

Monasteries in the centres, monasteries in the periphery: featuring monastic sovereignty in Early Medieval Bulgaria

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Monasteries; topography; settlements; communications; patronage

When mapping the known and identified monasteries, one realises that – though irregularly distributed – they appear almost in all parts of the territory of the First Bulgarian Kingdom in the second half of the 9th and the 10th century (fig. 1). Not surprisingly, the greatest concentration of monasteries, thirteen out of seventeen, is attested in ‘the inside’ of the Kingdom, namely the present-day North-east Bulgaria which was the natural hinterland of the greatest medieval administrative and military centres Pliska and Preslav (Venedikov 1979, 18–24). Three more monasteries are known on the territory south of the Balkan mountains (Haemus) referred as to ‘the Lower Land’, namely St Panteleemon and St Archangel Michael in Ohrid and the monastery of

St John in the Rila mountain (Koledarov 1991, 84–98). ‘Bulgaria beyond the Danube’, however, seems to have been the territory least inhabited by monks, since only one monastic site, the rock-cut monastery of Basarabi, has been safely identified there so far. Four of the monasteries can be considered ‘urban’ since they are situated within the fortified area of Pliska (the Great Basilica complex, fig. 2), Preslav (Čerešeto and Mostič, fig. 3), and Ohrid (St Panteleemon, fig. 4), while three others (Patlejna, Vâlkašina, fig. 3, and St Archangel Michael) can be seen as ‘suburban’ monasteries. The rest (i. e. Kalugeritsa, Černoglavtsi, Khan Krum, Sini vir, Ravna, Karaačteke and the rock-cut monasteries of Krepča and Basarabi) comprise the group of the rural monasteries.

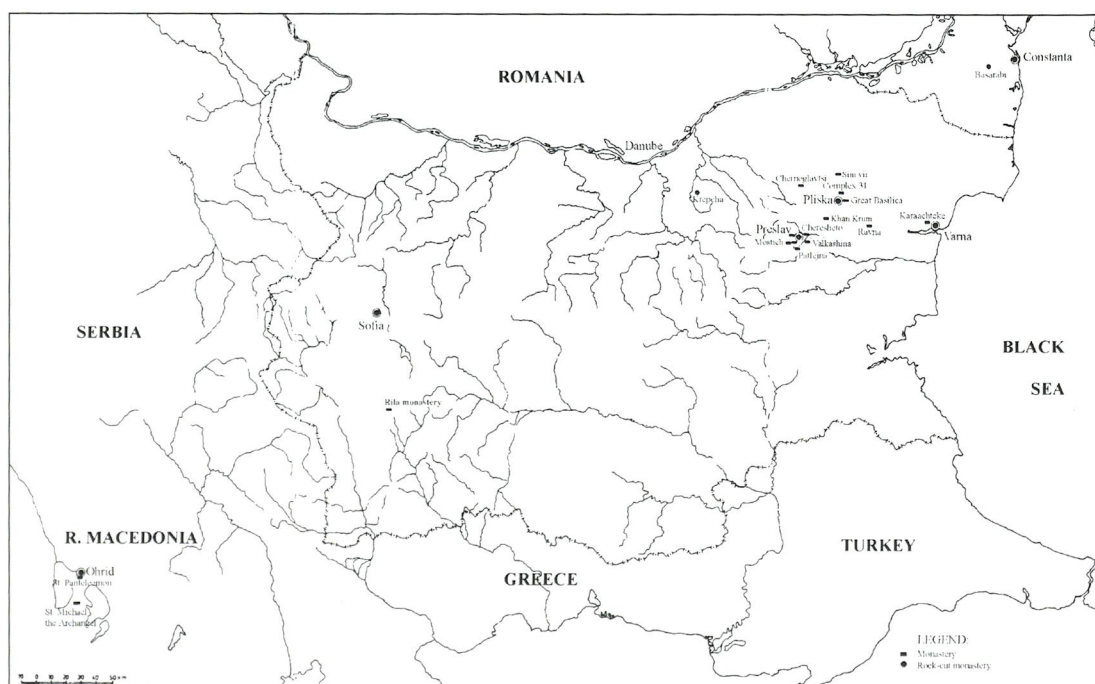


Fig. 1: Map of the 9th–10th c. monasteries in Bulgaria.

