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CHAPTER 24

TSCHATYRDAG, AN UNKNOWN ROMAN SENTRY POST ON THE SOUTHERN CRIMEAN COAST?

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Abstract: Since 1997, researchers from the Institute of Archaeology, Warsaw University have been finding traces of Roman military presence in Crimea. Excavations have helped to discover several structures connected with the presence of Roman troops on the north coast of the Black Sea. The first Roman military installation to be discovered and excavated in the Crimea was the ruins of a fort on the Ai-Todor cape (ancient Charax). In the neighborhood of the fort, a barbarian burial ground was found which revealed a burying tradition atypical of the Crimea: cremation in common, the deposition of ashes in amphorae and equipping graves with iron tools and pieces of weaponry. Such a burial site is practically unique in the Crimea. The most similar typologically, and that has been excavated and described in print is the necropolis at Tschatyrdag. It is important to establish whether people from the barbarian garrison were buried near a fort which had been built by Roman soldiers. An initial survey of Tschatyrdag in the spring of 2008 produced several sections of stone embankments and many single well dressed stone blocks. In the course of fieldwork in the summer of 2008, the best preserved part of the defensive wall with the straight line of the wall face was found.

Research so far suggests that the fortification was built in first centuries of AD. Further excavations may produce more information.

Keywords: Ai-Todor, Crimea, Charax, Defensive walls, Limes, Limes Tauricus, Roman army, Roman fortifications, Tschatyrdag (Chatyrdag)

The ruin of a fort on the Ai-Todor cape (ancient Charax) was the first Roman military installation in Crimea (Figures 1 and 2) to be discovered and excavated (Rostovtzev 1900; Rostowcew 1902). A double enclosure wall made of irregular and mostly huge stone blocks was uncovered on the site. It was built on an irregular plan and the stones were laid without mortar (Novichenkov and Novichenkova 2002). The stone blocks on the face were hewn in order to obtain more or less even surface. Near the fort, just outside the walls, a barbarian burial ground

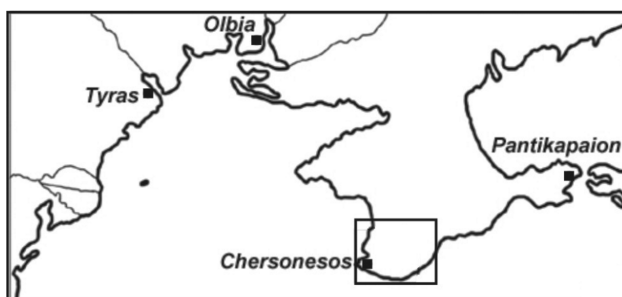


Figure 1. Black Sea. North Coastline - map (P. Zakrzewski)



Figure 2. South-West Crimea - map (P. Zakrzewski)

was found which revealed burying tradition untypical of Crimea: cremation in common, the deposition of ashes in amphorae and equipping graves with iron tools and pieces of weaponry (Blavatskii 1951; Orlov 1987). Such a burial

