k, m–r/ that are more characteristic of the 9th c.⁸ Vessels made of well-refined pink-and-yellow clay

⁶ **Р. Рашев.** Цит. Съч, с. 129-147; **Г. Атанасов, В. Йотов, Г. Засыпкина, Н. Руссев.** Исследования городища Руйно-Картал кале /предварительно сообщение/. - *Stratum plus*, 5, 2000, с. 97-107; **В. Димова.** Цит. съч., с. 54-62.

⁷ **Р. Рашев.** Цит. Съч, с. 141-144; **Г. Атанасов, В. Йотов, Г. Засыпкина, Н. Руссев.** Цит. Съч, с. 97-100.

⁸ **Л. Дончева-Петкова.** Българска битова керамика през ранното средновековие. София, 1977, с. 121-123.

covered with red angoba were also used in the 9th c. /Fig 13 g/.⁹ More special attention should be paid to two fragments of a pail and a fragment of a cauldron (rather a pot) with handles from the inside from type I (under D. Dimitrov), which is widespread during the 9th c.¹⁰ The most certain and indisputable find from the 9th c. is an Avar belt ornamentation with the so called “propeller pattern” covered with engraved vegetative ornaments – multileaf symmetrically arranged palmettos. /Fig. 11, e; 18/. It was discovered 15 m away from the northern wall of the fortress at a depth of 0.60 m in a cultural layer beneath the floor of a ground dwelling with ceramics from the 9th – 10th c. /Fig 12/. Direct parallels of this belt ornamentation in form, size and decorative pattern have been found in Late Avar necropolises. According to the correlation of to F. Daim¹¹, E. Garam¹² and the observations of St. Stanilov (specifically on the example from Okorsh)¹³ this type of ornamentation is dated to the second half of the 9th c., with a credible terminus ante quem of the end of the 9th c. Our guess is that it got in Okorsh not later than the middle or, at most, the second half of the 9th c.

Similarly to the case with the rest of the Early Medieval fortresses in the interior of Northeast Bulgaria, dozens of adornments have been found in Okorsh – rings, earrings, applications, medallions, encolpia, etc. However, in contrast with the neighbouring fortresses, three open rings were found here and they are characteristic of sites ranging from the first half of the 9th c. until the very beginning of the 10th c.¹⁴ /Fig. 11, b-d; 20/. A specimen similar to the first ring from Okorsh was discovered during the regular archaeological excavations and it has analogues from Pliska and the necropoleis at Izvorul and Obarsia Noia dated from the end of the 8th c. and the first half of the 9th c.

The second ring from Okorsh has an X-shaped cross on its plate. An analogous specimen from the Old Bulgarian necropolis Sultana is dated to the end of the 8th c. – the first half of the 9th c. and another from Stare Mesto (Czech Republic) to the middle – end of the 9th c. To the second half of the 9th c. are dated the analogues of the third ring from Okorsh in Seborice, Stare Mesto, Boleradice

⁹ **Я. Димитров.** Към характеристиката на светлоглинената и червеноглинената керамика на бързо колело от VIII-IX в. в Плиска. - В/ Проблеми на прабългарската история и култура, 4-2, София, 2007, с. 61-93.

¹⁰ **Д. Димитров.** Номадска керамика от Североизточна България. – ИНМВ, XI, 1975, с. 37-40; **Л. Дончева-петкова.** Средновековни съдове с вътрешни уши. – Археология, 4, 1971, с. 32-34.

¹¹ **F. Daim.** Das awarische Gräberfeld von Leobersdorf. - Studien zur Archäologie der Awaren, 3, Wien 1987, , S. 402, Abb. 29, Taf. 124.

¹² **E. Garam.** Das awarische Gräberfeld von Tiszafüred (527-829). Gemeteries of the Avar Period (567-829) im Hungary. Budapest, 1995, S. 201, 244, Abb. 102, 146, 254

¹³ **Ст. Станилов.** Художествения метал на българското ханство на Дунав /7-9 век/. София, 2006, с. 272, обр. 3-5.

¹⁴ **П. Георгиев.** Мартириумът в Плиска и началото на християнството в България. София, 1993, с. 32-33, обр. 29-30; **Г. Атанасов, В. Григоров.** Метални накити от ранносредновековни крепости в Южна Добруджа. – ИНМВ, 38-39, 2002-2003, с. 334-336, 364, табл. 8, 1-7.

and Brno-Melomeriste. In fact such rings are missing in the dated to the 10th c. horizons and complexes from Skala, Tsar Asen, Ruino, Odartsi, Capidava, Dinogetia, Păcuil lui Soare, etc. That is another argument in favour of inhabitation in Okorsh during the second half – the end of the 9th c.

Crosses – enkolpions and medallions are found in Okorsh. A specimen among the medallions is usually dated back to the 10th c., but according to some parallels it can be placed in the second half of the 9th c.¹⁵ /Fig. 11, i/.

At last on the ground of a dug-out № 7 /excavation 7/ a coin of Basil I is found /Fig. 11, a; 19/. It is remarkable that in the neighbouring fortresses of the *Skala-Tsar Asen* type, coins from the 10th c. are also to be found, including folises of Leo VI, but never coins from the second half of the 9th c.

Habitation at the fortress near Okorsh is most intensive in the 10th c. This is attested in the most common material – ceramics. The bulk of the ceramics are pots with engraved decoration of parallel lines running through the whole body or the upper half combined with various ornaments concentrated under the neck – wave-like or slanting lines engraved using a comb /Fig. 13/.¹⁶ Glazed ceramics made on a slow potter's wheel, characteristic of the fortifications from the first half of the 10th c., were also found at the fortress.

