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EARLY FORTIFICATIONS AT THE *APSAROS* FORT (GONIO, GEORGIA). NEW DISCOVERIES¹

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Increasing amounts of data seem to confirm that the beginnings of Roman military presence at the mouth of the Chorokhi River go back as far of Nero's reign (Fig. 1).² This is indicated by information available in various written sources. The establishment of the first fort must have occurred before 77 AD, when *Absarrum* is mentioned by Pliny the Elder.³ Such an early foundation of a Roman garrison in this area is also indicated by other sources: the *Tabula Peutingeriana*, on which we can find the name *Apsaro*,⁴ and indirectly in Agrippa's speech recorded by

¹ The research on which this article is based was made possible through financial support from The National Science Centre in Poland UMO-2017/26/M/HS3/00758.

² R. Karasiewicz-Szczypiorski (with a contribution by Sulchan Mamuladze), *Before there were the Thermae. A Few Words on the Remains of the Earliest Buildings in the Apsaros Fort (Gonio, Georgia)*, "Pro Georgia" 28–2018, 99–108. Cf. E. Kakhidze, *Apsaros: A Roman Fort in Southwestern Georgia, Meetings of Cultures in the Black Sea Region: Between Conflict and Coexistence*, "Black Sea Studies" VIII, Aarhus, 2008: 304–305. On the choice of the fort's location, see: D.J. Brezecz, *Maryport a Roman Fort and its Community*, Oxford 2018, 17.

³ Cf. E. Dąbrowa, *Le limes anatolien et la frontière caucasienne au temps des Flaviens*, "Klio" 2, 1980, 385; D. Braund, *Georgia in Antiquity. A History of Colchis and Transcaucasian Iberia 550 BC-AD 562*, Oxford 1994, 178; R. Karasiewicz-Szczypiorski, *Apsaros. Early Headquarters Building (principia). New location?* "Pro Georgia" 26–2016, 62; T. B. Mitford, *East of Asia Minor. Rome's hidden frontier*, Oxford 2018, 37–40, 55, 71.

⁴ https://www.euratlas.net/cartogra/peutinger/9_palestina/; the author is aware of the numerous doubts linked to the dating of various information in the above-cited *itinerarium*. However, it is worth noting that the Tabula only indicates two names at the Colchian coast that can be linked to Roman forts: *Apsaro* and *Sebastopolis*. The information conveyed by the other above-mentioned authors has similar undertones. Pliny writes about the *Apsarus* River (*flumen Absarrum*) and a fort (*castellum*) of the same name, as well as about the *Heniochs* (*Heniochi*) living on the coast. Among the names of various set-

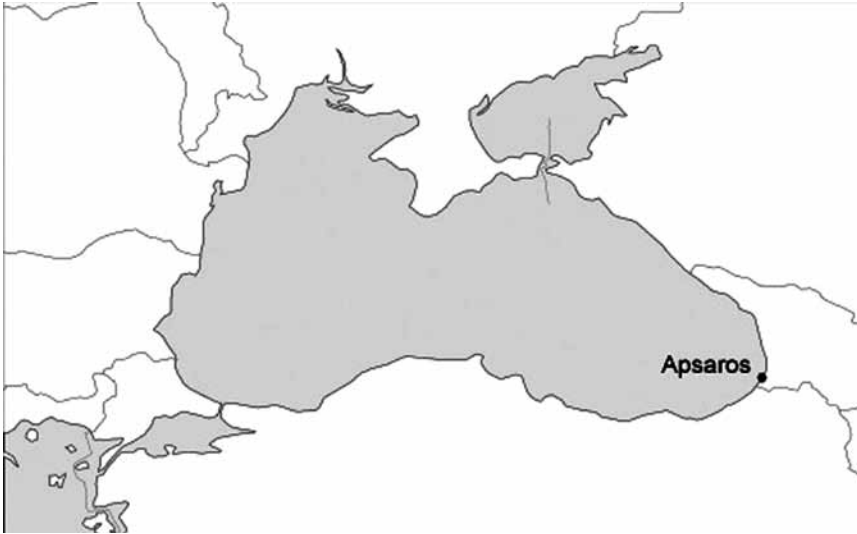


Fig. 1. Location of the Roman fort of *Apsaros* (after Kakhidze 2008, adapted by R. Karasiewicz-Szczypiorski, drawing O. Kubrak).

