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*The fortifications of Tanais
in the light
of Warsaw University excavations*

The Greeks established Tanais in the early 3rd century B.C.,¹ on a site situated on the peripheries of the Ancient World, at the mouth of the River Don (Fig. 1). The town's isolation determined its exceptional position among the Greek cities. The sole Greek settlement in the vicinity, known today as the fortified site of Elizovetskoe was abandoned at the time.² Other Greek centers – the towns of the Bosporan Kingdom located on either side of today's Kerch Strait – lay 280 km away from the mouth of the Don. Thus, the closest neighbours that Tanais had were the nomadic Scythian and Sarmatian tribes, and also the Meotians considered as a peoples leading a mixed way of life. The appearance next to the Greek city of a „borough” inhabited by members of the nearby tribes or perhaps just one tribe sometime in the middle (end ?) of the 3rd century B.C. may be interpreted as evidence for the peaceful relations between Tanais and its neighbors.

Polish archaeologists first became interested in Tanais in 1958, following the memorable events connected with the expulsion of Kazimierz Michałowski's team from Myrmekion. Michałowski's friendship with the Hermitage director M. Artamonov led to a search for another ancient site that the Polish team could explore instead.³ It was then that a group of experts, led by M. L. Bernhard and including architect J. Głowczewski, archaeologist Z. Sztetyło and photographer T. Biniewski, toured the south of the Soviet Union in search of such a site and visited Tanais on their way (Fig. 2). The site, however, failed to capture their attention. In 1973, at Z. Sztetyło's invitation, the then head of the excavations at Tanais Dmitrij Shelov visited Warsaw University, but for a variety of reasons, there was no long-lasting follow up to this event. Finally, in 1994, Warsaw University resumed cooperation with the Museum in Tanais and in 1995 the first group of student under the supervision of P. Dyczek from Warsaw University went to dig at the site. This group worked in trench XX run by S. Naumenko.⁴ Since 1996 T. Scholl has been in charge of the work of the Warsaw University team. The Polish excavations are part of the Lower Don Archaeological Expedition of the Institute of Archaeology of the Russian Academy of Sciences, headed by T. Arsen'eva. Also part of the project is a group of German archaeologists from the Deutsches Archaeologisches Institut in Berlin. In 1996–1998, the work was concentrated in the pit burial ground (trench XVII–2).⁵ Since 1999 the focus of research

¹ V. L. KAC, Keramičeskie klejma ranneellenističeskogo vremeni iz Tanaisa, in: *Meždunarodnye otnošenija v bassejne Černogo Morja v drevnosti i srednie veka. Materialy X meždunarodnoj konferencii 29.05. – 03.06. 2001 g.*, Rostov-na-Donu, 2002, pp. 98–103.

² V. P. KOPYLOV, A. D. VASIL'EV, Bospor i Skify del'ty Dona (vtoraja polovina IV –načalo III v. do n. è.), in: *Voprosy Istorii i Archeologii Bospora. Mežvuzovskij sbornik naučnych trudov*, Voronež–Belgorod 1991, pp. 33–34.

³ M. L. BERNHARD, Sprawozdanie z objazdu strefy archeologicznej ZSRR, *RocznikMN* IV, 1959, pp. 26–33.

⁴ T. M. ARSEN'EVA, Raboty Nižne-Donskoj ekspedicii v 1995–1997 gg, *IAlAND* 15, 1998, pp. 16–17.

⁵ T. SCHOLL, Tanais 1996 – wykopaliska nekropoli zachodniej – pierwszy sezon badań, *Światowit* 41–A, 1998, pp. 190–193; T. ARSEN'EVA, T. SCHOLL, Tanais – trzy lata badań nekropoli zachodniej, *Światowit* 42–A, 1999, pp. 15–16, Pls. 1–6.



1. Tanais from South.



2. Prof. M. L. Bernhard in Tanais by T. Biniewski.



3. Trench XXV from South-East.

has shifted to trench XXV (Fig. 3) which turned out to be located at the entrance to the town.⁶

In tracing trench XXV the team had hoped to locate the old trench XIII of 1962⁷ and then, having crossed the top of the defense wall, to begin exploring the Hellenistic town. Previous investigations⁸ (trenches VI, VII, IX, XIII) had revealed that this part of the town had been settled from the 3rd to the late 1st century B.C. at the latest. The beginning of this time sequence remains elusive, but there exist historical sources telling of Tanais in the latter part of this period. Strabo⁹ wrote of the Bosporan king Polemon, who sent a punitive expedition to subjugate Tanais. No details are known: neither when exactly the raid took place or what happened to the town.¹⁰ The effects, however, cannot be missed, for it appears that the western territories of Tanais were abandoned for good in consequence of this military action. The only parts of the city to be rebuilt in the end of the 1st century A.D. were the areas in the East of the town.¹¹