The vast majority of the numerous adornments from Okorsh are the ones that are characteristic of the 10th c. For example, 6 out of the 12 rings are from types discovered in complexes from the 10th c. /Fig. 12 i-l/.¹⁷ 35 buckles and applications from belts and straps also belong to the 10th c. /Fig. 12 a-h/.¹⁸ The picture is the same with the earrings. All of the 4 specimens are dated to the 10th c. /Fig. 12 m-j/.¹⁹ The recapitulation with the religious items is similar – 6 medallions and 4 encolpion crosses have direct analogues from the 10th c. /Fig. 12, p; 22; 23/.²⁰ Indirect evidence that there was a temple at Okorsh as well came from the discovery of a fragment from a processional cross /Fig. 12, o; 21/ that was identical to a cross from the 10th c. from Church №2 in the neighbouring fortification in

¹⁵ **Г. Атанасов.** Християнският Дуросторум - Дръстър. Доростолската епархия през късната античност и средновековието (IV-XIV в.). История, археология, култура, изкуство. Варна - Велико Търново, 2007, с. 206-208, табл. LVIII-LIX; **Г. Атанасов, Ст. Дончева.** Раннесредновековные свинцовые медальоны с изображениями крестов эпохи Первого Болгарского царства (IX-XI вв.) – *Stratum plus*, 1, 2010.

¹⁶ **В. Йотов, Г. Атанасов.** Цит. съч., с. 64-66, табл. XLII-XLIV; **Д. Димитров.** Керамиката от ранносредновековната крепост до с. Цар Асен, Силистренско. – *Добруджа*, 10, 1993, с. 78-81.

¹⁷ **Г. Атанасов, В. Григоров.** Цит. съч., с. 351-354, табл. 11-13.

¹⁸ **Ст. Станилов.** Старобългарски ремъчни украси от Националния археологически музей. – *Разкопки и проучвания*, XXII. София, 1991, с. 10 сл. ; **В. Плетньов, В. Павлова.** Ранносредновековни ремъчни апликации във Варнския археологически музей. – *Известия на народния Музей – Варна /ИНМВ/*, 30-31, 1994-1995, с. 24-108

¹⁹ **Г. Атанасов, В. Григоров.** Цит. съч., с. 338 - 342, табл. IV-VI.

²⁰ **Г. Атанасов.** Християнският Дуросторум – Дръстър..., с. 212-215, табл. LXI, LXII.

Skala.²¹ At the same time the iron pen /Fig. 12, r/ and the segment of a spindle with an inscription in Cyrillic ИЛНН /to Ilina/ /Fig. 12, n; 24/ show literacy among some of the inhabitants. To this most intensive period in the history of the fortification must be ascribed almost all the discovered rectangular dug outs with a stone stove at one of the corners /Fig. 15-17/. The dominant means of livelihood, agriculture is testified in the collective find of 11 agricultural tools from the 10th c. – ploughshares and coulter from ploughs, metalware from spades, axes, mattocks, etc.²² In addition, they are evidence of the practicing of vine-growing and gardening. There is also a battle axe in the collective find. Dated to the 10th c. are also an iron battle axe and a pike spearhead – two isolated finds /Fig. 13, k; 25; 26/.

Almost all of the dwellings from the 10th c. were destroyed in a strong fire. The closed archaeological complexes and specially the ceramic and the metal findings define the time of the arson – probably the second half-the end of the 10th c. Actually no ceramics and findings from the 11th c. were registered in the destroyed by fire dwellings. Some ten fragments of pottery made on a fast potter's wheel /Fig. 14, p, q/, pots made on a slow wheel with simple ornaments only on the neck /Fig. 14, k-m/, a fragment of a petcheneg copper /Fig. 14, n, o/, a ring /Fig. 14, c,d/²³ three crosses-enkolpions /Fig. 14, e-h/ with direct analogues from the beginning of the 11th c.²⁴ and finally an anonymous Byzantine folis class A2 /Fig. 14, a, b/ show the decrease of the life after the end of the 10th c. and the beginning of the 11th c.

Conclusion

The stone-built fortress near Okorsh is very much alike the rest of the fortresses from 10th c. in the interior of Dobrudja – the walls of unprocessed stones glued together with mud are almost without fundament, with square towers /bastions/ and a ditch in front of the outer faces. On the other hand the existence of earth ramparts with ditches in Okorsh connects the fortress with the earlier defenses from the 9th c.

The materials found in Okorsh are predominantly from the 10th c. but in contrast to the other fortresses the rate of the black-polished ceramic is twice as high. Some of the small metal works can rather be dated to the 9th c. than to the 10th c. At last coins of Basil I from the second half of the 9th c. are found here.

The accepted inception date for the medieval stone fortresses in the interior of Dobrudja and in the Ludogorie is the beginning of the 10th c. Almost all of them were built at desolate and naturally protected places. The researches in the recent decade generally confirmed that chronology, but at the same time some

²¹ В. Йотов, Г. Атанасов. Цит. съч. с. 101, табл. CI; Г. Атанасов. Християнският Дуросторум – Дръстър..., с. 202-203, табл. LV-153, 154.

²² Г. Атанасов. Клады земледельческих орудий из Южной Добруджи /X-начало XI вв/. – Stratum plus, 5, 2000, с. 183-208.

²³ Г. Атанасов, В. Григоров. Цит. съч. с. 357, табл. XV, 14,15.