Josephus.⁵ The author of *The Jewish War* mentions the subjects of Roman military rule, i.e. the Ἡνιόχους, alongside the Colcheans. Pliny also mentions the Heniochs (*Heniochi*) as being present at the coast nearby *Apsaros*.⁶ This convergence of such information in several sources supports the hypothesis about the earlier (than previously thought) establishment of the fort. It is worth mentioning at this point that Nero had been planning an expedition that was supposed to have gone as far as Caucasian Albania.⁷ The base in *Apsaros* might thus perhaps have been established as part of the preparations for this expedition?

tlements on the eastern coast of the Black Sea, only in the case of *Sebastopolis* does Pliny use the term fort (*castellum*). It is also interesting to note that he also refers to the *Heniochs* being present in this part of the coast (*Heniochorum gentes*)! Josephus mentions that the *Heniochs* were ruled over by Rome, without mentioning any local place names. Arrain, who wrote during Hadrian's times (*Arr. Peripl. M. Eux.*), and who personally toured the Roman garrisons on the eastern coast of the Pontus, visited three places: *Apsaros*, *Phasis* and *Sebastopolis*. It can thus be assumed that the Roman fort in *Phasis* was established slightly later than the remaining ones. This seems to be indicated by Pliny's silence on the topic, despite his mentioning *Phasis* a number of times as the name of a river. Such a reading of the written sources may indicate that also the *Tabula Peutingeriana* represents the location of the forts on the Colchean coast (though perhaps it should be referred to as the land of the *Heniochs*?) in the second half of the 1st century AD.

⁵ Joseph. BJ 2. 366–367.

⁶ Plin. HN 6.4.

⁷ Tac. Hist. 1. 6; see: T.B. Mitford, *East of Asia Minor. Rome's hidden frontier*, Oxford 2018, 58.