⁶ T. ARSEN'EVA, T. SCHOLL, Sprawozdanie z kampanii wykopaliskowej przeprowadzonej na terenie zachodniej nekropoli Tanais w sezonie 1999, *Światowit* 43–A, 2000 (2001), pp. 13–16, Pls. 2–11; T. ARSEN'EVA, T. SCHOLL, Sprawozdanie z kampanii wykopaliskowej przeprowadzonej na terenie tzw. zachodniej nekropoli Tanais w sezonie 2000, *Światowit* III (XLIV) A, 2002, pp. 17–19, Pls. 2–15.

⁷ A. I. BOLTUNOVA, Raskopki oboronitel'noj steny zapadnogo rajona Tanaisa (1958–1963 gg.), in: *Antičnye drevnosti Podon'ja–Priazov'ja*, Moskva 1969 [= Raskopki], pp. 121–122.

⁸ D. B. ŠELOV, Tanais i Nižnij Don v III – I w. do n. è., Moskva 1970 [= Tanais], *passim*.

⁹ *Strabo*. 11.2.3.

¹⁰ S. I. BOLDYREV, O charaktere prebyvanija Polemona na Bospore, in: *Drevnosti Bospora* 3, 2000, pp. 11–15.

¹¹ B. IRMLER, Tanais: aspekty topografičeskogo razvitija goroda, *Donskaja archeologija*, 3–4, 2000, p. 96.

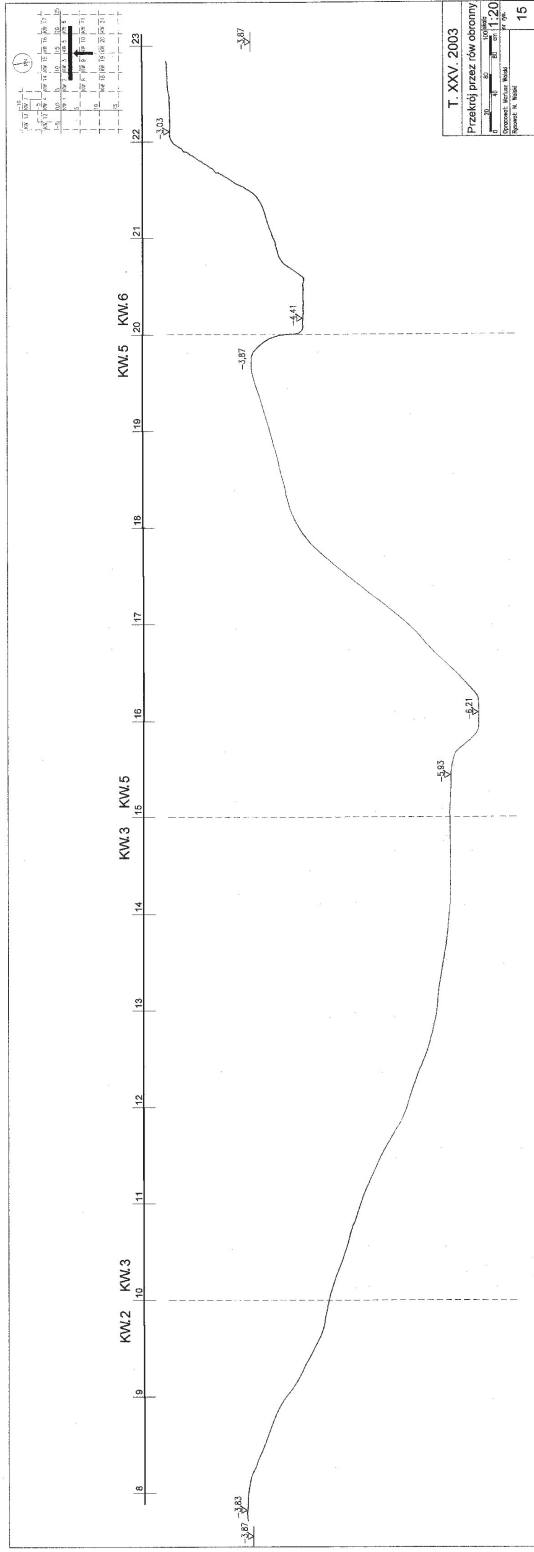


4. Defensive wall in the trench IX

Plans to excavate in the western quarter of Tanais had as an objective the investigation of the Hellenistic period in the history of the town. A ground survey, which covered about 8 km², supplemented the program.¹² It turned out that rural settlement in the immediate *chora* of Tanais followed a different pattern than in the case of the other Greek colonies. It apparently occupied a narrow strip of coastal land extending *c.* 0.8 km to the West, cut off from the steppe by a deep ditch.¹³

