

## Late Neolithic, Chalcolithic and Late Bronze Age Fortifications in Southeast Albania



### Archaeology

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### Abstract

The phenomenon of the fortification of a settlement is not uncommon in southeast Albania. For many centuries, especially during the last 3000 years, the construction of a stone wall around a settlement has been the main type of protection for the population of the main cities and towns in the region. But this phenomenon did not start in the last 3000 years. In fact, it is far older, documented at least in the Late Neolithic period. Until the Middle Bronze Age, this phenomenon was still a rare event with archaeologists documenting in only two cases (Kamnik settlement that belonged to Late Neolithic and Maliq settlement, where the fortification was dated in the first phase of the Chalcolithic). Only during the Late Bronze Age, due to social and economic developments that affected the population, this type of construction became widespread in the region. From the Late Neolithic until the end of the Late Bronze Age there are identified at least seven fortified settlements in southeast Albania (besides the aforementioned Kamnik and Maliq, five other settlements, Blacë, Symizë, Luaras, Bejkovë, and Barmash belong the Late Bronze Age). They belong to different typologies, not only when it comes to the material with which the walls were built but also to the planimetry, architecture, geographic position of the hills where they were constructed and intensity of human life inside the settlement they protected.

## 1. Introduction

The region of southeast Albania can be clearly distinguished from the other regions in the country. In the actual administrative division, the region includes the territory of the District of Korça with six municipalities as parts of the District: Municipality of Pogradec in the northern part of the District, Municipality of Maliq in the center, Municipality of Korça in the center (south of Maliq), Municipality of Pustec in northeast, Municipality of Devoll in southeast and Municipality of Kolonjë in the southern part of the District.<sup>1</sup>

In terms of its physical geographic characteristics, the region is mostly mountainous, with mountains and hills making up to 75% of its territory while the remaining 25% is made of hills. The region has also a rich hydrography with three main lakes: Lake Ohrid, Big Prespa Lake and Small Prespa Lake, and many rivers and streams.

The favorable geographic position and its rich natural resources have made the region a focal point of development of the prehistoric civilization in the ancient Illyrian territories and also a very important communication point between the coastal and inner areas of the Balkan peninsula. Starting from the Early Neolithic until the end of the Iron Age, the region has been the main connection point between the Mid-Adriatic coast and the regions of Thessaly, Pelagonia etc.

This status has given an important role to the settlements here, most of which were centers of cultural and economic development of the neo-Eneolithic civilization. The goal of this article is to present a chronological overview of southeast Albania's prehistoric fortifications until the Late

<sup>1</sup><http://reformaterritoriale.al/images/presentations/Tabelat.pdf>

Bronze Age so that we can understand better how these fortifications developed from their most primitive forms to the more developed ones before becoming the main form of construction during the Iron Age.



Fig.1. Google earth map with seven fortifications marked in red (F. Angjellari TOLA)

## 2. Description of the Fortifications

### Kamnik Hillfort (Late Neolithic period)

The neolithic settlement of Kamnik is located at the entrance of the modern-day village of Kamnik, in Kolonja Plateau. Unlike most of the settlements of the Neolithic period, which are located in open fields and on river or lake banks, the settlement of Kamnik has been built on the slope of a rocky hill that dominates the surrounding territory. One of the reasons for such decision was a better protection of the settlement. This argument is supported by archaeological evidence linked with the discovery of a stone wall that, stratigraphically, is part of the earliest cultural layer of the settlement <sup>2</sup>.

The wall consists of unworked broken stones of small or medium size. They were piled up one on top of another and are not connected to each-other through an additional material (mortar or mud). The wall was preserved 1.70 m in width and 0.40 m in current height. The typology of the wall is similar to a rampart, built only for protection purposes. The fact that the wall is positioned on the lowest part of the slope, where the entrance to the settlement was easier than on the other parts, supports such argument.

<sup>2</sup>. Korkuti 2010, p. 203

The wall seems to have had a bigger length protecting thus, the northern and eastern parts of the settlement. The settlement has been inhabited from Late Neolithic to the Chalcolithic period (3300 – 2700 B.C) and has had a high intensity of life with at least five levels of human occupation. The archaeological finds vary from kilns, five of which were found in situ with pottery still inside them, house floors, hearths, pottery fragments and vessels of various shapes and decorations, tools and weapons made of stone, flint, bone or antler horns, anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figurines etc<sup>3</sup>. Culturally, all the finds are linked to the Late Neolithic level of the settlement of Maliq (phase Maliq I) in Korça field. The similarities of both sites are so many that archaeologists have unified them in one neolithic culture known as Maliq-Kamnik culture<sup>4</sup>.