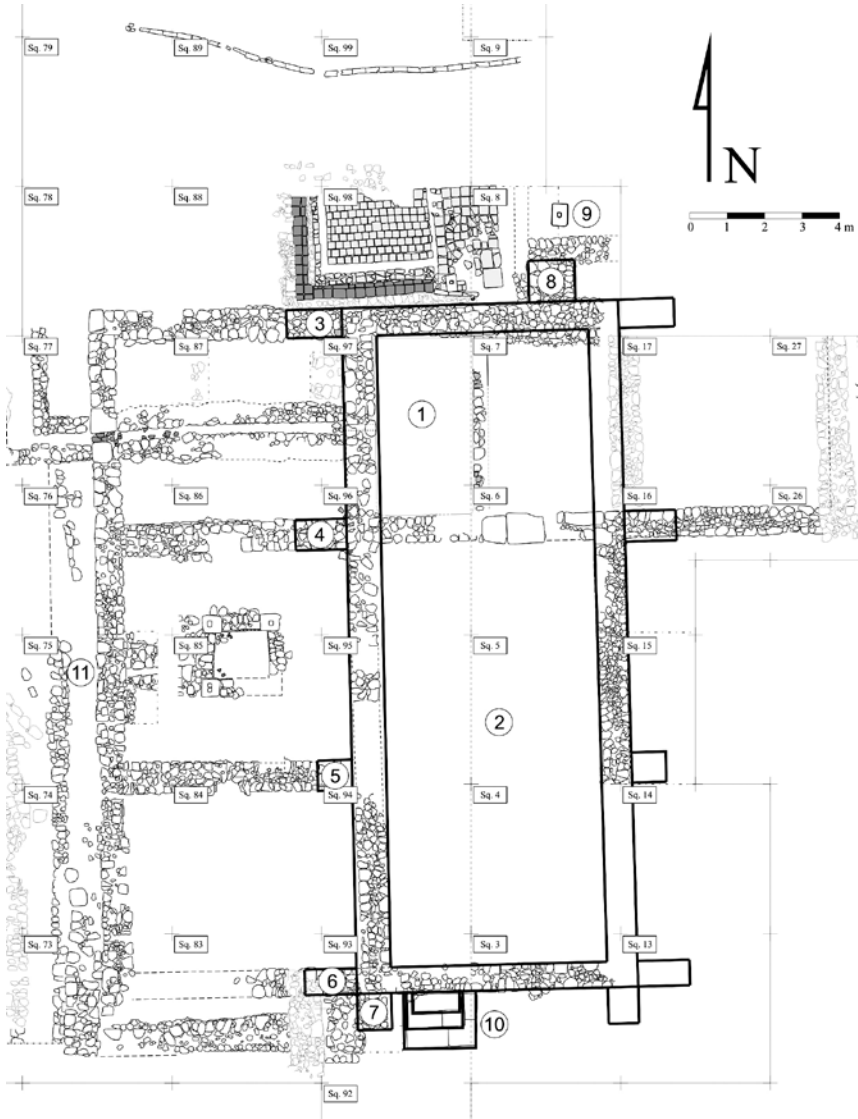


Fig. 2. Gonio. Plan of part of the excavations in Sectors NO 01 and NO 11 (M. Marcinia). Elements of the bathhouse (*balneum*) from Phase 2: 1 – pool (*frigidarium*); 2 – room with mosaic floor (*apoditerium* ?). Remains of the granary from Phase 1 (in black): 3–8 – external buttresses attached to the walls: W2, W16 and W4; 9 – base of the column north of the granary; 10 – stairs – entrance to the *horreum*; 11 – entrance to the building (Phase 2).

Until recently, there had been no explicit confirmation of the cited information in other categories of sources. Of special significance are discovered artefacts, which can be dated to a period within a narrow chronological range, but primarily linked to the stratigraphic context and architecture.⁸ The discoveries made over the last years by the Polish-Georgian expedition, supervised by the authors of this paper, fulfil the above-mentioned conditions. These new findings provide increasingly convincing confirmation of the earlier (than previously thought) metrics of the Roman fortress.

Special attention should be paid to some of the artefacts linked to the remnants of a granary (*horreum*).⁹ The garrison's bathhouse (Fig. 2) were later constructed on top of its ruins. Two hemidrachms, minted in Caesarea in Cappadocia during Nero's reign, probably in AD 59, were found within one of the buttresses from the older of the aforementioned buildings¹⁰ (Figs. 2: 7; 3: 1-2). They commemorate Corbulo's victory in the war against the Parthians over Armenia. Both coins were found in the same place and they were probably deposited there intentionally. The first of these (inv. no. 515/15) presents Nike facing to the right on the reverse side, ARME[NIA C],¹¹ while the second (inv. no. 517/15) Nike facing to the right and writing on a shield.¹² Fragments of a glass vessel were also found in the granary's foundation trench, out of which an almost complete form was achieved after they had been pasted together. This is a mould-blown beaker with concave walls. The vessel had been decorated with a laurel wreath motif in its upper part, and a plant vine motif in its lower part. The find can be categorised as an example of so-called victory beakers, produced in Syrian workshops. Based on the analogies and contexts (a stratigraphic analysis related to the preserved architectural relicts), the object can even be dated to the mid-1st century AD.¹³

⁸ Cf. E. Kakhidze, *Apsaros: A Roman Fort in Southwestern Georgia, Meetings of Cultures in the Black Sea Region: Between Conflict and Coexistence*, "Black Sea Studies" VIII, Aarhus, 2008: 311–316.

⁹ R. Karasiewicz-Szczypiorski (with a contribution by Sulchan Mamuladze), *Before there were the Thermae. A Few Words on the Remains of the Earliest Buildings in the Apsaros Fort (Gonio, Georgia)*, "Pro Georgia" 28–2018, 99–108.

¹⁰ E.A. Sydenham, *The Coinage of Caesarea in Cappadocia*. New York 1978, 40, fn. 80. The listed coins will be the subject of a separate publication by P. Jaworski from the Institute of Archaeology at the University of Warsaw, in which he will discuss the coin findings from the *Apsaros* fort.

¹¹ E.A. Sydenham, *The Coinage of Caesarea in Cappadocia*, New York 1978, 40, no. 81.

¹² E.A. Sydenham, *The Coinage of Caesarea in Cappadocia*, New York 1978, 41, no. 83.

¹³ Due to the exceptional character of the find and the very small amount of analogies, there will be a separate publication dedicated to discussing the glass beaker, prepared by the specialist M. Wagner, who is currently researching the glass archaeological material from the *Apsaros* fort.