¹² T. ARSEN'EVA, T. SCHOLL, Sprawozdanie z powierzchniowych badań terenowych prowadzonych w okolicach antycznego miasta Tanais, *Światowit* II (XLIII) A, 2000 (2001) [= *Światowit* II], pp.11–12, Pl.1; T. ARSEN'EVA, T. SCHOLL, Sprawozdanie z powierzchniowych badań terenowych prowadzonych w okolicach antycznego miasta Tanais, *Światowit* III (XLIV) A, 2002, pp. 13–15, Pl. 1.

¹³ ARSEN'EVA, SCHOLL, *Światowit* II, p. 12, site 5, square 37–24; T. M. ARSEN'EVA *et al.*, Issledovania v Tanaise v 2001 g., *IALAND* 18, 2002 [= Issledovania], p. 194.



5. Profile of the defensive ditch, by M. Wolski.



6. Defensive ditch with the northern part of the bridge, from North-West.

To date, the exploration of the fortifications in the western part of hellenistic Tanais has uncovered the remains of a stone defense wall in trenches IX (Fig. 4) and XIII. The lowermost course of foundation stones (and even not all of it, some of the stones having been robbed out) proved to be the sole preserved element of this wall. The final dismantling of the stones from the wall face in the section of fortifications investigated by the Polish team has been confirmed as occurring under the Goths.

D. Šelov¹⁴ was of the opinion that the defense walls in western Tanais were of fairly simple construction: a stone wall 3 m across with a facing of larger stones on both sides of a central core of debris bonded in clay and earth. The foundations were very shallow, dug not more than *c.* 0.20 m in virgin soil or set directly on top of the original ground. It would have been a simple structure, corresponding to the inferior quality of the domestic architecture inside the town. This view of the defenses in the western part of Tanais, definitely inferior to the fortifications in the eastern part of the city, corresponded to Šelov's theory that assumed the existence of two separate parts of Tanais – an eastern one inhabited by the Greeks and a western one occupied by the local tribes.¹⁵ It was even suggested that the walls of western Tanais could have been used whenever there arose the need to suppress riots among the local population living inside these walls. The present excavations by the Polish expedition have provided evidence to disprove the opinions about wall construc-

¹⁴ ŠELOV, Tanais, p. 130.

¹⁵ ŠELOV, Tanais, p. 212.



7. Lower part of the defensive ditch.

tion in western Tanais, refuting in the process the suggested reconstructions as irrelevant. Foremost, it has become clear that a ditch 2–3 m deep and 10 m wide at ground level ran in front of the stone defense wall (Figs. 5, 6). This ditch presumably joined the ditch that protected the western part of the *chora* of Tanais from the steppe lands beyond (this area is currently being investigated in trench XXIII by S. Iljašenko¹⁶). The ditch followed a typical constructional design: steep eastern slope with the defense wall standing at the top (additionally increasing the height of the wall) and a gentle western slope. At the bottom of the ditch, a channel was cut to ensure quicker draining of rainfall to the South, in the direction of the river (Figs. 7, 8). This kind of defense system, consisting of a deep ditch and a stone wall, was quite common on Scythian and Meotian fortified sites.¹⁷

¹⁶ ARSEN'EVA *et al.*, *Issledovania*, p. 194.

¹⁷ V. D. BLAVATSKII, *Očerki voennogo dela v antičnykh gosudarstvach Severnogo Pričernomor'ja*, Moskva 1954, pp. 27, 37.



