Late Antique Mesembria:
(Re)Shaping of Public Spaces

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Abstract: From the 5th c. BC to the 9th c. AD three defensive walls were built in Mesambria between the slope of the Young Karangatian marine terrace, bordered by a steep abrasion-type shore, and the underwater terrace which corresponds to the Phanagorian regression around the city-peninsula. They defended the Classical and Hellenistic city of Mesambria, the Roman city, and the Early Byzantine Mesembria. The course of the fortifications did not follow the antique coastal line, but was rather attempted to stay close to the base of the peninsular slope. In the Early Hellenistic period on the terraced northwestern slope of the peninsula, south of the supporting wall a temple *in antae* was built dedicated to Zeus Hyperdexios. During the construction of the Northwestern Early Christian basilica, the pagan buildings were destroyed. In the center of the Late antique Mesambrian entrance square the two main urban streets meet; traditionally they connect the country roads with the central and the harbour zone. Between them, to the southwest of the temple of Demeter, is another basilica. The street running along the north of the basilica leads to the central urban area, where the basilica St. Sophia was probably built in the *temenos* of Apollo’s temple. From the trade and administrative center along the orthogonal, west-east oriented street network one reaches the highest eastern part of the peninsular terrace. The medieval church St. George the Oldest inherited topographically an Early Christian basilica. Another basilica was built in the northeastern urban zone, with adjoining *necropoleis* from the 7th, 12th and 13th–14th c. AD.

Key words: urban design, urban planning, architecture, public spaces, liturgical architectural environment.

Approach

The political municipality is typical for the antique civilization. Its material medium is the city. The planning and spatial composition, infrastructure, architectural types and ensembles are formed according to its specific rules and norms. They provide conditions for the realization of its functions, while giving it a unique face and monumentality. The material remnants of the Roman and Early Christian culture that survived throughout the years preserved the memory of their creators and act as mediators between generations and cultures and the material code of their traditions and development. In this regard, the public spaces of Late antique and Early Christian Mesembria are understood as a material representation of a city’s facts of life, in a period when the fight for physical survival and spiritual ascension to God dominated.

The study focuses on the historical topography of the public urban spaces, which were shaped again into a different spatial form and used for the same or other public purposes during Late and Post-Antiquity in Mesembria: the fortifying devices used to protect and decorate that town center and dependent on the withdrawing coast of abradant type; historically formed street network, defined by the topography of the
city-peninsula; emblematic Christian Holy Heights – the basilicas, which reshaped the traditional sacred *topoi*.

The mapped archaeological and historical evidence reveal a “moving” spatial development and transformations of streets, plots and buildings. As the town was neither systematically razed, nor rebuilt in the Greek-Roman period, certain elements (streets, plots, public buildings) of the “plan units” survived and must have been re-used. Thus, if the street lay-out did not evolve too drastically, still following the lines of the Hellenistic and Roman grid-pattern, then other sites may have survived, and a reconstruction of the public physiognomy of the city inside the walls is thus possible.

**Utilized Public Topoi and Artefacts**

**City walls**

“... to be beautiful as well as militarily adequate...”

(Arist. *Pol.* 7.11.1331a10)

The west fortifications of Mesambria were meant to reinforce the peninsula, vulnerable from the isthmus connecting it to the land, and to protect the Northern and Southern Bays of Nesebăr where the harbours of the *polis* were situated (fig. 1). From the 5th c. BC to the 9th c. AD three defensive walls were built. They defended the Classical and Hellenistic city of Mesambria in the 5th–1st c. BC, the Roman city in 1st–4th c. AD, and the Early Byzantine Mesambria in the 5th–8th c. AD from the west (fig. 2).