The context within which the above-listed artefacts were encountered, as well as the stratigraphic sequence and dating of the later construction phases, make it possible to categorize the granary among the buildings of the earliest fort in *Apsaros*. We know almost nothing about the other buildings from this period. In all probability, one such trace of another early structure is a cubic column base found *in situ* north of the *horreum* (Fig. 2: 9). However, in this case it is too early to make any far-reaching conclusions.

The research conducted thus far in the area in which the granary was discovered (Phase 1) have enabled the distinguishing of three subsequent construction phases. As a result of further reconstructions, the baths were built (Phase 2), followed by the garrison commander's house (Phase 3). The change in the structure's function was linked to a modification in the orientation of its front according to the cardinal directions. The *horreum* had its entrance in the south wall of the building (Fig. 2: 10). The later constructed baths probably made use of the same stairs to enter the building, though another entrance may have already been in place on the west side (Fig. 2: 11). The *praetorium* also had its front facing the west. These observations will in future be useful in attempts to reconstruct the plan of the early fort. However, there are still many more questions than answers at the present stage of research. The above-mentioned discoveries provide evidence that there was a fort in *Apsaros* as of the mid-1st century AD, subjected to subsequent reconstructions, which functioned more or less to the mid-2nd century AD.¹⁴ Modifications in the fort's plan and in the functions of the buildings located inside correspond to the periods when the subsequent army units that took command of the post were stationed there. The link between garrison rotation and architectural changes can also be observed in other places at which the Roman army was stationed, including on the nearby northern coast of the Black Sea.¹⁵ In the case of *Apsaros*, so

¹⁴ In the discussed excavation area, there are no traces of later construction activities. The more shallowly located architectural relicts are traces of the internal structures inside a Byzantine fort. The analysis of the finds from other excavation areas, including the Roman coins from *Apsaros*, indicate that at least part of the fort was also used later, probably until the mid-3rd century AD. The just mentioned analysis of coin finds written by P. Jaworski (Institute of Archaeology University of Warsaw) has not yet been published; see: E. Kakhidze, *Apsaros: A Roman Fort in Southwestern Georgia. Meetings of Cultures in the Black Sea Region: Between Conflict and Coexistence*, "Black Sea Studies" VIII, Aarhus, 2008: 313.

¹⁵ R. Karasiewicz-Szczypiorski, *The Roman Army on the Walls of Chersonesos*, „Światowit” XI (LII)/A 2014 (2013), 87–112; R. Karasiewicz-Szczypiorski, *The Roman Fort in Balaklava and its Surroundings*, „Światowit” XII (LIII)/A 2015 (2014), 53–79; R. Karasiewicz-Szczypiorski, *The Roman Fort on Cape Aj-Todor (Charax) and its Surroundings...*, „Światowit” XV–XVI (LVI–LVII) (forthcoming).



Fig. 3. 1–2. Two hemidrachms minted in Caesarea in Cappadocia during Nero’s reign, found in a buttress of the *horreum* at *Apsaros* in 2015 (P. Jaworski).

far it has been impossible to establish whether there were any gaps (and – if so – of what duration) between the moment when one unit left and another arrived to take its place.

One important research question, which until very recently remained unanswered, involved the early defensive walls. The garrison buildings, including the structures listed above, must have been surrounded by some sort of fortifications. The ones that have survived to our times are later and cannot be linked to the discussed architectural relicts from Phases 1 to 3. In 2000–2002, the Georgian-German expedition working in Gonio did some geodetic measurements of the area located to the north and east of the aforementioned late Roman and Byzantine defensive walls. The published research results indicate that a soil embankment has been preserved north of the late fortifications, which most probably is a trace of a fort constructed according to the “playing-card” layout.¹⁶ This shape is typical for the majority of Roman fortifications from the Principate period.¹⁷ Unfortunately, no attempts were made to verify these measurements over the next dozen or so years. This was made impossible by the changes in property status of the territories surrounding the fortress. The area of interest was divided into plots that ended up in private hands. The owners of these lands were not interested in having their arable farmland devastated by excavations. In addition, any potential discoveries could have led to them losing their rights to the discussed plots of land. These problems with access have remained in place but a solution was found enabling the first excavations outside the walls of the late Roman fort. There is local road running between the northern line of the fortifications and the gardens. Its surface consists of gravel that can be easily dug up. At two points, the road cuts through the embankment, which is in fact the remains of the supposed early fort’s fortifications. The first survey trenches were marked out at these points (Fig. 4:

¹⁶ A. Geyer (ed.), *Neue Forschungen in Apsaros (2000–2002)*, Tbilisi 2003, Tafel 2.