²⁴ Г. Атанасов. Християнският Дуросторум – Дръстър..., с. 303-304, табл. LXXIV-LXXV.

distinguishing features are found in Okorsh. In contrast to the rest of the defenses, the fortress in Okorsh is situated within the borders of an earth fortification from the second half of the 9th c.

The relatively limited amount of artifacts and ceramics from the 9th c. suggests that the first earth rampart was probably a shelter for the neighbouring protobulgarian population which had inhabited the nearest settlements one of which is situated at the foot of the opposite bank.

Okorsh is the first example in Dobrudja and Northeast Bulgaria for a topographic and cultural continuity between an earth fortification from the 9th c. and a stone fortress from the 10th c. 14 earth fortifications of the Kladenci type are registered in that vast region, but none of them was transformed into stone fortress.²⁵ Besides that 30 stone fortresses of the *Skala-Tsar Asen* type, which were built after the beginning and in the first half of the 10th c. are registered and studied, but none of them is connected with an earthen defensive system from the 9th c.²⁶ Okorsh is the first example for the mechanism of development and change of the fortification in the First Bulgarian Kingdom.

In contrast to the fortresses in Skala, Tsar Asen, Odarci, Balik, etc., the stone defense near Ruino was definitely not restored after the capture of Dobrudja by Byzantium in the end of the X c. and once and for all after the year 1000.²⁷ Here, in contrast to the above-mentioned fortresses, the ceramics and the artifacts from the 11th c. are insignificant percent. Unlike Tsar Asen and Skala, coins from the 11th c. (except for two Byzantium folises) are missing in Ruino, as well as seals of Byzantium dignitaries. At last unlike Skala, Tsar Asen, Kapidava, Oltina, etc. repairs of the walls in the XI c. are not defined here. In this point of view the fortress near Okorsh is similar to the defenses near Ruino²⁸, Preselenci and Vasilevo. The reason is that unlike the fortresses near Danube /Drastar, Pakuiul lui Soare, Oltina, Kapidava and others/ and these on the main road Preslav-Pliska-Drastar (Skala, Tsar Asen, Omarchevo ?) Byzantine garrisons wasn't stationed here in the end of the X – the beginning of the XI c. Probably after the destruction of the fortress near Okorsh in the last decades of the X c. (according to written sources and excavations in the neighbouring fortress of Ruino it happens during the campaign of the Varagian prince of Rus Svetoslav, between 969-971) small number of inhabitants still lived around the southern wall. This population had not enough potential for rebuilding the fortification. The two fragments of petchenegs cauldrons and the two folises from class A-2 suggests that here, similar to the other fortresses in the interior of Dobrudja, the life ends with the big pecheneg's invasion in 1036.

²⁵ **Р. Рашев.** Цит. съч., с. 117-125.

²⁶ **Р. Рашев.** Цит. съч., с. 126 etc.

²⁷ **Г. Атанасов.** Нов поглед към демографските ...с. 185-214; **G. Atanasov.** De nouveau pour la date initiale de folies Byzantines class „B”. Numismatic and Sphragistic Contribution to History of the Western Black Sea Coast. - Acta Musei Varnaensis, 2. Варна, 2004, p. 289-298.

²⁸ **Г. Атанасов, В. Йотов, Г. Засыпкина, Н. Русев.** Цит. съч., с. 97-107.



Fig. 1. Fortresses from 10th c. in Dobrudja.

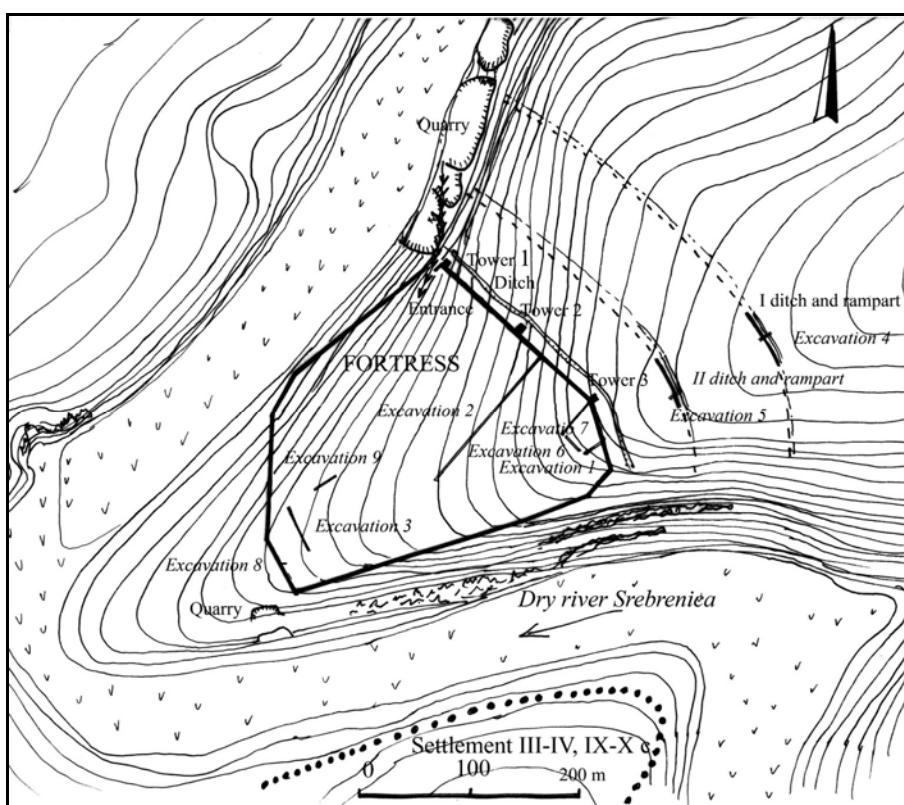


Fig. 2. Plan of the fortress according to G. Atanasov.