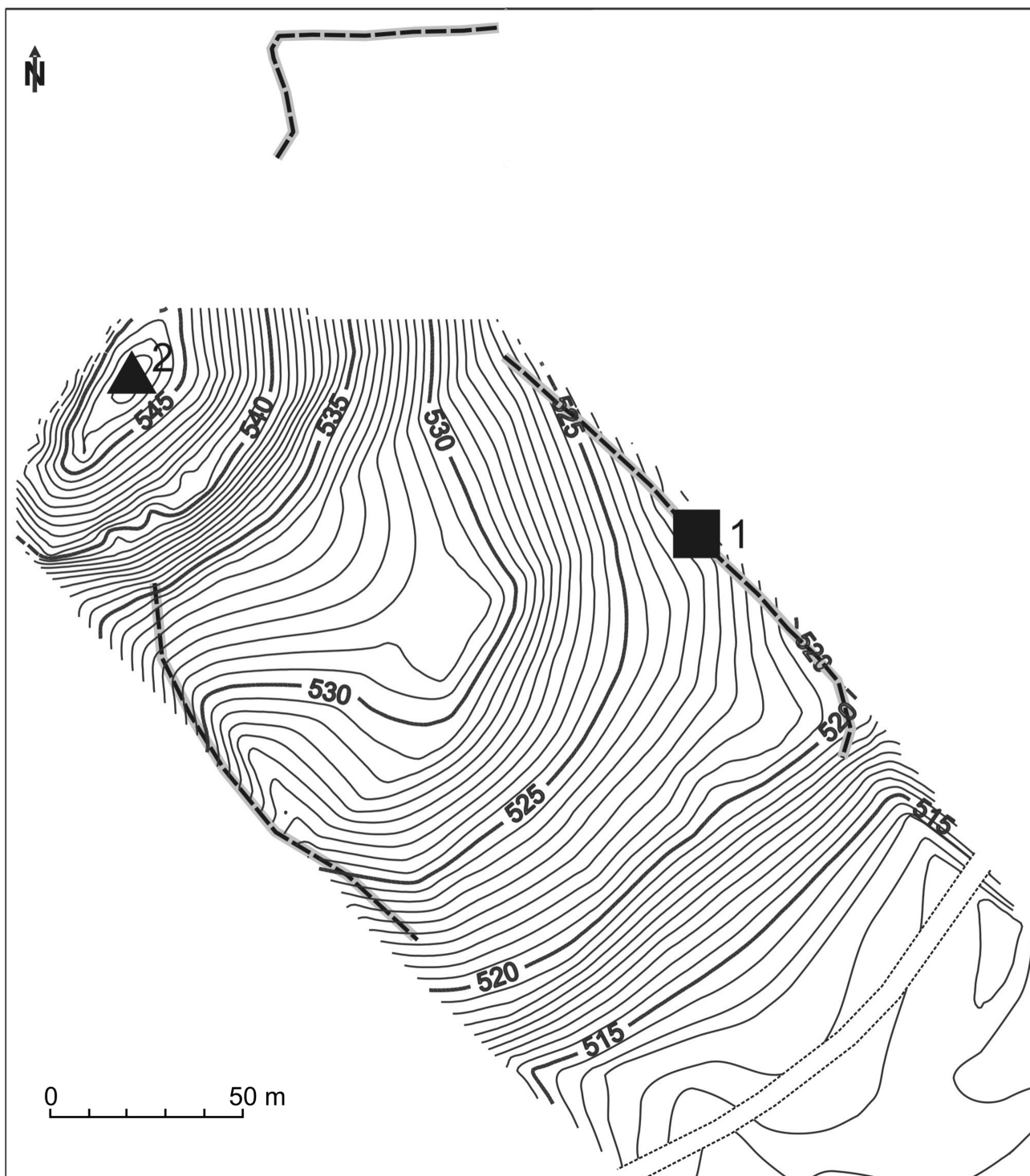


Figure 3. Tschatyrdag - contour map of the site with overlapping preserved sections of stone embankments. Point 1 - point of exposition face of the wall. Point 2 - the presumed highest point where fortification was located (P. Zakrzewski)

site is practically unique in the Crimea. The most similar typologically, and that has been excavated and described in print is the necropolis at Tschatyrdag (Mys *et al.*, 2006).

It is important to establish whether the proximity of the burial site to the fort on the Ai-Todor cape is purely coincidental. According to some publications, people of the barbarian garrison which was brought in the 3rd century AD after the Roman troops had been evacuated were buried there (Zubar' 1998, 148-150). If this was the

case, then the presence of a necropolis similar to the one on the Ai-Todor cape in a place where no traces of a Roman military fort are known should encourage a search for such fortifications. Therefore, a research was initiated near the only burial ground whose resemblance to the necropolis on Cape Ai-Todor is unquestionable. The initial survey on Tschatyrdag site took place in March and at the end of August and the beginning of September 2008. No extensive excavation work was done. The research comprised surface survey, laser tachometer measurements, aerial photography

from a paraplane and a kite (spring 2008) and clearing the discovered relics of grass and leaves and photographing them (summer 2008).

The research helped to find several sections of stone embankments near the burial ground. These structures do not form a self-contained whole. They differ in height and width, as well as in the size of stone blocks visible on their surface. These differences led to distinguishing three types of stone embankments:

Type 1. The most massive stone embankments made of massive stone blocks, some of which bear the signs of hewing. They are characterised by massive stone blocks on the face and angular gravel in the core.

Type 2. Less visible embankments made almost entirely of medium sized blocks. They required much less building material than the embankments of the first type.

Type 3. Clearly visible embankments, yet less massive than those of the Type 1. They are built of large stone blocks, fine crushed stone and soil. The embankments of this kind run along the local asphalt road.

This diversity of embankments may be interpreted as follows: Type 3 embankments came into existence in the second half of the 20th century, when the ground was being levelled for the asphalt road, while Type 2 embankments are probably present-day field boundaries. Both their size and the material employed indicate that it did not cost much effort to build them, which is not at all true of Type 1 embankments. Regardless of their date, it must have taken a huge effort to build them, including the organisation of the work and the coordination of people.

The extraordinary distribution of the building material in the embankment, i.e. the facing of huge stone blocks and the core of rock aggregate, may suggest that this stone structure was destroyed. The total destruction of a stone embankment laid without mortar might have been due to a large earthquake. Big earthquakes occur in this part of Crimea. In one of them a village was completely destroyed when the local Demerdzi mountain fell apart leaving a vast rock debris field on its slope. Assuming a similar situation on Tschatyrdag, the wall was built of huge stone blocks for the face and angular gravel mixed with soil for the core. Due to a large seismic shock the wall faces could have fallen outwards and inwards, the core of the wall got loose and marked the original alignment of the wall.