¹⁷ A. Johnson, *Römische Kastelle*, Mainz 1987.

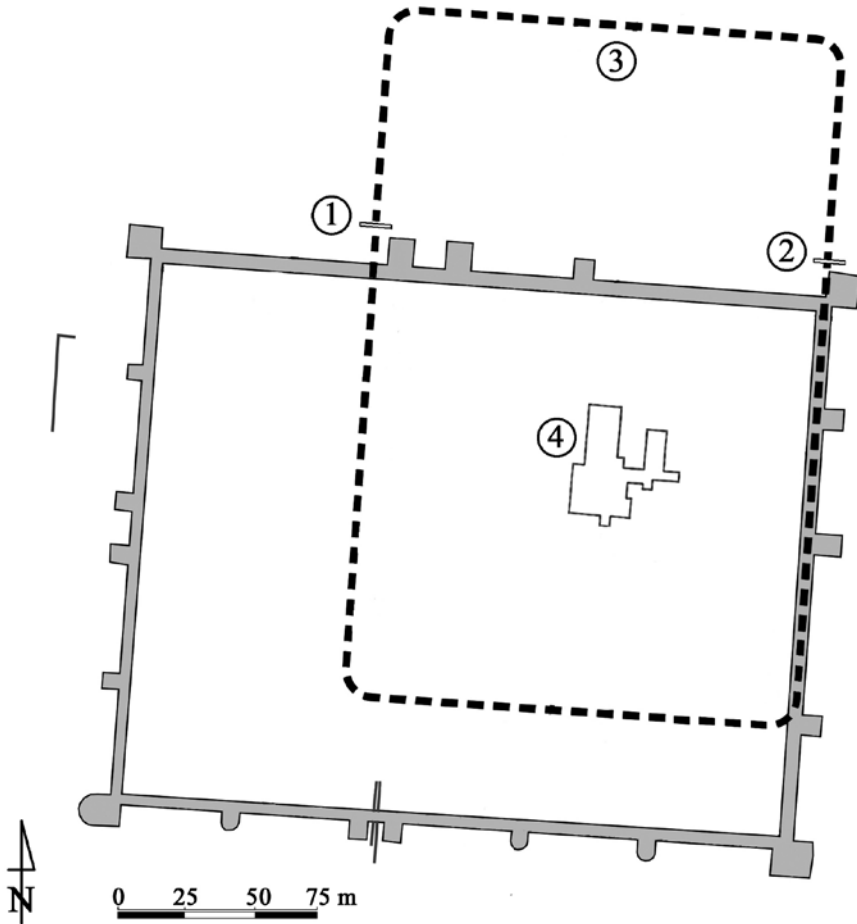


Fig. 4. Gonio (Apsaros). Site plan (after Geyer 2003, adapted by R. Karasiewicz-Szczypiorski, drawing O. Kubrak): 1 and 2 – trenches beyond the late Roman defensive walls; 3 – probable location of the early fortifications at the *Apsaros* fort; 4 – location of the discovery of the granary (Phase 1), the bathhouse (Phase 2) and the garrison commander's house (Phase 3).

1-2). The edge of the road and the roadside neighbouring the gardens were used for this purpose. As a result, car traffic was not impeded. The land belonging to neighbouring plots was also not infringed upon. The western trench was 20 m in length and in its upper parts it was 1 m wide (Fig. 5). The eastern trench was 15 m long and at maximum also 1 m wide (Fig. 6). Both trenches were demarcated so as to enable encompassing as much as possible of the fortification remains (respectively, the western and eastern