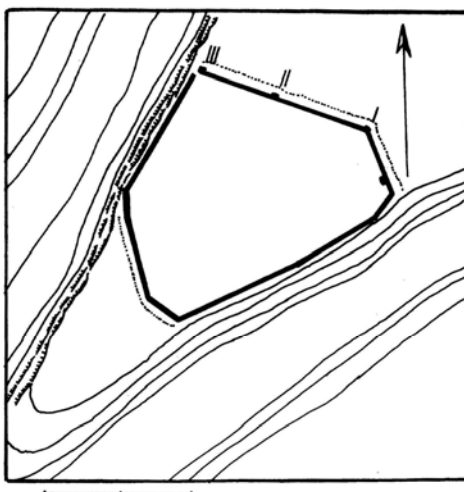


Fig. 3. Plan of the fortress according to K. Skorpil and R. Rashev.

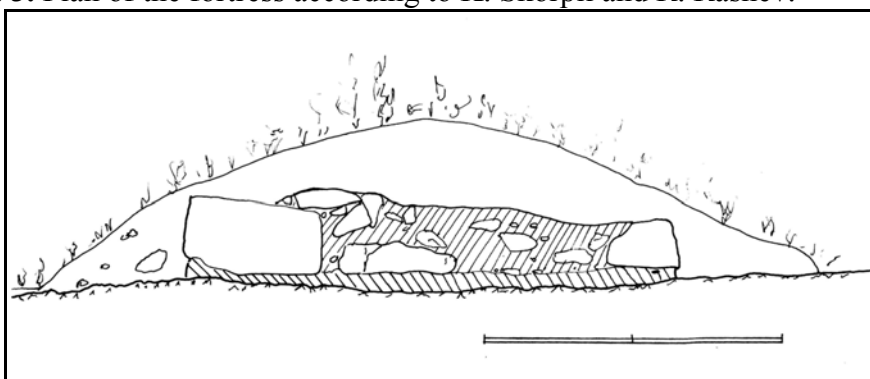


Fig. 4. Section of the southern wall (excavation 8).



Fig. 5. Section of the southern wall.

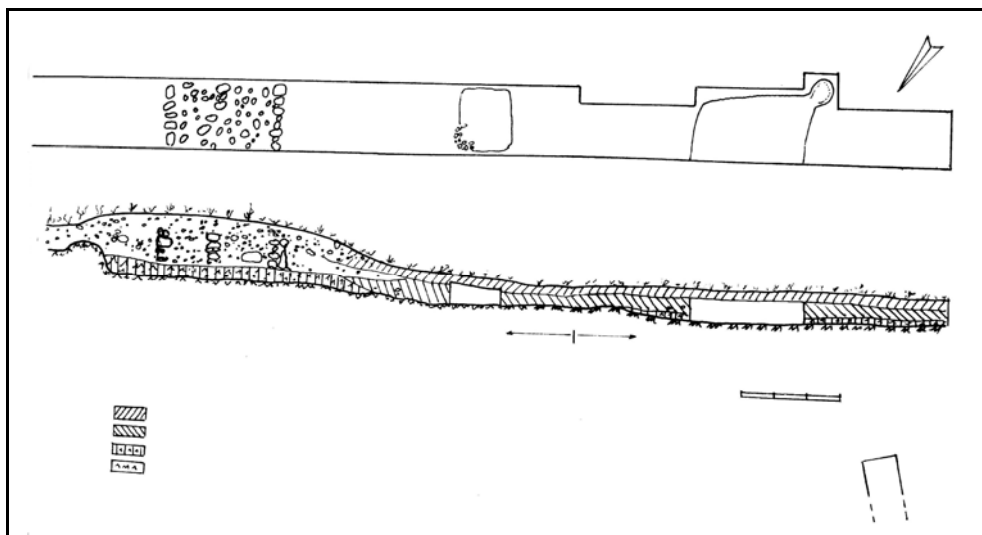


Fig. 6. Excavation 1.

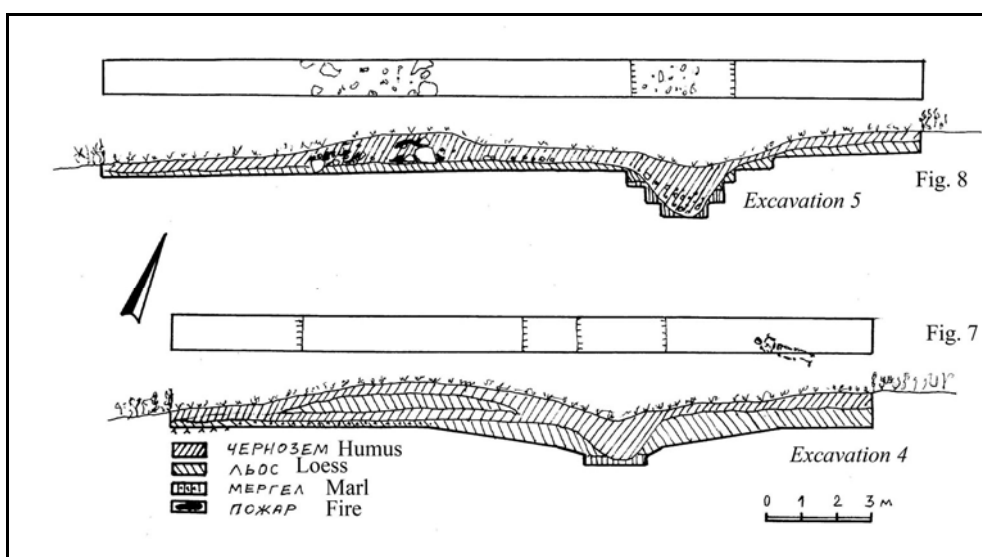


Fig. 7., 8. Excavation 4; Excavation 5.