### **The Fortification of Maliq (Chalcolithic Period)**

Unlike the settlement of Kamnik, the settlement of Maliq is located in an open field on the banks of Devoll river, situated on the right side of the modern-day town of Maliq. The earliest evidence of human population in the settlement belongs to the Late Neolithic period, phase Maliq I, when houses were built next to each-other, directly on the ground and were not protected by any sort of fortification system across the perimeter of the settlement. The first fortification system here will be constructed in the first phase of the succeeding period, the Chalcolithic. During this time, phase Maliq IIa, the settlement will also change its typology. The houses were now built several meters above the ground, standing on horizontal wooden platforms made from oak trees, that would rise above the ground with the help of hundreds of vertical wooden pillars, made also from oak trees. These pillars were all worked with copper axes. This kind of construction would be known as “settlement on piles” or “palafitic” settlement. The main reason why people build this kind of settlements was to protect themselves from the floods during heavy rain seasons and from other dangers coming either from the river, either from the ground (wild animals, attacks from neighboring communities etc). It seems that the need to protect the settlement was “mandatory” during this phase and the construction on piles was not enough to achieve such goal. For this reason, on the part of the river bank, the inhabitants built also a wooden rampart of the elliptical shape. The rampart was made of several vertical pillars, put next to each other in two rows. The space between the rows was filled with soil. As a whole, the rampart had a width of 0,70 – 0,80 m and more than 20 m of length<sup>5</sup>. Its main function was to protect the settlement from the floods caused by the river and also from other dangers. It seems that this wooden “wall” was in function as long as the palafitic settlement was also in function. The excavations carried out in the site show that the palafite, was burned at the end of phase Maliq IIa and the rampart was burned with it<sup>6</sup>.

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3. Prendi, F. *et.al.* 1971, pp. 18-23

4. Prendi, F. 1976, pp. 33-34

5. Karaiskaj, Gj. 1980, p. 9

6. Prendi, F. 1966 p. 256



Fig.2: The palafitic settlement of Maliq during excavation (after F. Prendi 1966. p.85, fig.3)

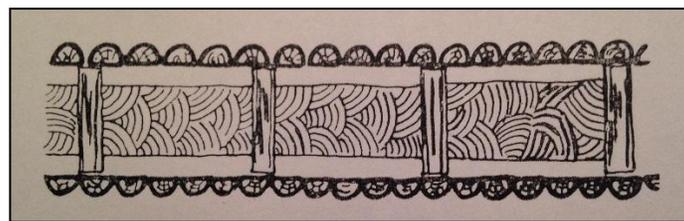


Fig.3: Plan reconstruction of the rampart in Maliq (after Gj.Karaiskaj 1980, p.10, fig.1)

### **The Hillfort of Blacë (Late Bronze Age)**

The hillfort of Blacë, is located in the northernmost part of Korça field, just above the village of Blacë, around 10 km on the south of the city of Pogradec. The fortification was built not in one but in two neighboring hilltops known as “Kulla e Blacës” and “Maja e Shpatit”, that are connected together through a narrow pass. The hills stand in the middle of a long range of hills with an east to the west direction that divides the field of Korça from the field of Pogradec. Both hilltops are fortified by separate fortifications but they are connected together through an outer fortification that protects the foothills in two sides, east and west. The total surface of the fortification is 15 ha<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup>. Ceka, N. 1985, p. 35

The fortification in the northern hilltop consists on an acropolis of an oval shape whose wall consists of unworked stones of big dimensions. They are piled one on top of the other creating two slightly regular rows on both façades. The space between the rows is filled with stones of small or medium size. The wall is preserved on a maximum width of 3 m<sup>8</sup>.

A wall of the same technique with a preserved length of 400 m, fortifies the southern hilltop. The steep slope both on west and east of the hill separated the acropolis from the outer fortification that protected both the foothills and the pass between them. The outer fortification consisted of two walls, one on the west and one on the east. The main gate was built on the western wall, at the pass, while the eastern wall closed the pass entirely. It also seems that the eastern wall had a shorter length than the western wall<sup>9</sup>.