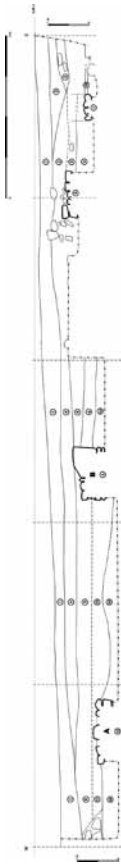


Fig. 5. Gonio. The western survey trench behind the walls of the late Roman fort: 1 – humus; 2–4 – layers formed after the destruction of wall B (the later defensive wall and the accompanying buildings); 5 – foundations of defensive wall B (later – Phase 2 and 3?); 6 – foundations of unidentified building inside the early fort (Phase 2 or 3); 7 – foundation of unidentified building inside the early fort (Phase 1?); 8–9 – layers formed during the period of the functioning of defensive wall B and during its destruction; 10–11 – layers formed after the destruction of defensive wall A (the earlier one) but before the construction of defensive wall B (or during its construction); 12 – sand (barren soil); 13 – foundation of defensive wall A.

line of the defensive wall), but also traces of the moat in the foreground and road on the inner side of the fortifications.

The first surprising discoveries were made in the western trench. Not one but two lines of fortifications were unearthed in the narrow space (Fig. 5: A-B). Both walls are oriented along the N-S axis. The foundations, as well as the preserved remains of the lower parties of curtain wall B (Fig. 7), were made from broken stone joined using clay. The facing stones in wall B were larger and more precisely worked than those used to construct the foundations. However, the discussed wall was not built using regular blocks but instead efforts were introduced to even out the large rock fragments so as to make their front surfaces straight.

Wall A is 1.6 m wide (Fig. 5: A), while wall B – 1.32 m (Figs. 5: B; 9). The distance between the wall curtains amounts to 4.9 m. The limited extent of the trenches provided little space outside the described fortification lines to search for a moat in their foreground. Nonetheless, further research was not conducted and the trench was not extended westward. It would not have been

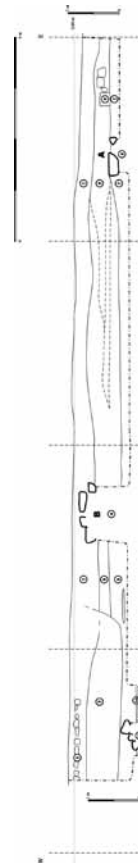


Fig. 6. Gonio. The eastern survey trench beyond the walls of the late Roman fort: 1 – humus; 2–3 – layers in the contemporary pit; 4 – foundation of defensive wall B (the later one – Phase 2 and 3?); 5–6 – layers formed after the destruction of defensive wall A (the earlier one) but before defensive wall B was constructed (or during its construction); 8 – foundation of defensive wall A; 10 – sand (barren soil); 11 – foundations of unidentified building inside the early fort (Phase 1?).

possible to uncover and record the traces of any potential ditch in a trench less than 1 m wide. No structures were encountered in the area between the walls. The remains of other architectural structures made from broken stone were found east of wall B (i.e. inside the fortifications) (Fig. 5: 6; 7). These are probably traces of a road running along the defensive walls (*via sagularis*) and part of building of a difficult to specify function located next to the road.

The relicts of two parallel lines of early fortifications should be considered the most important discovery made in the western trench. This same sequence of two defensive walls was confirmed in the eastern trench (Fig. 6: A-B). However, the foundations of both wall curtains have been preserved in a much worse state. The same applies to the deposits accompanying the architecture. As a result, the interpretation of the finds and observations made in the western trench are key for any further considerations.

As already mentioned, the remains of the two uncovered defensive walls differ in terms of their width, the depth of their foundations, as well as the construction details. The accompanying stratigraphic contexts are also different. The foundation of wall A (Fig. 5: A) goes deeper and its base rests on sand, i.e. barren soil (Fig. 5: 12). There is a cultural layer lying above the preserved relicts, which most probably formed after the destruc-



Fig. 7. Gonio. The face of wall B (view from the east). Visible large facing stone (A. Trzop-Szczypiorska).



Fig. 8. Gonio. Foundation of wall A (view from the east) (A. Trzop-Szczypiorska).

tion of the discussed wall (Fig. 5: 11). The foundation of wall B (Fig. 5: B) is not as deeply located, while its base from the west does not lie on barren soil but on the surface of the just mentioned cultural layer (Fig. 5: 11). As a result, we can state that wall A was constructed earlier than wall B.