Fig. 9. Excavation 5.



Fig. 10. Excavation 5.

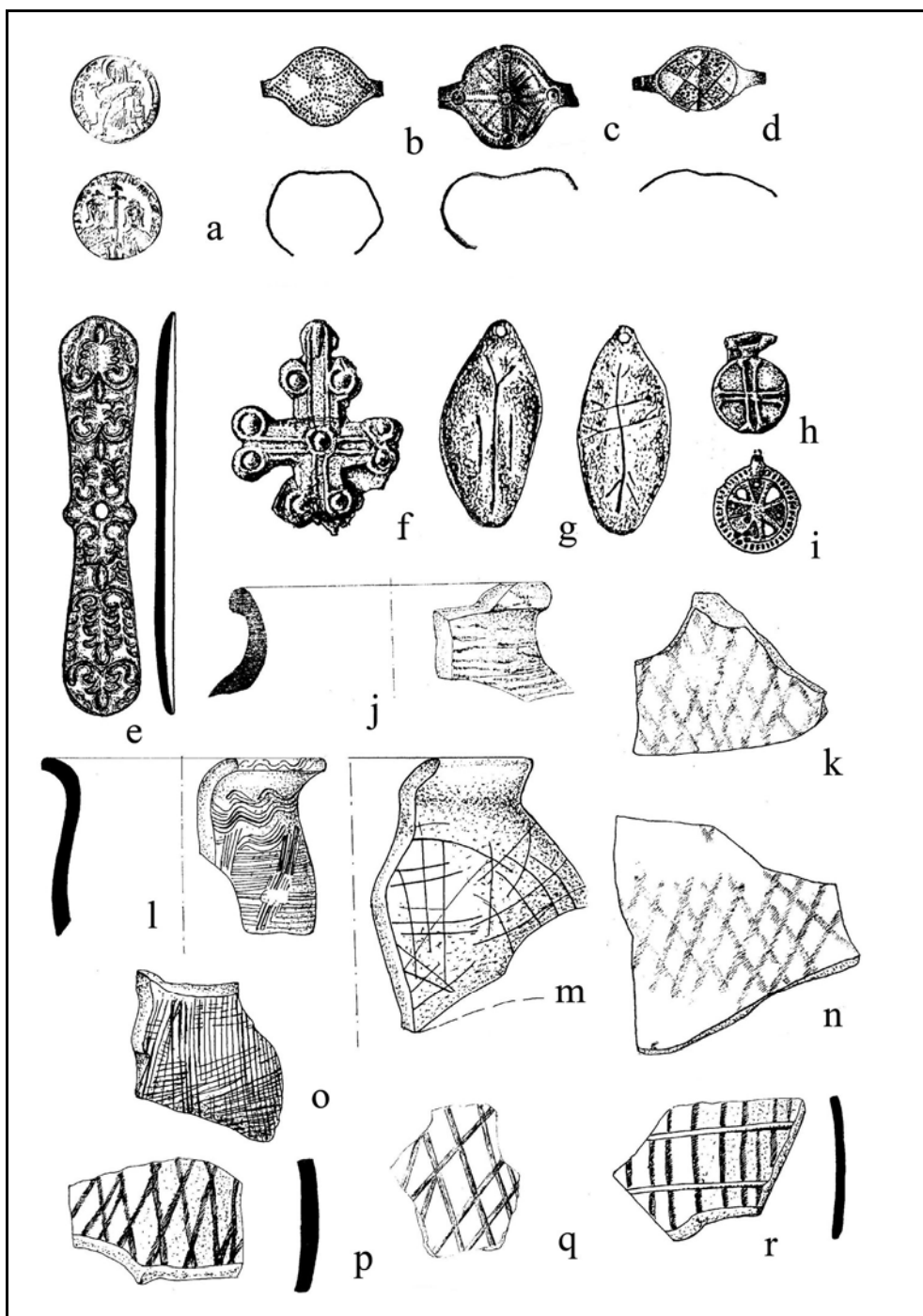


Fig. 11. Finds and ceramics from 9th c.

