

The Lost Town of Gortinija



Lying just a few kilometres away from the Greek border, Gevgelija is famous for its transit tourism and casinos serving the foreigners travelling through the country. It is a modern town with open minded cosmopolitan population. The most important reasons why people visit Gevgelija is its Mediterranean spirit, fun and the entertainment they get from the developed chain of hotels and casinos. Very few visitors are familiar with Gevgelija's famous archaeological site Vardarski Rid and the artifacts which can be seen in the City Museum. The site is one of the oldest known settlements in Macedonia, which thanks to its position and configuration, sustained residents in both prehistoric and ancient periods.

The site has a history of intensive life for more than 1000 years around the first

millennium BC. It is centrally positioned in a strategically important area dominating the Vardar Plain, the city of Gevgelija and the river valley. It consists of two rocky hills, one higher and steeper than the other, joined by a saddle-like elevation and overlooking the Vardar river bed on one side and the present-day town of Gevgelija on the other.

Since 1995, the site has been intensively explored and sixteen cultural strata belonging to six different settlements have been identified. The city life started as early as the Bronze Age and continued through different ages and cultures. Different burial rituals identified in the numerous graves are good markers of the multitude of cultures in this location. The economic, social and cultural development of the region over the centuries is reflected in the size and type of the six

settlements. In prehistoric times, more specifically during the Iron Age, Vardarski Rid was the central settlement of the Paionians. During the Classical Period it was one of the several settlements on the bank of the Vardar (Axios) River. In the age of the Macedonian Empire it was probably the administrative centre of the Amphaxitis region. In these centuries the region was among the most developed and economically advanced areas. The mighty local culture blossomed due to intensive mining, metallurgy and the good geographical position. It was no accident that the ancient Macedonian state spread in this direction after the foundation of the new capital Pella in the Lower Vardar valley during this period. Many artifacts associated with the Macedonian state of Alexander the Great and his father Philip – shields with the famous state symbol, the 16-ray sun, helmets, wine cups, silver coins with their faces, etc. – have been discovered here.

The most important period when the city boomed was the fourth century. Although it took less space than the previous Iron Age settlement, the discovered buildings and other findings document an economically and culturally strong settlement with all the characteristics of urban life. The great town of Stoa, works of art and the circulation of different coins at the end of the V and IV century B.C. are the best illustration of that. Private houses were built using river stones and mud bricks. Roofs were made with massive ceramic tiles. Most probably this flourishing city was destroyed by Celtic raids, as the aggressively and simultaneously demolished structures testify. A ceramic vessel with 51 silver tetradrachmas built into one of the structures speaks of the possible attempt to hide the treasure in case of such a raid.

Yet the city survived and even spread its urban texture to a wider area with new architecture and cultural life. Again,





coins from the Hellenistic up to early Roman period bear witness to that. Archaeologists found that the settlement from this time is known as the ancient city of Gortinia. A whole quarter of artisans and craftsmen developed on the so-called southern terrace at that time. An entire complex of blacksmith's, pottery and other workshops as well as storage facilities and shops with a characteristic inventory were unearthed. The cultural layers show that the settlement was destroyed at least four times and revived again, until it was finally demolished and gradually abandoned between the second and the first centuries BC. The lavish private house from the second century known as Collector's House is the most important finding from this time. In this set of ruins, dating from the second century BC, archaeologists found a wealth of treasures from much earlier periods. They speculate that the owner of this house must have been a rich man with an interest in artifacts that were already ancient in 200 BC.

The life in the town ceased for good during the Roman conquest of Macedonia. The Tower and the City Wall represent only a small part of the discovered Acropolis defense system constructed in the face of those tumultuous events. Yet, the life in the town ended abruptly not to resume for another thousand of years. The later artifacts recently discovered on the southern terrace are skeletons in the graves dating back to the 12th and 13th centuries.