The ruins of the pre-Roman fortification have been revealed under the Roman and the Early Byzantine walls, either in front of their curtain walls or crossed by them (Venedikov 1980, 37-39, fig. 17) (fig. 3). The Western gate was to the north of the northern end of the Early Byzantine gate which reused its place (Venedikov 1980, 38, 39). During the construction of the new fortifications in the Roman and Early Byzantine period, the pre-Roman wall was preserved slightly above its substructure for the additional reinforcement of the ground (Venedikov et al. 1969, 37; Venedikov 1980, 51, 52, 53). North and south of the entrance three rows from the Roman fortified wall have been preserved. Rectangular blocks from the pre-Roman fortifica-

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**Fig. 1.** Nesebăr Peninsula during the third quarter of the 20th c.
(from the photo archive of L. Ognenova-Marinova)
tions were being reused (Venedikov et al. 1969, 88, 91, 94; Venedikov 1969a, 125, 126; Venedikov 1969b, 155). The walkway of the Roman entrance was preserved in Late Antiquity and the new pentagonal gate towers are built on the foundations of Roman, probably rectangular, towers. The construction of the Roman walls dates to Marcus Aurelius’ rule (Venedikov 1969a, 130, 131, 144-145, 148; Venedikov et al. 1969, 39-40, 46). After the collapse of the town walls, an Early Byzantine curtain in opus mixtum was built around the second half of the 5th c. AD (Venedikov 1969b, 155-156, 159). The ditch for the substructure of the wall touches the eastern face of the pre-Roman curtain. Some of its dismantled blocks were reused (Venedikov et al. 1969, 85). The pentagonal gate towers and the two circular towers were added in the corners of the new wall. The wall expanded to the east of the Roman foundations (Venedikov et al. 1969, 83; Venedikov 1969a, 144-145, 149, 150-151). Repair work and reconstruction of already existing towers had been carried out, and perhaps two solid interval towers had been built before the destruction of the fortress by the Bulgars in AD 812 (Venedikov 1969a, 152-154; 1969b, 158).

The ruins of the fortifications, which once protected the peninsula from attacks by sea, were discovered between the shelf terrace at 4-5 m and the sea terrace 12 m above sea level, where the Classical and Late antique city is situated. The tracing of the fortifications did not follow

Fig. 2. Western fortifications: 1 Antiquity; 2 Late Antiquity; 3 Middle ages; 4 present-day city quarters; 5 coastline of the 20th c., Baltic System; 6 present-day strengthening of the seashore (after Venedikov 1980; Шкорпил А 457; Кожухаров 2003 and H. Preshlenov)
the ancient coastal line, but rather was attempted to be close to the base of the peninsular slope (fig. 4).

The wall in *opus mixtum* was built on the northeastern shore of the peninsula and in the bay north of the present-day coastline (Венедиков 1960, 9; Велков / Кехлибаров 1961, 5-7; Огненова 1975, 43, 44; Ognenova-Marinova 1980, 98). It was a continuance of the Late antique wall in *opus mixtum*, building up on land the pre-Roman wall (Venedikov 1980, 26-37, fig. 13; Огненова 1975, 44; Ognenova-Marinova 1980, 105, fig. 14) (fig. 4/1; fig. 5.1). The northern end of the wall was probably accessible for shallow draught boats, but their basic purpose was related to the defense of the peninsula by land. According to bathymetric data, by the end of the Early Byzantine period at least 87 m of these walls had been built on land. They can be defined as *diateichismata*, meant to block the skirting of the fortress from the north. The coastline west and east of the Early Byzantine *diateichisma* was also included in the fortified urban zone. A fortification wall was built in *opus mixtum*. Access to the newly defended territory was via an arched doorway in the *diateichisma* (Venedikov 1980, 26-27, 33, 73, fig. 7, 10, 13, 14, 16 and 19).
A supporting terrace wall was constructed at the end of the 5th – the beginning of the 4th c. BC of irregular pseudo-isodomic masonry east of the pre-Roman diateichisma along the 1st and the 2nd isohypse. Its construction overcomes the displacement and supports the slope of the peninsula also in Late Antiquity (Venedikov 1980, 41, 51, 67, 74) (fig. 4/2; fig. 5/2).