The construction of the fortification in two hills is not a common situation in southeast Albania. The reason for such construction is linked not only with the physical topography of the hills, that are basically divided by each other only by a narrow pass but also with the need to control and dominate the surrounding area. Both hilltops could easily control the roads that connected Pogradec and Korça fields with each-other. Their position in the middle of the range of hills that divided both fields was also a well thought strategic point in the means of both protection and attack during battles.

According to the archaeological material found on the hilltops, the southern hill had a higher intensity of life than the northern one. The fortification was first constructed in the Late Bronze Age (1500 – 1200 B.C) but it was occupied, without hiatuses, until Late Antiquity (IV – VI A.D).



Fig.4: South view of the hills of Blacë fortification (F. Angjellari Tola)

<sup>8</sup>. Ceka, N. *et. al.*, 1972, p. 205

<sup>9</sup> Ceka, N. *et. al.*, 1972, p. 206



Fig.5: Part of the north acropolis prehistoric wall in Blacë fortification (F. Angjellari Tola)

### **The Hillfort of Symizë (Late Bronze Age)**

The hillfort of Symizë stands on the top of a pyramidal-shaped hill located just above the village of Symizë, 2 km on the north of the town of Maliq. The hill, known by the villagers as “Gradishtë” has an elliptical shaped top 220 m in length from north to south and 70 m in width from east to west. The hill dominates the surrounding territory and from its top one can clearly have an eye view of the western part of Korça field. The archaeological excavations carried out in the hilltop during the late 60’s of the XX century, have discovered the traces of a prehistoric wall that was more similar to a rampart than to a real stone wall. Because of its poor preservation, the archaeologists had many difficulties in identifying its characteristics. The only certain thing about it is the fact that the wall surrounded the top of the hill on all its sides. Such argument is supported not only by the traces of un-worked stones of small and medium sizes found all around the contour of the upper platform but also by the lack of natural protection on the hill due to the low steepness of its slopes. The archaeological material found on the platform links the wall with the earliest level of human occupation in the settlement that is dated in the Late Bronze Age (1500 – 1200 B.C). The fortification continued to be occupied in the succeeding periods and was not abandoned until the Late Antiquity. The vicinity of the prehistoric settlement of Maliq and the cultural similarities of archaeological finds in both sites lead us to the conclusion that the settlement of Symizë, during Late Bronze and Early Iron Age was used for protection not only by its own inhabitants but also by the inhabitants of the settlement of Maliq. Furthermore, we can hypothesize that after the abandonment of Maliq settlement in Early Iron Age, many of its inhabitants went to live in the neighboring settlement of Symizë<sup>10</sup>.

<sup>10</sup>. Lera, P. 1974, pp. 461-467

### The Fortress of Luaras (Late Bronze Age)

The fortress of Luaras is located next to the village with the same name in Kolonja Plateau. Unlike most of the fortresses of the same period (Late Bronze Age), this one does not stand on a hilltop but on a low platform on the foot of a rocky hill. One of its sides is naturally protected by the steep slope of the hill while the other sides are protected by a stone wall preserved on a current length of 320 m, the width of 2.5 m and maximum preserved height of 2 m. The stones are unworked and have different sizes. They are piled up one on top of the other. Because of their natural shapes, many of them create small empty spaces with the neighboring stone but these spaces are not filled with smaller stones or other additional material. The wall protects a settlement with a total surface of 1.5 ha. Inside this surface, on the highest part of the platform, was built a small acropolis protected by a separate wall of the same technique but smaller preserved length.

The technique of the wall and the archaeological material found on the surface, date the settlement in the Late Bronze Age (1500 – 1200 B.C). What is not common for this fortress is the fact that it was not standing on a hilltop. According to the archaeologists who have carried out the only excavation here, social and economic developments in the area around this time were very stable so they did not condition the construction of the settlement on the hilltop. Furthermore, the initiative to build the settlement on such a rugged terrain was very expensive so the inhabitants chose the easiest and cheaper way and built it on the lower platform<sup>11</sup>.

