

The Tale of the Biggest Fortress



While driving down the E-75 highway from Skopje to Thessaloniki at some point the traveller experiences a drastic change akin to entering another world in fantasy fiction or horror movies. All of a sudden the highway ends, and while the driver is still adjusting to being on a much narrower road, the passengers are taken by the astonishing landscape including the wide Vardar River being swallowed by huge picturesque cliffs. And then, almost immediately, the car disappears in a long scary tunnel, which briefly opens in the middle, just to let you cast a look up on the huge vertical blocks of limestone rocks, and, then, down at the small river with stubborn vegetation below. The gorge continues beyond the tunnel as a larger canyon with the cliffs still taking the passengers' breath away. And then you notice that it is not only the landscape but also the climate, the vegetation, and the air that have changed.

This gorge is the present-day Demir Kapija, which translated from Turkish means "iron gate". While the name refers to its strategic military position, Demir Kapija is also a natural gate and a climatic barrier

between the continental climate to the north and the Mediterranean climate to the south. Of course, thanks to the wide River Vardar, occasionally, the Mediterranean influence may be felt as far as Skopje, but beyond Demir Kapija it is a rule.

Each nation and kingdom that existed in this area had their own name for this important point. The Greek and Roman name Stenae means "narrow", while the Slavic name Prosek means "cut through". Unfortunately, the multiple waves of building and destroying, had not left many traces of the earlier civilizations in this location, but archaeological excavations have revealed the walls of a huge town on the uneven plateau above the cliffs. There are remnants of at least four towers and the original walls which cannot be seen from the busy road. Prosek was the biggest fortified town in Macedonia. Its walled territory was 17 hectares on one plateau and 14 hectares on the other, far more than the area of the medieval towns of Ohrid and Skopje, both of which were Emperors' seats.

The excellent strategic position turned Prosek into a complex of fortifications. On the left side, among the stone massifs



which stretched up to 220 meters above the riverbed, two fortified towns were built. They are now called Markov Grad and Strezov Grad, according to the names of their medieval rulers. On the right side, across the river, is Ramniste. The three of them kept the narrow pass totally controlled. Another range of towers and defensive walls covered a wider area forbidding any side passing. The acropolis of Markov Grad is built of stones without cement, the technique testifying to its ancient origin. Many ceramic objects, jewellery, coins, several acropolises and necropolises tell us of the intensive life that passed above these cliffs. The dating of some objects proves that it was built in the Archaic period. Red figure ceramic objects found in the tombs lead to the conclusion that Ancient Greeks had a small colony in the gorge. Yet, some of the building techniques of the walls testify to Paionian construction. Thus, archaeologists claim that the town was a southern outpost of the Paionian Kingdom that protected it from the northward expansion of the aggressive Macedonian state. The Roman maps mark Stenae on the 11th Roman mile from Antigoneia (present-day Negotino).

The ruins on the highest 220 meters tall rock date back to the Byzantine times and reveal complex architectural and building structure with a north-south orientation and two acropolises repaired in the medieval times. In the early Byzantine period, the role of the fortress of Prosek changed: it protected the ancient Salonika and the access to the Aegean Sea from the barbarian attacks coming from the north. In the sixth century the fortification was called Miropolis. In the tenth century there were many battles between the Byzantine army and the Slavic nobles who wanted to restore Slavic independence and kingdom. But the Byzantine rule over the area held until 1186, when the feudal archon from Strumica Dobromir Hris took it over from the weakened empire. This event was described in the chronicle of Nikita Honijat. In the beginning of

the thirteenth century Prosek survived multiple hostilities. In 1201 Byzantium restored its rule for only few years, as the Bulgarian general Cesmen took it over on a victorious march to Thessaloniki. In 1207 Dobromir Strez, another local ruler, gave up his loyalty to the central Bulgarian state and proclaimed an independent principality around Prosek, which stretched along the Vardar and included the Pelagonia Plain. In 1215 Strez died, or was killed, and Prosek fell first in the hands of the Latin Kingdom, and later of the Despotate of Epirus. In 1230 Bulgarians took it again. From 1246 Prosek was under the rule of the short-lived Nikea Kingdom. With the advance of the Serbian kingdom in the southern lands of Macedonia, Prosek became their fortress in 1330. Yet only six decades later, in 1385, the Ottomans conquered southern Macedonia, including Prosek. They destroyed the city walls and the city above the gorge, sparing only the rural settlement on the river banks before the gorge, out of which the modern-day Demir Kapija grew.

In modern times Demir Kapija did not lose its importance. Touched by the beauty of the place, the Yugoslav King Aleksandar Karadjorgjevic built his summer palace here. He installed a small royal winery and a breeding farm for the most beautiful race of Lipizzan horses especially liked by European monarchs. The herd existed until the Second World War, when the Nazis took the horses and destroyed the farm. The winery, however, survived not only the Second World War but also the Socialist era, and is now privately owned. The winery is now a protected building. It still has the caryatides built to glorify Queen Marija to whom the original palace was dedicated. In the cellar, one can see big barrels of two to four hectolitres of wine placed there 80 years ago. With the rise of the nearby Popova Kula winery, Demir Kapija became not only an important archaeological site, but also an increasingly popular stop on the Macedonian Wine Route.