Conclusions

Defensive walls A and B could not have functioned at the same time. It is almost certain that the constructors of the later fortifications did not know the exact location of the earlier fortifications. If they had known about the existence of the older foundations, they would most probably have used them in the construction of the new walls. This observation enables putting forward the supposition that in the case of the older line of fortifications only the socle was made from stone. The upper parties of the walls might have been made using perishable material. If the fort had been abandoned, such fortifications were most probably dismantled and the area was levelled. Another possibility that should also be taken into account is that this was an unfinished and discarded investment. It is possible that no curtain walls or turrets existed on the foundations.

By approaching both structures as belonging to different architectural phases, it can be assumed that wall A corresponds to Phase 1 of the inside building complex. It might thus have been constructed during the same



Fig. 9. Gonio. Wall B. View from above (A. Trzop-Szczypiorska).

period as the *horreum*. Wall B must have been erected contemporaneously to Phase 2 distinguished within the fort, i.e. when the garrison bathhouse were constructed. It can be assumed that these same fortifications still was used in Phase 3, i.e. at the time when the garrison commander's house (*praetorium*) was built in the area excavated by the Polish-Georgian expedition.

The minimal range of the excavation signifies that the above hypothesis must be treated with a high degree of caution. These observations will certainly be verified over the course of the following seasons. There are plans to continue the excavations in the trenches established along the course of the early fortifications but on the inner side of the late Roman fort.

The verification of the measurements made by the Georgian-German expedition through excavations and of the observations made in the field by the first co-author of this text allow for an approximate reconstruction of the *Apsaros* early fort's dimensions. The northern border of the fortifications, even though still unexcavated, is observable on the published contour map.¹⁸ There is a clearly visible lowering of the ground level, which runs further to the north, parallel to the axis of the soil embankment (Fig. 10: 1). The described differences in the height of the land can

¹⁸ A. Geyer (ed.), *Neue Forschungen in Apsaros (2000–2002)*, Tbilisi 2003, Taf. 2.