Monasteries, settlements, communications

The analysis of the topography of the rural monasteries outlines three groups of sites in accordance to their relation to the network of settlements and communications. The first group includes monasteries situated in dense and well-developed settlement networks. The closest surroundings, up to 15 km in radius of the monastery of Černoglavtsi and Sini vir in the north hinterland of Pliska, the monastery of Karaačteke near Varna and the rock-cut monastery of Basarabi were densely occupied by settlements, the number of which varied between 10 and 40.

As another group one can recognise monasteries which appeared in area important from the point of view of communication and defence systems. The three roads that pass near the monastery of Khan Krum and the close proximity of two paramount fortresses, Preslav and the so-called 'stronghold of Khan Omurtag' define the location of the monastery as very important from a strategic point of view despite the fact that only 4 settlements are attested 5 km in radius (Rašev 1982, 134; Kostova 1998, 117–120). The same can be stated for the monasteries of Sini vir and Ravna situated close to roads which linked the capital of Pliska with important destinations, such as Drăstâr, Varna, and Northeast Thrace (Rašev 1982, 131; Kostova 1998, 110–113). Though of minor importance, the two roads that pass along the monastery of Kalugeritsa must be noted too since the one which links Pliska with the Bulgar pagan shrine at Madara was the only break through the desert-like appearance of the latter (Feher 1934, 395–396).

The isolation and hard accessibility, in fact, are the main features of topography of the third group of monasteries. However, while the isolated position of the monastery of Kalugeritsa on the plateau of Madara rather resulted of the topographic continuity of the cult place from the preceding pagan period, the peripheral location of the two lavriotc monasteries, Krepča and the monastery of St John of Rila in the Rila mountain, was consciously demanded by their founders.

Therefore, it would not be far from the truth to say that the variety in topography of the rural monasteries in ninth-tenth century Bulgaria reflects the variety of the motives and reasons for their foundation. Perhaps a common reason

for the location of most of the monasteries, both cenobitic and lavriotc, that can be clearly outlined is the proximity of a fed water source, either a spring, or a river (e. g. Kalugeritsa, Černoglavtsi, Karaačtke, Ravna, Sini vir, and Krepča). Furthermore, despite the absence of written evidence, some of the factors of foundation can be guessed on the basis of the interrelation between the monasteries and the rest of the elements of the settlement and communication network. Thus, the appearance of most of the rural monasteries in regions that were densely inhabited and included in the communication system of the state prior to the foundation of the monastic houses imply that 'the flight outside the world' was not the leading motive of the founders whoever they were. Rather, they and the brotherhood looked for a more frequent contact with the laity, the most pious reason for which would have been missionary activity (Kostova 1998, 121). It is noteworthy, that one of the tasks which the hermit St John of Rila left to his followers through his Testament was to "establish the newly enlightened from your own race in the faith and instruct them to abandon the indecent pagan rites and the evil customs which they keep even after the acceptance of the holy faith" (Testament of John of Rila, 133). It must be noted, however, that the previously planned large monasteries with distinctive architectural appearances like Ravna and Karaačteke can hardly be seen as somewhat spontaneous foundations but rather as a result of the royal policy of intensive christianising. And there also arises the question about the possession of the land on which not only these two, but also the rest of the rural monasteries were built. The acts of donation of land by Prince Boris-Michael and King Symeon to the monasteries of St Kliment and St Naum in Ohrid show one of the possible ways for the appearance of a monastery on a certain place. Moreover, the expropriation of a part of the territory of a lay settlement by the monastery of Černoglavtsi indicates the exertion of rights of land ownership. Unfortunately, the identification of settlements in the hinterland of the monasteries only through field walks does not allow to assert whether some of the settlements followed the appearance of the monasteries or, in other words, whether the latter became a kind of generator for the development of the settlement