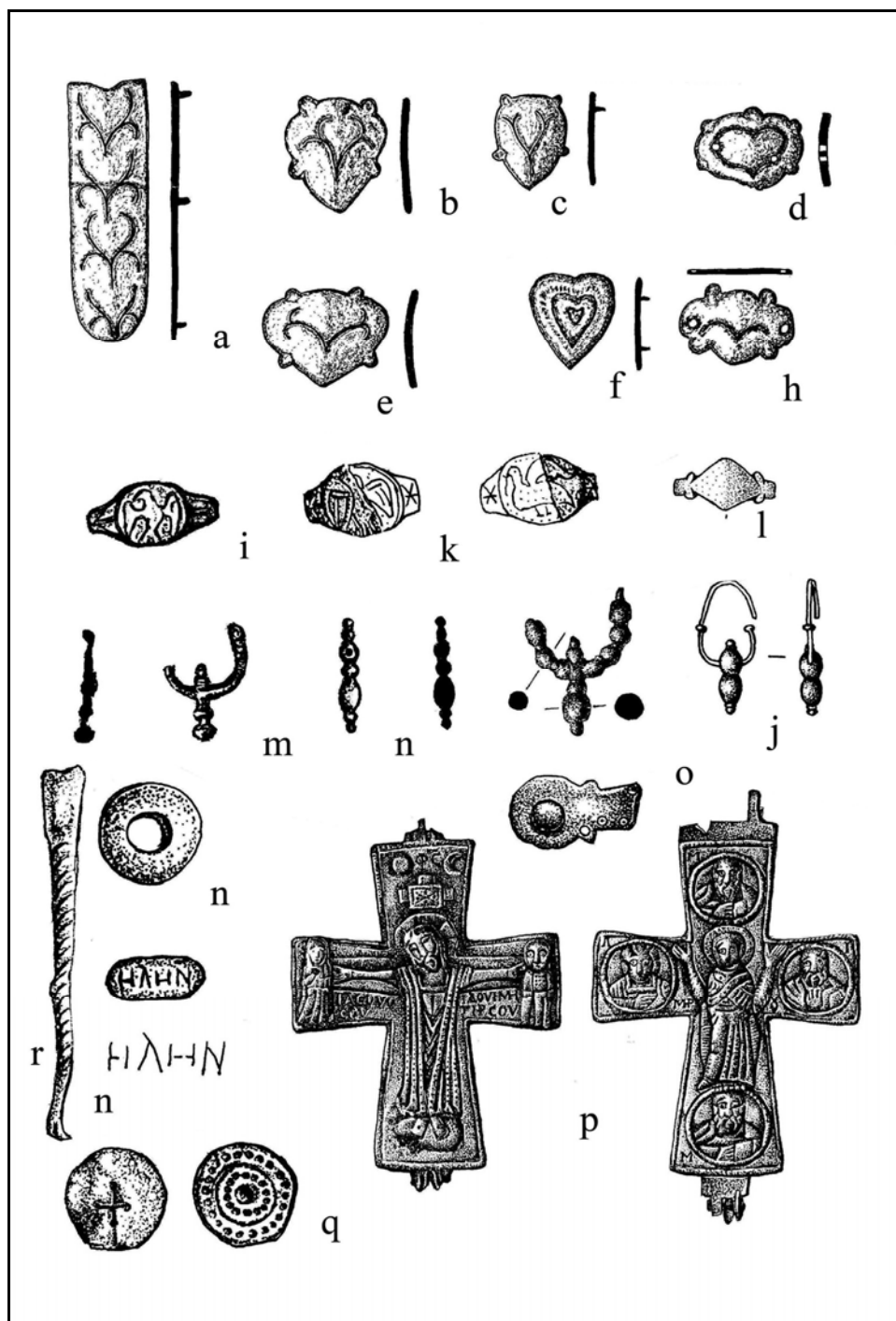


Fig. 12. Finds from 10th c.