So far three stretches of the embankments have been classified as belonging to Type 1. Because of their location they may have been fragments of the original enclosure wall. In all three cases they were found in places easy to defend, as the potential enemy would have to attack up the slope (Figures 3 and 5). Most of the embankments of Types 2 and 3 lack this important feature.



Figure 4. One of the biggest stone blocks visible on surface (M. Bogacki)



Figure 5. Fragment of preserved wall - aerial view (M. Bogacki)

One difficulty in the study of the supposed defensive wall is the predominance of stones with no traces of working. Only some of the blocks have one or two faces dressed. The stones were probably hewn only when it was necessary to make the face of the wall even. Single well dressed stones scattered round the preserved structure, however, support the idea that the embankments are the remains of a defensive wall (Figure 7). These blocks are big and one of them was even prepared to be part of an obtuse angle construction (Figure 4).

In the course of new fieldwork season in summer 2008, the best preserved part of the defensive wall was distinguished (see Figure 3 Point 1). Turf, weeds, and accumulated leaves from nearby trees were removed in the designated area. After clearance the straight line of the wall face was evident (Figure 6). In some places only one row of massive stones remained. However, in one stretch of the structure a second and third layer of stones was preserved. The embankment was very massive there. A more detailed analysis helped to determine a probable line of the other face of the wall

and to estimate the original thickness of the curtain wall to be 3.5m.

The dating of Type 1 embankments is problematic. Since no excavations of these relics have been undertaken, it is impossible to solve this problem. So far it has been established that:

1. The building material and its use in places where the wall face is preserved resemble the building technique of the walls on the Ai-Todor cape.
2. The presumed highest point of the fortification is located on Tschatyrdag burial site which is of the Ai-Todor type (see Figure 3 Point 2).

When the stratigraphical relationship is taken into account, the unpreserved or unbuilt section of the wall must have been anterior to the burial ground which was in use in the 3rd-4th centuries AD. If this was the case then the wall may have been contemporary with the defences on Cape Ai-Todor .

Neither the movable finds collected during the surface survey and the embankment clearing, nor the reports on chance discoveries made by local people helped to establish the chronology. An *antoninianus* of Philip the Arab (information from A. Lysenko) and fragments of Bosporan amphorae dating from the 2nd-3rd centuries AD (Zeest 1960, 76 type, identified by V. Nessel) may come from the last phase of Roman military presence on the southern Crimean coast. This date corresponds to the presumed time of the evacuation of Roman troops from Charax. However, the same artefacts could have been part of the equipment of early graves similar to those on Cape Ai-Todor and connected with the alleged presence of a barbarian garrison. We should also mention a few pieces of hand-made ceramics discovered during the clearing of the conjectural wall. These fragments are small and unusual. They have been variously described as ‘not from the Middle Ages’ (V. Mys) or ‘late antique’ (O. Savelia). We should, however, bear in mind that they were found on the surface near a pile of rubble which may indicate that they had moved down the slope from higher up in the site.

The research done so far leads to the following conclusions:

1. Type 1 embankments seem to be the remains of a defensive wall.
2. The fortifications most probably were not completed.

The fact that only stretches of the presumed enclosure wall were found, as well as the presence of scattered dressed stones at a certain distance from the preserved embankments, argue for the second conclusion. The material may have been abandoned on its way to the building site. The hypothesis of an unfinished investment would account for the small number of movable artefacts accompanying the supposed fortifications. The fort, which had not been inhabited or had only been used for a short



Figure 6. Exposed face of the wall (R. Karasiewicz-Szczypiorski)



Figure 7. Dressed stone blocks on the site (M. Bogacki)

period of time, did not include any buildings nor did it accumulate rubbish such as ceramics.

The Roman sentry post on Kavkaz Bair could also have been left unfinished. During the fieldwork very little stone material from the enclosure wall was found. There were also no Roman roof tiles which should have remained after the tower roof had collapsed (unpublished information). Remains of a tiled roof were discovered on Kazatskaya Hill (Sarnowski *et al.*, 2004; Sarnowski *et al.*, 2009). Clearly, the material could have been used at some later time in other buildings, but we might expect some traces of materials such as tile fragments to be present *in situ*. Their complete absence may indicate that either the post was not completed or it was built in haste from the materials available at that time, such as clay and timber. A parallel situation may apply at the Tschatyrdag site, since the enclosure wall there was either left unfinished or the gaps in the fortification were filled with impermanent materials. Further construction of the walls without the use of stones may have been the work

of the barbarians whose cremation burial site was found nearby.

It must be stressed that even when all the data is taken into account, it is not absolutely certain that at the Tschatyrdag site the cremation burial ground was adjacent to an older Roman sentry post as at Cape Ai-Todor. The remains of the conjectural enclosure wall provide a new argument in favour of a Roman military presence on the southern Crimean coast. Further excavations may bring clinching arguments to this still unsettled issue.

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