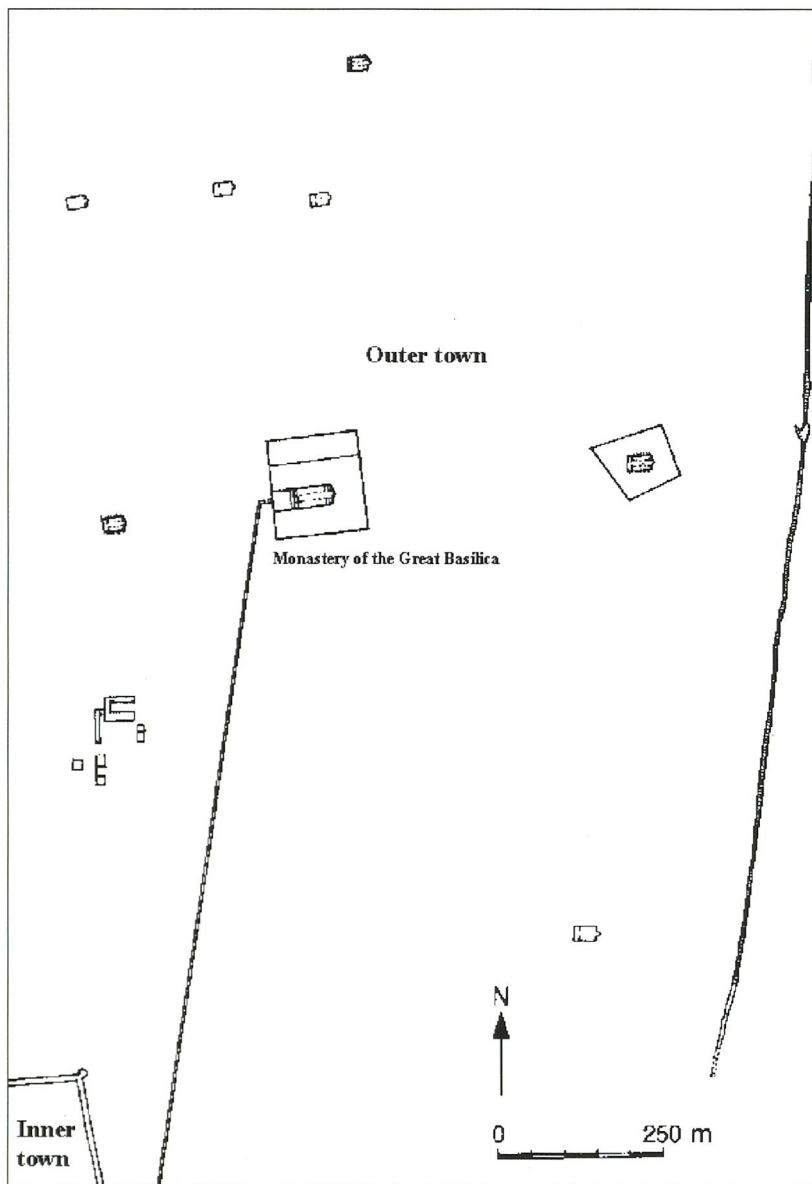


Fig. 2: Topographic sketch of the Outer town of Pliska and the location of the monastery of the Great Basilica.