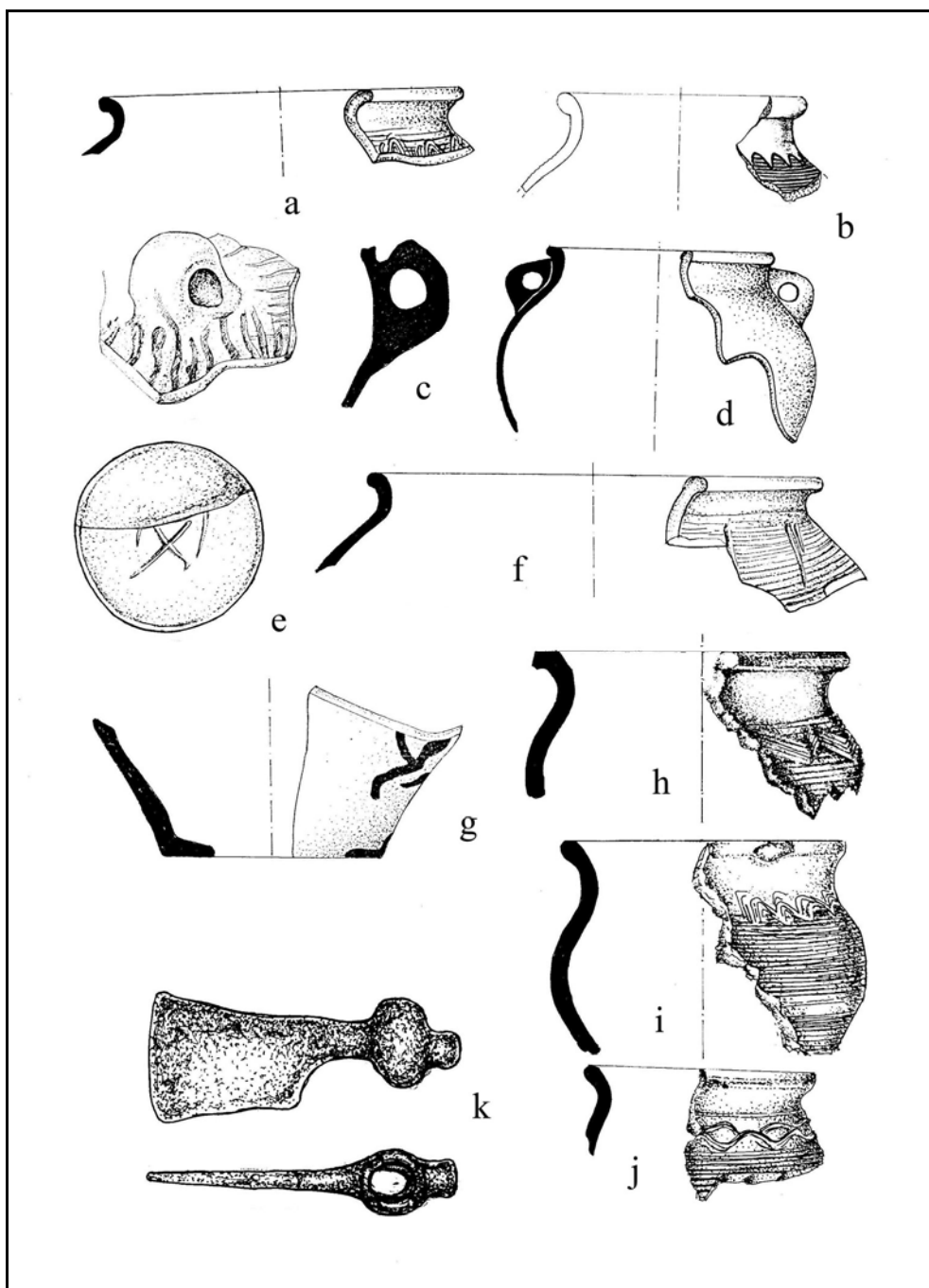


Fig. 13. Ceramics from 10th c.

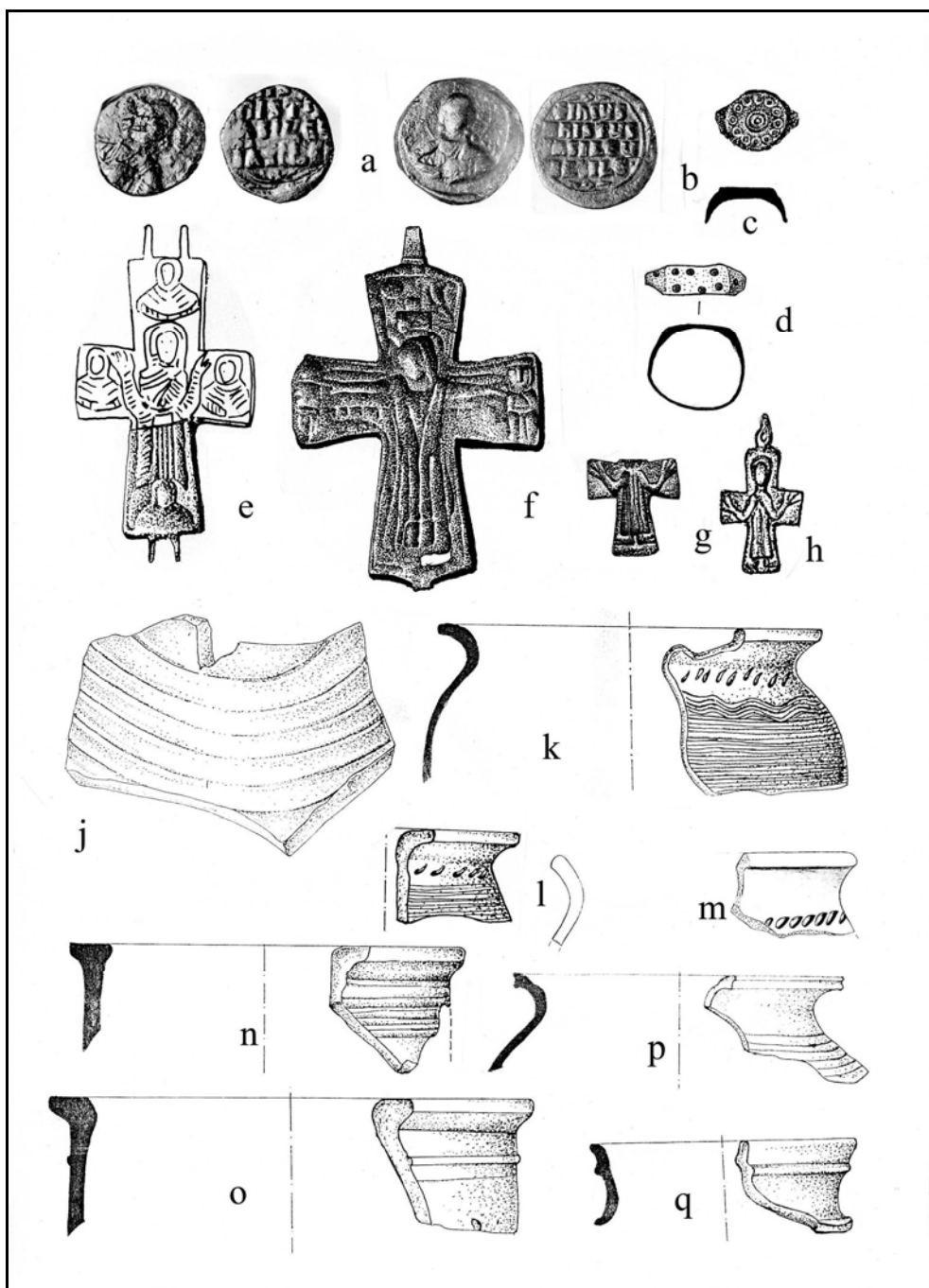


Fig. 14. Finds and ceramics from 11th c.