Solid walls and towers were built of stone, brick or opus mixtum masonry on the upper part of the cliff slope. Obviously they mark the permanent course of the city defenses during Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages along the northeastern cliff slope of the peninsula (Щорпил А 457; Venedikov 1980; Огненова-Маринова 1980; НЕК Юнеско A / 1984; Sasselov 2005 and H. Preshlenov) (fig. 4/3).

Hypothetically, it is possible that some of the fortification facilities along the northern shore of Nesebar Peninsula were a result of medieval repair works and reconstruction of the Early Byzantine defences, established at other fortress sections during the 6th–7th c., in AD 879, 1064-1067, and in the 14th c. Reconstruction a fundamentis of the Late antique walls has not been recorded (Venedikov 1969а, 158, 160, 162; Прешленов 2011, 313-314).

In the southeastern territorial waters of the peninsula the sections of the three ancient fortifications was investigated. Between the fifth and the sixth isobath the crescent-line wall, built of large roughly processed blocks leveled by oak timber, was associated with the Thracian presence on the peninsula before the Dorian settlement (НЕК Юнеско A 1977, 6, фиг. 8-13, прил. [1]; НЕК Юнеско A 1978, 17-21, фиг. 9-14, прил. 1 и 2; Огненова-Маринова 1980, 28; Огненова-Маринова 1990, 128, Tav. VI) (fig. 4/4; fig. 6). A section of the Classical wall was discovered above the 4th isobath, northeast of the crescent-line wall (fig. 4/5; fig. 7). It is built mainly of rectangular-shaped blocks (НЕК Юнеско A 1984, 9-10, фиг. 1, 6 and 9-14;
прил. 1 and 3; Трифонова 1985, 50, 53). A few pieces of the Late antique curtain in opus mixtum were discovered west of the Classical wall, brought down in an arc-like way at a depth of 2.50 m (fig. 4/6; fig. 8). Part of the substructure of the wall section has visible traces of reinforcement by piles and a wooden grille (НЕК Юнеско А 1979, 11, фиг. 4-7, прил. 1, 3 and 4).

The southwestern fortification has similar chronological and topographical characteristics to that of the northwestern coastline of the peninsula. During the end of the 5th – the beginning of the 4th c. BC the front part of the peninsular terrace in the direction of the 11th isohypse, was fortified by a wall of coarse stone blocks (Кияшкина / Димова 2007, 312-313, обр. 2) (fig. 4/7). To the northwest, a section of a “zigzag (?) line-terrace-wall” was built during the second half of the 4th– the first half of the 3rd c. BC of gray stone blocks (Огненова-Маринова et al. 1986, 80) (fig. 4/8; fig. 9). A part of the foundations of a thick wall between the 7th and the 8th isohypse was registered to the northeast (unpublished observation by D. Kozhuharov in 1993) (fig. 4/9). A part of the wall with the same orientation, which belonged to the Hellenistic...
defenses, was discovered in front of the foundation. It is built of coarse limestone blocks (Кишкина / Димова 2007, 313, обр. 3) (fig. 4/7).

During the construction of the Late antique fortified wall in opus mixtum during the 5th c. AD the new fortification was shifted southwards at the foot of the peninsular slope between the 1st and the 5th iso-hypse. During the Middle Ages and the 19th-20th c. the approach toward the southern harbour topographically inherited the passage space of the Greco-Roman and Early Byzantine harbour gate (fig. 4/10; fig. 10). The Mesambrian section shares some similarities with the Theodosian sea-walls in Constantinople (Sasselov 2005, 127, 129-132, 154, 156, fig. 9). The masonry corresponds to the walls in opus mixtum used at the large-scale fortification works in Mesambria from the second half of the 4th to the end of the 6th c. BC, as well as to the repair and reconstruction works till the end of the 9th c. AD (Venedikov 1969a, 126-127, 138; Venedikov 1980, 34-35, 36). Perhaps the "sea"-walls follow closely the Late antique coastline and join the western fortified wall by its southern round tower. In the beginning of the 20th c. to the southwest of the bay the ruins of the southern diateichisma were still visible (Шкорпил A 165/457, 16, 17). Similar to the northern diateichisma, it hindered movement along the walls toward the Southern harbour gate.