network. Nevertheless, the revival of the "desert of Rila" where "no man has dwelled until now, but only wild animals" by the monastic settlement founded by St John of Rila (Testament of St John of Rila, 129) can be seen as a good example for the impact of rural monasteries on the landscape. In the same time, the transformation of a rock-cut granary on the second terrace of the hill of Krepča into a monastic cell and subsequently into a funerary chapel seemed to have provoked a conflict situation with the locals as indicated by an inscription found there (Popkonstantinov/Kronsteiner 1994, 47). Furthermore, the landscape might have been changed by the interaction between different types of monastic settlements as suggested for the monasteries of Khan Krum and Ravna and the neighbouring

hermitages, since the latter might have decided the exact location of the two cenobitic monasteries (Kostova 1998, 113–120). And finally, two monasteries at least, Ravna and Basarabi, can be seen as factors for the establishment of a new and specific communication (e. g. a pilgrimage route?) as implied by the appearance of the boot-graffiti on their walls (Kostova 1996, 140–166).

While the rural monasteries can be seen as a macro-level of monastic geography of 9th–10th century Bulgaria in general, the monasteries within in the immediate vicinity of the walled territories of the main administrative centres could be seen as a micro-level that might or might not reproduce the same relations to the landscape.

Monasteries in urban topography

Fully acknowledging the relativity of the term 'urban topography' in Bulgaria by the 9th–10th century, it is still the most appropriate term to be applied for the designation of the spatial appearance of Pliska, Preslav, and Ohrid which significantly differ from the mass type of unfortified settlements of light dwellings. The main feature of their planning is the hierarchical division of the space into zones, namely Inner town (i. e. citadel) and Outer town by means of defence works. The social implications of that urban topography must be the reason for the similar location of monasteries in the three administrative centres despite their different landscape. Thus, no monastery is attested until now in the citadels occupied by the residences of the ruler, they can only be found in the Outer towns and the immediate suburbs. Similar to the rural monasteries, the most intriguing but very difficult question concerns the urban property on which the monasteries were built. The question can be properly answered only in one case, and this is the already quoted foundation of the monastery of St Panteleimon that was done on a land donated to Kliment by Prince Boris-Michael (Life of St. Kliment of Ohrid, XXIII.67). As evident from the location of the monastery, the ruler had the right to lord with the ownership of the whole, or a part of the territory inside the fortress of Ohrid (fig. 4). Then it seems reasonable to assume that Boris-Michael exerted the same rights upon the construction of the Great

Basilica, when one of the settlements in the north-eastern sector of the Outer town was moved to free the space for the cathedral of Pliska and the related archiepiscopal residence (Vasilev 1995, 27–33). The later enlargement of the complex as a monastery suggests that the ownership of the land around the Great Basilica was granted either to the Church if the archbishop became a patron of the monastery, or to the monastery itself. It should be noted, however, that the important change in the urban topography of the Outer town of Pliska, the replacement of settlements by architectural complexes, was not accomplished only through religious foundations, but also through the construction of lay households as in the case of complex No. 31 in the neighbourhood of the Great Basilica (fig. 2).