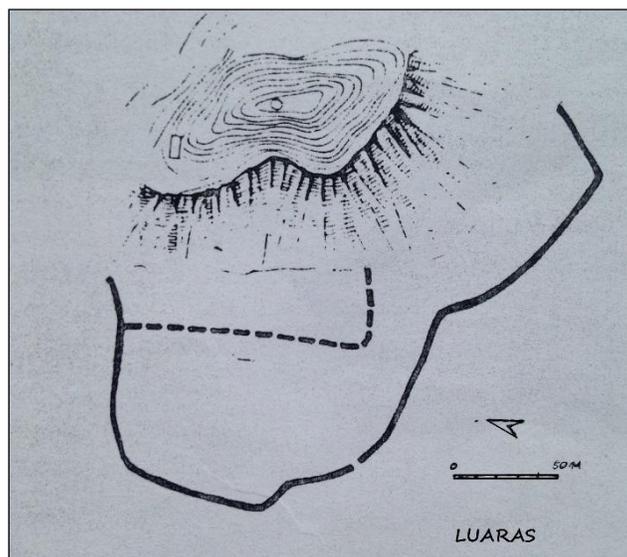


Fig.6. Plan of the fortification of Luaras (after N.Ceka 1985, p.46, Tab.II)

### The Hillfort of Bejkovë (Late Bronze Age)

The fortification of Bejkovë stands on the highest platform of a rocky hill, 1080 m above sea level. The hill is part of a range of hills that lie to the southwest of the village of Bejkovë, in Kolonja Plateau and dominates the surrounding territory.

<sup>11</sup>. Karasikaj, Gj. et. al, 1984, p. 96

Its highest platform has a very slight steepness which has allowed the builders to divide the inner space of the fortified settlement in two parts. The highest part, with a surface of 0.2 ha is protected by a wall and forms the acropolis of the fortification that served as a living space for the aristocracy. The other part of the platform, with a surface of 1.3 ha, also protected by a wall, was the living space for the rest of the population that lived in the fortified settlement. Both walls were built with the same technique. They consisted of big and medium sized unworked stones that were piled one on top of the other. The small empty spaces created between neighboring stones were filled with smaller stones, giving thus more stability to the wall. It seems that the wall protected only the eastern, northern and western parts of the fortification. The southern part was naturally protected through the steep slope that fell directly on the stream known as “Përroi i Vrikës”, that flows at the foot of the hill.

Unfortunately, the wall is not well preserved so it is difficult to understand its characteristics throughout all its contour. Only in the western part, the wall is better preserved so we can understand something more about its typology. Its current preserved height here is 1.40 m while the width varies from 2.40 to 2.80 m. The outer façade of the wall has a slight steepness. This helps the wall to gain more stability<sup>12</sup>. The technique of wall and the dense archaeological material found inside and outside the fortified space, date the settlement in the Late Bronze Age (1500 – 1200 B.C). It seems that the settlement was used for a short period of time and was abandoned in the Early Iron Age, an argument supported mostly by the lack of archaeological material after this period.



Fig.6. Areal view of Bejkovë fortification (F. Angjellari Tola)

### **The Hillfort of Barmash (Late Bronze Age)**

The hillfort of Barmash stands on the highest platform of two neighboring rocky hills known as “Gradishtë”, that are connected together through a narrow pass. The hills are located above the village of Barmash, on Kolonja Plateau.

<sup>12</sup>. Karasikaj, Gj. et. al, 1984, p. 83

They have a dominating position and from their top one can control most of the valley of Langarica river, which serves as the connection road between Korça field on the north and the area of Leskovik and Përmet on the south. The fortification walls protect an inner space divided into three parts. The main and highest part is the acropolis which stands on the top of the southern hill. It has a surface of elliptical shape 190 m in length and 80 m in width. The other two parts of the fortification lie on the northwestern slope of the southern hill and on the top of the neighboring northern hill. The walls are preserved in a total length of 400 m.<sup>13</sup> They are all built with the same technique. The interior façade of the wall was built with unworked stones of small and medium sizes while the exterior façade stones had bigger sizes and, in order to give more verticality to the wall, were submitted to a primitive process of elaboration only in their sides. The current height of the walls was preserved only in 3 rows of stones but based on its 1.80 m maximum widths, we can assume that the walls were not high. The research carried out in the fortification shows that the fortified area did not give any prehistoric archaeological material so the dating in the Late Bronze Age (1500 – 1200 B.C) is based on the technique of the wall. The lack of human occupation during this time allows us to assume that the fortification was used only for refuge in case of danger. The division in three areas must have served to create different spaces for different social levels of the population. The aristocracy would shelter themselves in the acropolis while the rest of the population and their belongings would shelter on the remaining two parts.

