

Tauresium

Skopje Valley with its wide plain and surrounding hills has always been attractive to settlers. Even though the area is not large by modern standards, in olden days it maintained many independent villages, towns, and castra (Roman camps), of which Skupi is the most famous. To the east of Skupi there were other settlements, and there were also several medieval towns around Vodno and Skopska Crna Gora Mountains. Among them are the ancient town of Tauresium and Baderiana castle, which were not less famous than Scupi in their heyday, but have since been forgotten and today are hardly known to visitors and tourists.

Tauresium is an ancient settlement situated in the immediate vicinity of the present day village of Taor only 20 kilometres to the south-east of Skopje. It stretched along Via Axia, the road down the River Vardar, which connected Skupi

with Stobi and Salonica. Even today, both the regional road and the highway pass the village following the same route.

Tauresium has been a famous and disputed archaeological site since the visit paid by the famous archaeologist and travel writer Arthur Evans in the beginning of the 1900s. Evans visited both Skupi and Tauresium identifying the latter as the native town of the Emperor Justinian I (527-565), mentioned by the Roman historian Procopius:

"...Among the Dardanians of Europe who live beyond the boundaries of the Epidamnians, close to the fortress which is called Baderiana, there was a hamlet named Tauresium, whence sprang the Emperor Justinian, the founder of the civilised world. He therefore built a wall of small compass about this place in the form of a square, placing a tower at each corner, and caused it to be called, as it actually is, Tetrapyrgia. And close by this





place he built a very notable city which he named Justiniana Prima (this means "firs " in the Latin tongue), thus paying a debt of gratitude to the home that fostered him...".

As with many other ancient sites, the location of the actual Justiniana Prima and the birthplace of Justinian is disputed. Some place it near Leskovac, in Southern Serbia, others in Bulgaria. However, to Evans, and to Macedonian archaeologists, the modern villages of Taor and Bader, which have the ancient roots in their names, seem the most convincing location. The excavation that started in the 2000s revealed a city stretching over 1.6 hectares on the south-eastern side of today's village of Taor on the hill consisting of the acropolis and two settlement terraces.

The exploration revealed civic life spanning three periods, prehistoric, late antiquity and early medieval. The prehistoric time is dated between 2200 and 1700 BC. Small stone axes, short flint knives and numerous fragments of ceramic vessels typical of the early Bronze Age were excavated there. During the late antiquity, the disastrous earthquake which hit Macedonia in 518 AD was a watershed. The stone buildings dating back to the period before the earthquake had mud as a binding material and did not have any defensive ramparts. After the earthquake the settlement was rebuilt with a new

defensive wall. A drainage system and a water supply cistern were introduced. The new defences, however, could not protect the town from constant raids by Slavs and Avars. After several attacks the town was deserted and left to decay. It is also believed that one of the famous Ostrogoth kings, Theodahad, was born in Taor.

Life in the town picked up again in the 9th and 10th centuries, when the migration pattern and social structure stabilized again. Rich findings including fragments of vessels, glassware, window panes, weaponry, locks and keys testify to a rich and varied life at this site. More than 250 coins and several jewellery items (earrings, fibulae, rings) indicate a wealthy population.

The most significant findings are from the golden age of Justinian. Marble columns, capitals with early Christian motifs and pythoses (storage vessels) prove the wealth of the city. The most intriguing is the pythos with fragmented mouth and neck decorated with a seal, which is actually the monogram of Emperor Justinian I.

If someone visits Taor today, one thing becomes clear. The ancient people surely knew how to choose a perfect spot for a town. The surroundings are so magnificent that this area was proclaimed an ecological protected zone. Today it is full of birds and animals thriving on the fertile soil, in and around its marshy waters.