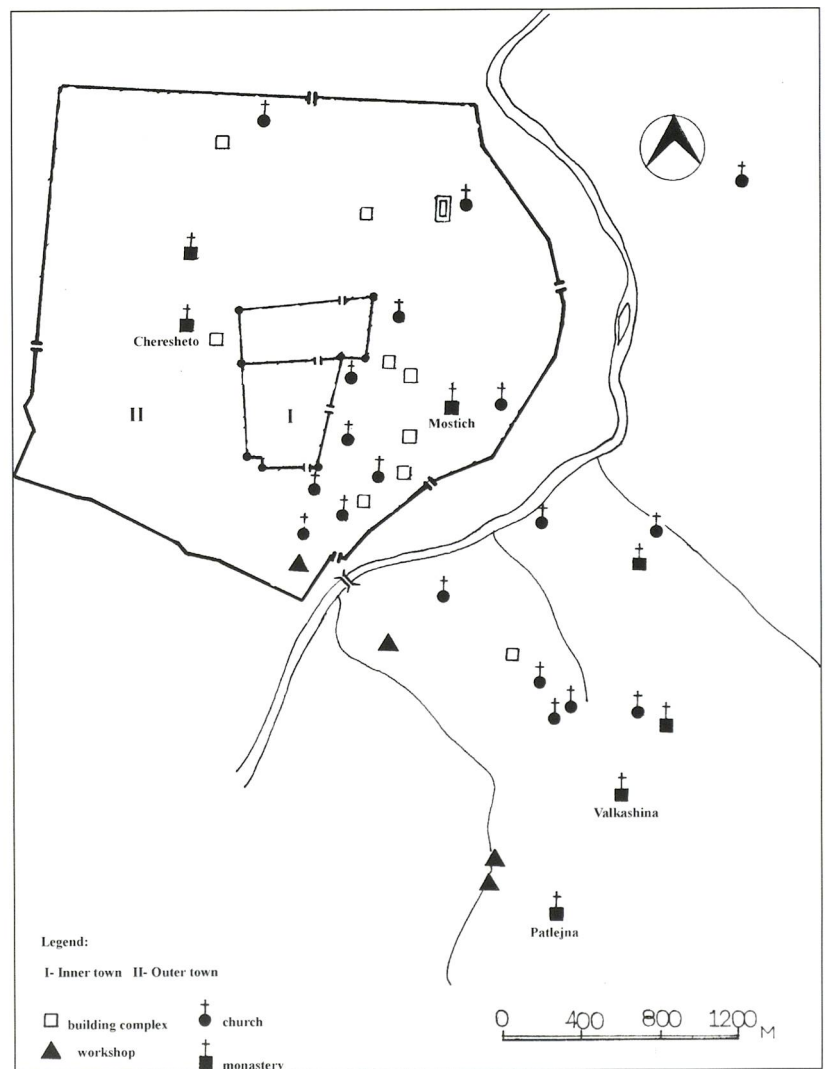
The same process of changing urban topography can be seen in the building history of 'the monastery of Mostič' in the Outer town of Preslav where a settlement of light dwellings was replaced by a lay household that finally was turned into a monastery. Such intensive building activity on a limited space implies a necessity of observing certain limits of the land property (fig. 3). Indeed, relevant examples for complying with limitation of urban property is the transformation of the Myrelaion, the private residence of Romanos Lecapenos in Constantinople, that was done simply by erecting a church within the area of the oikos (Striker 1981).

In contrast to the monasteries inside the walls, those in the suburbs did not survive a complicated building history by replacing any previous structures. However, their appearance was a product of the same factors described above. Thus, the monastery of St Archangel Michael outside the fortress of Ohrid on the opposite south bank of the lake became possible thanks not only to the funds, but also to the decree of Prince Boris-Michael and his son, King Symeon. It is very likely that the royal order concerned nothing else but the provision of land for the construction of the monastery. The monastery of Vālkašina might have appeared in the most densely built up area of the Preslav suburbia on the right bank of the river Tiča in a similar way though not definitely with royal support. A well-known example for a foundation of a monastery on a private estate in suburbia is the Evergetis monastery founded by a certain Paul on a family proasteion outside the

walls of Constantinople (Evergetis, 454). As for the monastery of Patlejna, the analysis of the excavated complex has shown, that it must be viewed as a lay household of the type of villa suburbana perhaps specialised in production of polychrome glazed ceramics, which at a certain moment was turned into a monastery (Kostova 2000, 193–196).

The latter example gives us a reason to bridge the discussion on monastic geography to the social topography of the monasteries, or in other words, to the more specific functions of the monasteries that might have a greater social significance than providing proper space for *vita contemplativa*. Thus, the geography of the patronage shows that the patrons could either be people with local connections like the high-ranking military officer Mostiā in Preslav, or they could be invested in the countryside from the administrative centre, as in the case of the foundations in Ohrid supported by

Fig. 3: Topographic plan of Preslav and the location of the monasteries.



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