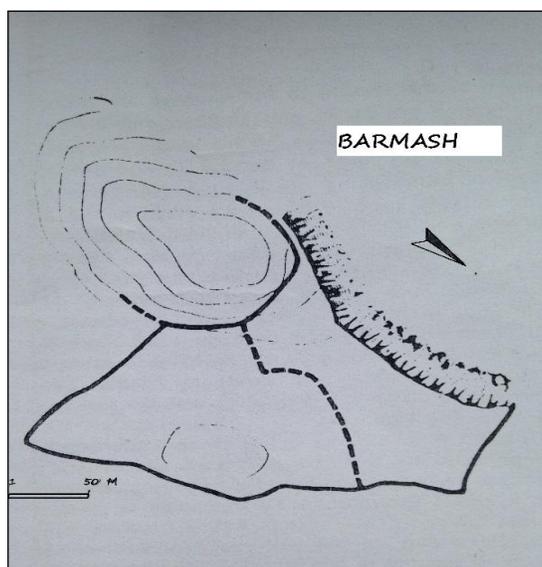


Fig.7: Barmash fortification (after N.Ceka 1985, p.47, Tab.III)

## Discussion

The above-mentioned fortifications are some of the earliest given examples of these type of construction not only in southeast Albania but in all the Albanian territory. Based on the typology and the building technique of the walls we can classify them into two big groups: 1. Fortifications with rampart walls and 2. Fortifications with stone walls.

<sup>13</sup> Karasikaj, Gj. et. al, 1984, p. 85

The first group includes Kamnik and Maliq fortifications which chronologically are also the earliest fortifications. The use of the rampart is understandable for a period like Late Neolithic and Chalcolithic when the protection of a given settlement was not an objective per se. In this case, the ramparts are primitive and served only for a small period of time, probably when the settlement was in severe danger.

The situation changes for the second group which includes Blacë, Symizë, Luaras, Bejkovë and Barmash hillforts. Chronologically they all belong to the Late Bronze Age. This period is characterized by many social and economic changes in the society at the time. These changes are manifested especially through the formation of the tribal communities and the economic differentiation inside them which brought the formation of aristocracy and elites. This phenomenon might have also been accompanied with the aggravation of conflicts between the newly formed communities and social groups bringing thus in the center of attention, the need to protect ones live and fortune from this conflicts. The solution for this was the construction of fortified settlements which, starting from Late Bronze Age, become the main type of construction in the Illyrian territories<sup>14</sup>.

## Conclusions

Late Bronze Age fortifications in southeast Albania are all building, either on hilltops either on slopes of well protected rocky hills. The surrounding territory is mostly made of fertile plains, rich pastures, and nearby rivers or lakes. In all the cases they also dominate nearby communication roads that connect different areas with each other. The walls are all built with unworked stones piled one on top of each-other without creating regular rows. Only in one case, Barmash fortification, the stones have a slight primitive elaboration but only in the exterior. The walls are adapted to the terrain, following the highs and lows of the hilltops or slopes. In four out of the five fortifications mentioned here (Blacë, Luaras, Bejkovë and Barmash), the interior space of the fortification is divided at least into two spaces. This division is not simply a choice made for a better protection of the population but is mostly a manifestation of the social changes in this population, where the aristocracy or elites would live or refuge in the most protected parts of the fortification, which in this case is the acropolis, while the rest of the community would live and shelter themselves on the other protected areas of the fortification. Again, in four out of the five fortifications (Blacë, Luaras, Symizë, and Bejkovë) the main function of the fortification was a settlement and only in one case (Barmash) the fortification was a refuge space in times of danger. These examples allow us to conclude that starting from Late Bronze Age, the construction of a stone wall around a settlement was becoming a mandatory need not only for the simple purpose of the protection of the settlement but was now a requirement for the urbanistic development of ancient cities and towns.

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<sup>14</sup>Aliu, S. 2011. pp. 141-164

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