The medieval Mesambria was politically and militarily contested by Bulgars and Byzantines during the 9th, the 11th, and the 14th c. AD, only reconstructions and repairs were made and some new towers were added to the already existing Late antique defensive system. After the capture of the city by the Turks in the 15th c., the fortress was left without maintenance and only partial repairs were made (Venedikov 1969a, 160-162; Ognenova-Marinova 1969, 96-97, 102, 106-107; Ognenova 1988, 573-574).

Public places
“… The city – this is the people …”
(Thuc. 7.77.7)

In conformity with the urban planning traditions of east Mediterranean poleis centers erected on steep slopes, some buildings in Mesambria were constructed on artificially formed terraces (fig. 11). In the Early Hellenistic period on the terraced northwestern slope of the peninsula, south of the supporting wall, a temple in antae was built in Doric order dedicated to Zeus Hyperdexios (Ognenova-Marinova 1994, 141; Velkov 2005, # 17) (fig. 4/11; fig. 12). Perhaps during the construction of the Northwestern Christian basilica the temple of Zeus was destroyed. Two rows of blocks from the southern wall of the temple were used to fill the substructure of the apse of the basilica (Прешленов forthcoming/A).

Epigraphic, iconographic and semantic evidence supports the existence of a heroon in this urban zone; inside the tombs the founders of the polis were honored as heroes, and during the Late Hellenistic period heroized citizens were buried here (Мапасов 2004, 20, 25) (fig. 4/11). During the construction of the Northwestern Early Christian basilica the Hellenistic-Roman buildings were destroyed, probably in the beginning of the 5th c. AD. The initial construction stage of the basilica, based on stratigraphic data, took place from the end of the 4th till the last quarter of the 7th c. AD. Fragments of marble altar plates
were reused as spolia during its reconstruction in the third quarter of the 7th c. AD when it was transformed into a cross-dome church. Among its ruins in the 10th–11th c. a small cemetery was located. In the construction of one grave, a frieze block with metopes and triglyphs from the Zeus temple was reused. In the nave of the abandoned basilica, a single-cell church was erected (Кожухаров 2003, 372, 373, 374; Прешленов forthcoming/B).

Fig. 9. Southwestern pre-Roman supporting wall (photo: H. Preshlenov)

Fig. 10. Byzantine fortifications by the Southern harbour (photo: H. Preshlenov)

Fig. 11. Western topographic profile of the Nesebăr Peninsula: 1 present-day deepening sea bottom; 2 supposed coastline, 5th c. BC; 3 present-day quay territory; 4 southern diateichisma; 5 coastline, 20th c.; 6 Late antique round tower; 7 Late antique portico, supposed location; 8 floor level of the Early Christian basilica, reconstruction; 9 early Christian crypt, staircase; 10 apse of the Northwestern basilica, 5th – beginning of the 9th c. AD; 11 temple of Zeus Hyperdexios, Northern wall; 12 supporting wall, 5th – 4th c. BC; 13 Late antique fortified wall; 14 present-day strengthening of the seashore (by H. Preshlenov)
A cruciform vaulted single-chamber subterranean building, fragments of marble sarcophagi and a reliquary were discovered in the altar space of the basilica (Чимбулева 1991, 76; Кожухаров 2003, 372) (fig. 11; fig. 13). The 10th-century Byzantine Synaxarion of the Church of Constantinople contains data about a legendary martyrium of St. Irene in Mesambria, which attracted many pilgrims in the 4th c. AD (Soustal 1991, 355; Дражева 2002, 206). Undoubtedly the building in the altar area of the Northwestern Early Christian basilica served as a crypt which was preserved during the Middle Ages.