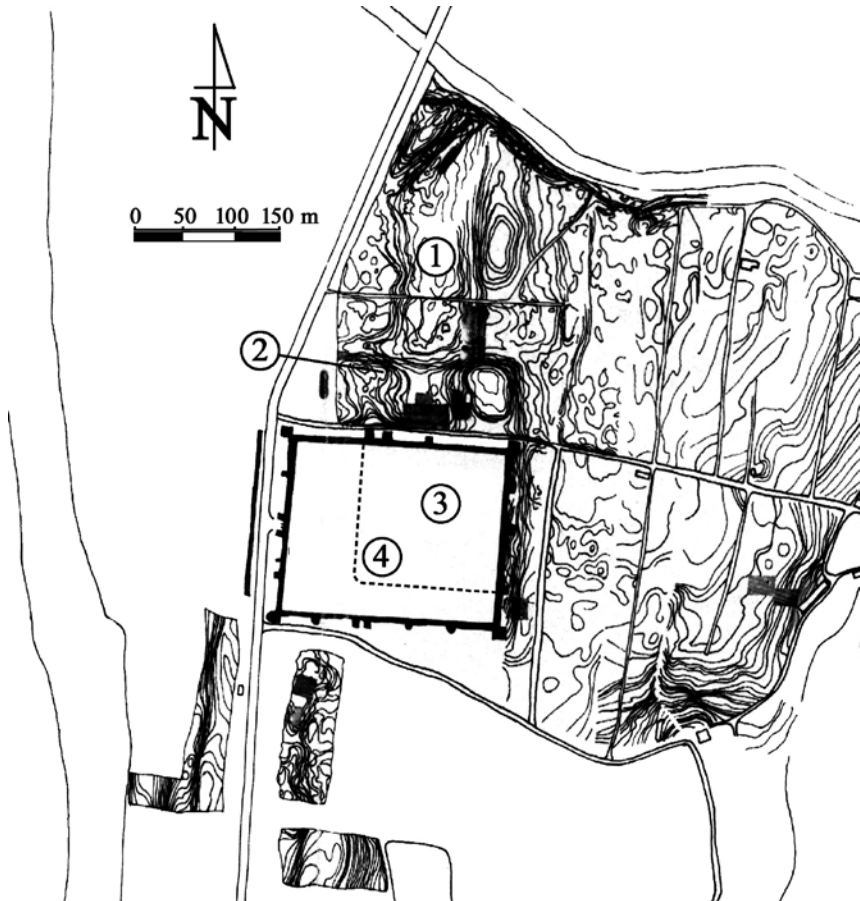


Fig. 10. Gonio (*Apsaros*). Site plan (after Geyer 2003, adapted by R. Karasiewicz-Szczypiorski, drawing O. Kubrak): 1 – traces of road beyond the walls of the early fort; 2 – outline of early fortifications at the *Apsaros* fort; 3 – location of discovery of the granary (Phase 1), the bathhouse (Phase 2) and the garrison commander's house (Phase 3), (Sectors NO 01 and NO 11); 4 – supposed course of the western and southern line of the early fortifications (new proposal).

be interpreted as traces of a defensive wall, a centrally located gate and the road that ran from it. The road most probably ran in the direction of the river ford. Territories remaining outside Roman control extended further to the north. Taking into account this information, it should be assumed that we are dealing in this case with the remains of a main gate (*porta praetoria*) and a road, which ran its course further on within the fort as the *via praetoria*.

At the current state of research, it is impossible to establish the southern border of the early fortifications with any precision. However, it can be assumed that this part of the defensive walls ran ca. 30–35 m to the north of the southern line of the late Roman fortifications (Fig. 10: 4). This hypothesis is based on two facts. On the above-mentioned contour map, there is a visible change in the concentration of contour lines north of the south-eastern corner turret. This is probably the point at which the early fortifications curve toward the west under the contours of the later walls. A small offset is observable more or less in the same place in the eastern line of the preserved fortifications. The corner of fortification continues on, as far as the corner of the south-eastern curtain, at an angle (a small one, but observable during an autopsy) to the remainder of the discussed wall. This imperfection in its structure probably results from the fact that only parts of the walls rest on the relics of earlier fortifications.

Based on the described observations, it can be assumed that the early fort constructions on a “playing-card” plan was about 240 m long. The width of the discussed architectural feature can be stated with much more precision. In this case, these are two different values. Thanks to the results of the survey trenches, we know that the eastern and western lines of wall A (correlated with Phase 1 of the inner structures) were located at a distance of 160 m from each other. The younger walls (wall B), which most probably encircled the buildings considered to have belonged to both Phase 2 and Phase 3, were at a distance of 150 m from each other. Based on the measurements and excavation verification, we can thus state that during the Principate period fort *Apsaros* had dimensions no smaller than 240 x 150 m and accordingly covering a surface of 3.6 ha or slightly more (depending on the construction phase taken into account).

If the length of the area enclosed by the walls has been estimated correctly, *Apsaros* was one of the largest forts of the Principate period. However, it was not an exception. The forts in in Heidenheim, Rottweil III (both from Baden-Württemberg) and Niederbieber (Rhineland-Palatinate) were similar in size and proportions.¹⁹ Especially the first and the second of these analogies seem to be significant in this case as forts dated to the Flavian period. These would thus be architectural features established more or less at the same time as the early *Apsaros* fortifications.

¹⁹ A. Johnson, *Römische Kastelle*, Mainz 1987, figs. 189, 197 and 215.

Early Fortifications at the *Apsaros* Fort (Gonio, Georgia).
New Discoveries

In 2018, the Polish-Georgian Gonio-Apsaros Expedition under the supervision of the authors of this text continued research into the issue of the early presence of a Roman garrison at the mouth of the Chorokhi River. Two narrow trenches were opened along the road located north of the late Roman and Byzantine fortifications. Places were selected in which traces of earlier fortifications were expected to be found. The foundations of defensive walls were discovered in both survey trenches. It came as some surprise that in both cases the remains of two lines of walls had been preserved. The analysis of the architectural relicts and the accompanying layers enables stating that these are the traces of two different construction phases which did not occur simultaneously. The earlier fortifications (wall A) can most probably be linked to the fort's inner structures from Phase 1, among which the recently discovered granary (*horreum*) can be included. The later defensive wall (wall B) was probably constructed at the same time as the buildings classified as belonging to Phase 2. These same fortifications most probably continued to be in use along with the buildings considered to be part of Phase 3. Garrison bathhouse (*balneum*) were built in place of the above-mentioned grain storage building during Phase 2, while the commander's house (*praetorium*) was erected during Phase 3.