8. Trench XXV, by M. Wolski.



9. Trench cut in virgin soil for the outer face of the defensive wall, from South.



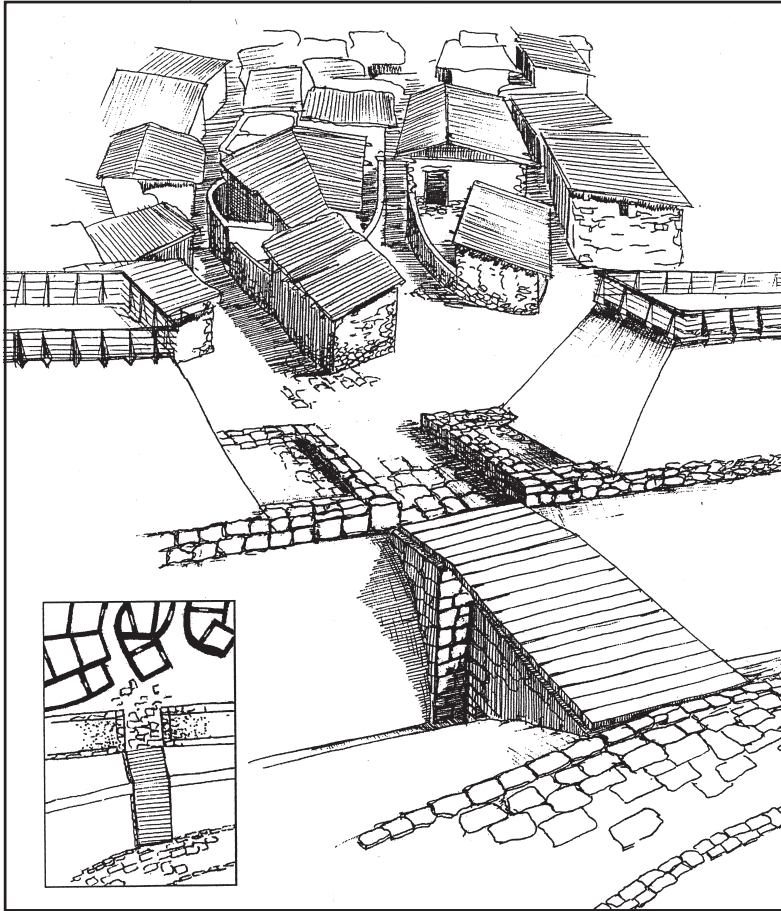
10. The inner part of the defensive wall, from South-East.



11. The eastern part of the southern profile of the eastern slope of the ditch, from North.



12. Turkish rampart from West.



13. Reconstruction of the western entrance to hellenistic Tanais, by M. Wolski (partly with the reconstruction by V. Tolstikov).

Also the defense wall itself proved to be built differently than believed so far. On the town side a kind of „parapet” was combined with a deep foundation trench (0.60 m x 0.80 m) cut under the outer face of the wall; in effect, this ledge-like structure formed a base, upon which big flat blocks were laid presumably crosswise to the wall face (Fig. 9). The trench itself was executed with much care, maintaining vertical sides and a flat bottom. The stones put into this kind of trench had to have been well dressed, just like the foundation stones of a tower recently uncovered by S. Naumenko in trench VI.¹⁸ The core of the defense wall was also reinforced. A layer *c.* 0.10 m deep, consisting of fine lime debris bonded in virgin clay, was pounded into the virgin ground surface (Fig. 10). It was only on such a prepared surface that larger stones were piled, mixed with a clay-earth mortar. The

¹⁸ S. A. NAUMENKO, K voprosu o fortifikacijach Tanaisa (po materialam raskopok 2001 g.), *IAlAND* 18, 2002, p. 165.

described wall construction system is clearly observable only on the northern side of a bridge that led across the ditch from the steppes into the town. It appears that this section of the defense wall, which was intended as protection for the approach to the bridge and for the nearby northwestern corner of the Tanais fortifications, in view of the lack of towers, must have been specially reinforced and adapted to house a variety of missiles-throwing devices.

The construction of the defense wall on the southern side of the bridge proved different. The foundation trench was present but without the “parapet” or any kind of filling bed under the core of the wall. The less solid structure of the wall in this section could have been due to the proximity of the *chora* fortifications; the meeting point of these two lines of defense was located presumably a few dozen meters away to the south of the bridge, permitting effective defense without the need for additional fortifications.

Excavations by the Polish expedition have led to a verification of the results from trench XIII. The evidence has revealed that the outer wall face had not stood on the original ground surface (virgin ground in this case)¹⁹ but had been set in a foundation trench. The natural erosion of the eastern slope of the defensive ditch obliterated this fragment of the construction completely (Fig. 11).

It has proved impossible so far to trace the width of the defense wall in trench XXV. An unknown section of this wall is concealed under the so-called Turkish rampart which rises to a height of 5 m above the top of the hellenistic wall (Fig. 12). It is clear that at this point the wall (no less than 4.20 m wide) was much wider than in other sections, presumably because of the proximity of the entrance to the town (Fig. 13).

To recapitulate the results obtained from trench XXV, one should emphasize the importance of the discovery of hitherto unknown defense constructions. It now seems that the role of Tanais in the Hellenistic period – and consequently in the period of its founding – should be perceived in entirely different light.

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¹⁹ BOLTUNOVA, Raskopki, p. 123.