The approach from the south towards the narthex of the basilica, which inherited topographically the square area by the heroon and Zeus’ temenos, was through the northern arc of the oval entrance to the city square vestibulum (measurment by H. Preshlenov; for the latest excavations, see Божкова / Кияшкина 2015, 294-297) (fig. 11; fig. 4/12). A street paved with stone slabs was built during the second half of the 12th c. over the ruins of the northern arc of the portico (Чимбулеva 1990, 191).

In the center of the Mesambrian entrance square the two main urban streets meet; traditionally they connect the country roads with the central and the harbour zone (Иванчев 1957, 49). Between them, to the southwest of the temple of Demeter, under the foundations of the demolished mosque, is another basilica from the 5th–6th c. AD (fig. 4/13). A more plausible identification is the basilica St. Apostles Petrus and Paulus, which is topographically localized under the mosque (Огненова 1963; Ognenova-Marinova 2005b, 51, 53; Прешленов forthcoming/B).

The street delineating the basilica from the north leads to the central urban area. A few limestone and andesitic blocks formed a pavement, under which parts of fluted Doric columns were found (unpublished investigation of D. Kozhuharov and S. Dimova in 2002). The basilica St. Sophia was probably built in the area of the temenos of Apollo’s temple, where some of the lapidary copies of the city decrees have been preserved (IGBulg I 307 bis, 308 bis, 308 undecies, 312) (fig. 4/14). An inscription in the basilica’s foundations contained the names of Ἀδα and Δουτουβεη, whose liberation in the 4th–3rd c.
BC was mediated by the priest of Apollo. In conformity with common practice, the inscription with their names was put on some of the walls of the sanctuary (Velkov 2005, # 25). The single-apse basilica was built between the first half and the beginning of the last quarter of the 5th c. AD (Bojadžiev 1962, 322-323, 333-334) (fig. 14). The initial plan was preserved during the renovation of the church which was burnt down after AD 618, according to the interpretation of two graffiti from the 2nd period of the basilica (Stanev 2009, 87-89, 94, 95, 99). The preserved part of the walls was built upon, the colonnades were replaced by mortar-and-tile pillars, and the atrium was abandoned (Bojadžiev 1962, 324-325, 327, 328, 330, 332, 334-335; Бояджиев 1996, 13). During the renovation, materials from the demolished church were reused. The pilasters at the eastern wall were walled in the small pillar of the initial chancel (Bojadžiev 1962, 325, 327; Станев 2007, 62-65) and also a marble cornice with the inscribed Psalm 101:2, paleographically dated to the 4th–5th c. (Velkov 1992, 20) or to the 5th–6th c. AD (Beševliev 1964, # 166) (fig. 15). St. Sophia was a liturgical church at least until the 17th c., since fragments of its wall painting from that time have been preserved (Шкорпил А 165/734, 2, 3, 5-8, 10-12; Bojadžiev 1962, 334-335).

From the trade and administrative center along the orthogonal, west-east oriented street network one reaches the highest eastern part of the peninsular terrace (Младенова 1986, 34). The church St. George the Oldest was located in the southeastern urban zone (fig. 4/15; fig. 15).
A commemorative inscription announces its renovation in 1704 (Κωνσταντινίδης 1945, 97-98). During its demolition in 1958, spolia from an Early Christian church were discovered inside its walls – parts of marble columns and bases, a capital (6th c. AD), part of a chancel, a brick with a stamp of Justinian I, three Early Christian inscriptions and graves from the 5th–6th c. AD under its foundations, as well as from the 13th–14th and 18th–19th c. AD (Ognenova-Marinova 2005a, 12-14).
The medieval church inherited topographically an Early Christian basilica. It was built in a sparsely built-up area in the Roman period, over a stratum of ruins of Hellenistic houses and furnaces. With the abrasion of the cliff slope of the peninsular terrace, the remains of the Early Christian basilica collapsed into the sea.