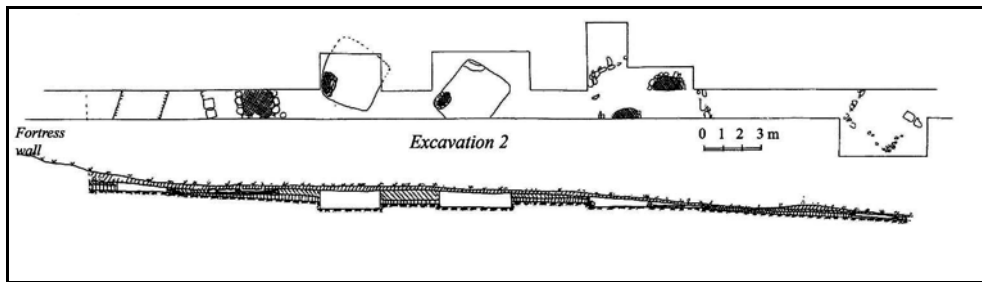


Fig. 15. Excavation 2.

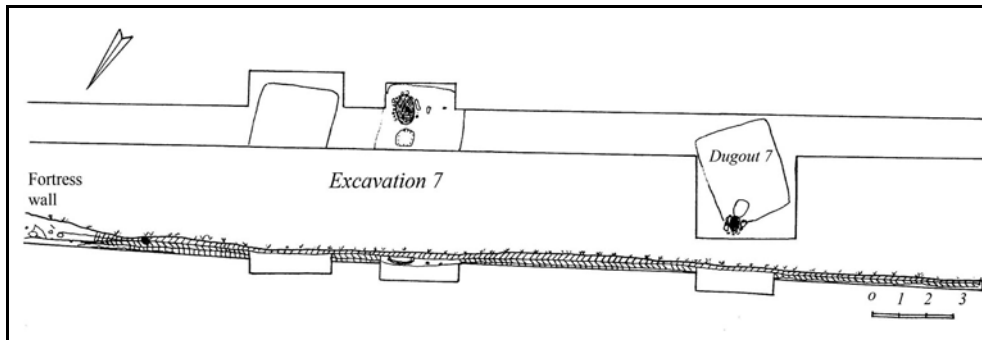


Fig. 16. Excavation 7.

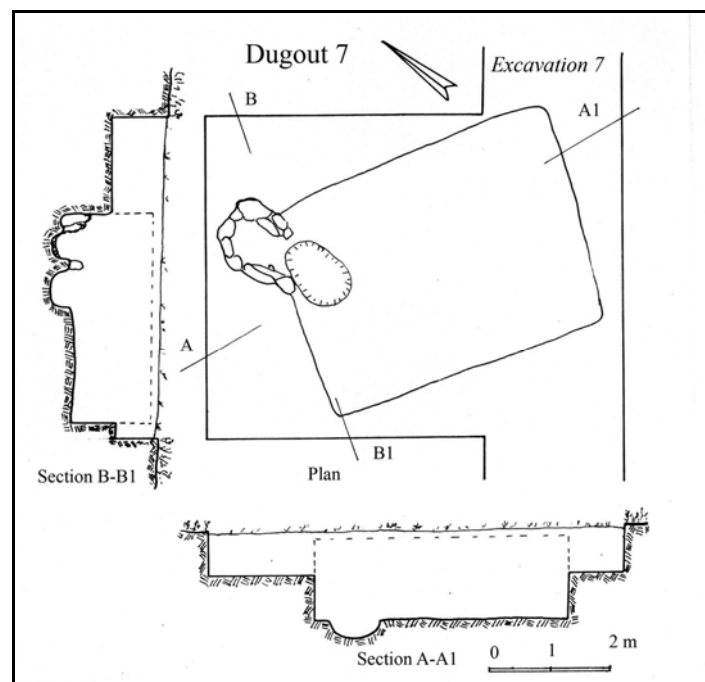


Fig. 17. Dugout 7 in excavation 7.



Fig. 18. Avar belt ornamentation. the beginning of 9th c.



Fig. 19. Gilded coin of Basil I (867–886). averse and reverse.



Fig. 20. Ring. 9th c.



Fig. 21. Processional cross fragment.



Fig. 22. Semi-manufactured lead cross. 9th - 10th c.



Fig. 23. Cross-encolpion. 10th c.



Fig. 24. Spindle with an inscription is Cyrillic. 10th c.



Fig. 25. Battle axe. 10th c.

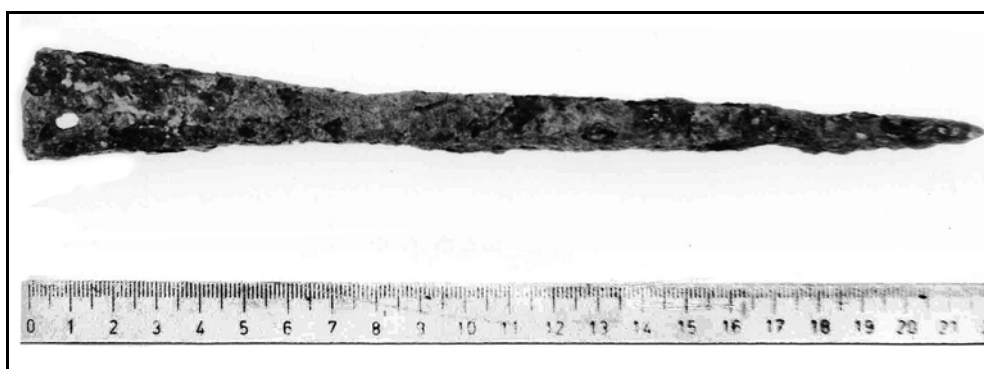


Fig. 26. Spearhead. 10th c.