Another Early Christian basilica was built in the northeastern urban zone, on the territory of the Monastery St. Virgin Eleusa (Прешленов 2009, 197-198, 199) (fig. 4/16; fig. 16). Along with its adjoining necropoleis from the 7th, 12th and 13th–14th c. AD, it was located between the 9th and 10th isohypse of the leveled front part of the peninsular terrace. Chronologically related to its initial construction are the graves in the necropolis west of the monastery which date to the first half of the 7th c. AD – cist-graves constructed of and covered with stone slabs, and simple pit graves, some surrounded by stones (Божкова et al. 2007, 250; 2008, 307) and perhaps the vaulted and tombs at the narthex (Велков А 83/65, 32-35).

The two renovations of the church date before the 15th c. AD (fig. 17). Traces of the first along the southern wall and at the southern section of the narthex can be related to the Iconoclastic period in Byzantium after AD 754 or to the conquest of the city by the Bulgars in AD 812 (Velkov 1946, 67; Прешленов 2009, 198-199). During the second change in the basilica, most spaces between the mortar-and-tile pillars in the nave were blocked up and obviously the southern aisle was most often used for liturgies. In stone graves at the northern aisle and the nave coins of the Komnenian dynasty and pottery from the 13th–14th c. AD were discovered (Velkov 1946, 68; Велков А 83/65, 35, 37, 42, 44-45). The changes in the composition-plan were not executed later than AD 1341/1342, whence the donation inscription about the renovation of the monastery-church dates. After the Turkish conquest, the church was burnt down. As a result of the withdrawal of the cliff, which continued during the Middle Ages, the northern nave of the monastery basilica St. Virgin Eleusa collapsed into the sea. The increase of the sea level from the mid-2nd millennium and the earthquakes of 1688, 1778 and 1855 seemingly prevented attempts at restoration of the liturgy in the abandoned church as well (Прешленов 2009, 199-200; Preshlenov 2008, 54-55).

**Conclusion**

The (Late) antique structures of Mesambria are located on the Young Karangatian marine terrace, bordered by a steep abrasion-type shore. The city plan and spatial composition inherit the compact structure of the antique polis, which traditionally was oriented along a west-east axis, and was laid out regardless of the topographical conditions.

The Mesambrian fortifications also take advantage of the characteristics of the local topography. Destoructions of the "sea"-walls are observed between the slope of the marine and the underwater terrace, which corresponds to the Phanagorian regression. The course of the curtain wall often sought the proximity of the cliff slope, which is also justified by the step-by-step rise in the sea level.

The topography of the city-peninsula determines the direction of the city traffic. The importance of the two main axes in the west-east and north-south directions remains till the end of Late Antiquity and later. They traditionally connected the country roads, the central, the
northern and the southern harbour zones where the main gates of the polis were situated.

The composition of public buildings and squares along the main directions of the street network are also preserved. The elongated peninsula with degraded marine erosion cliffs, as well as the older urban pattern, probably forced the Roman-Byzantine town planners to use grids of different orientations. The morphological structure of this city network is succeeded by Nessebar’s contemporary one, which is similar to that of every historically formed city and combines elements of rectangular-linear, axial, and free network.

As the town was neither systematically razed nor rebuilt, certain public elements of the city have survived. A “vestibule-type” square is constructed by the Western gate. It is tangent to the Northwestern basilica to the south, which takes up the space of a former pagan heroon and a temple of Zeus Hyperdexios. The oval of the square’s portico is a vanishing point of the three radiating streets. The southern one runs along the city reservoir and leads to the main harbour through the Southern gate. The central one passes by the basilica known as the Holy Apostles and connects with the southeastern residential area. The northern street reaches the central square with the Episcopal basilica, which takes up the space of a former temple of Apollo and the Southeastern basilica that was brought down into the sea in the Middle Ages. Short branches divide the traffic to the north – one leads to the northern harbour, between the basilica, succeeded by the church St. John the Baptist, and the public bath, and another – to the monastery basilica St. Virgin Eleusa, whose northern nave collapsed in the sea in the Middle Ages.

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