

THE GETIC CAPITAL AT SBORYANOVO  
(NORTH-EASTERN BULGARIA)

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The discovery in 1982 of the famous Caryatids' tomb near the village of Sveshtary in north-eastern Bulgaria raised the question: to which Thracian dynasty did it belong (Fol *et al.* 1986; Chichikova 1992). In 1986 archaeological excavations began of the large fortified Thracian settlement in the middle of the great tumular necropolis in the Sboryanovo reserve (to the north-west of the town of Ispcrih, north-eastern Bulgaria). Evidence has been collected during 13 archaeological seasons which makes it possible to outline the basic characteristics of the Thracian city, built to be the new capital of the Getae<sup>1</sup>. During the last two decades the progress of field studies in north-eastern Bulgaria, as also in south-eastern Romania (Dobruja), has given us a real opportunity to define the economic, political, military, and cultural character of the area, with adequate information about some important centres of settlement, such as Cabyle, Seuthopolis and Pistiros (Dimitrov/Cicikova 1978; Chichikova 1985; Velkov 1991; Bouzek *et al.* 1996; Domaradzki/Taneva 1998; etc.).

The results of the archaeological investigations at Sboryanovo over the last 16 years have provided the evidence and the stimulus for an attempt to build up a comprehensive picture of Getic political, economic and cultural life in the region during the Early Hellenistic period. At the outset it was suggested that a powerful dynasty had resided there (Chichikova 1992, 79; 1994, 37: "la capitale de la dynastie locale de Svestary"). Furthermore, there was a well-grounded hypothesis that the city could be identified as the capital of Dromichait-Helis (Delev 1990, 93-6; Stoyanov 1996, 89-91). The concise presentation of the current investigations given below summarises what has been achieved.

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<sup>1</sup> In the period 1986-8 Mrs M. Chichikova was in charge of the team excavating the site. Since 1990 the author has been director, with Mrs Z. Mihaylova of the Ispcrih Museum as his deputy. For preliminary reports on the excavations to 1988, see Chichikova *et al.* 1992; Cicikova 1994. On the results to 1997, see Stoyanov 1996; 1997; 1999; Stoyanov *et al.* forthcoming. An exhaustive publication of the main results of the excavations to 1999 appears in Stoyanov (ed.) 2000.



Fig. 1. Plan of Sbornanovo reservation.

1. the fortified part of the Getic city; 2. Demir Baba Teke and the reservoir; 3. ancient quarry; 4. Late Roman fort; 5. Late Roman-Early Byzantine fort; 6. Dipsiz Göl lake; 7. Kamen Rid site.

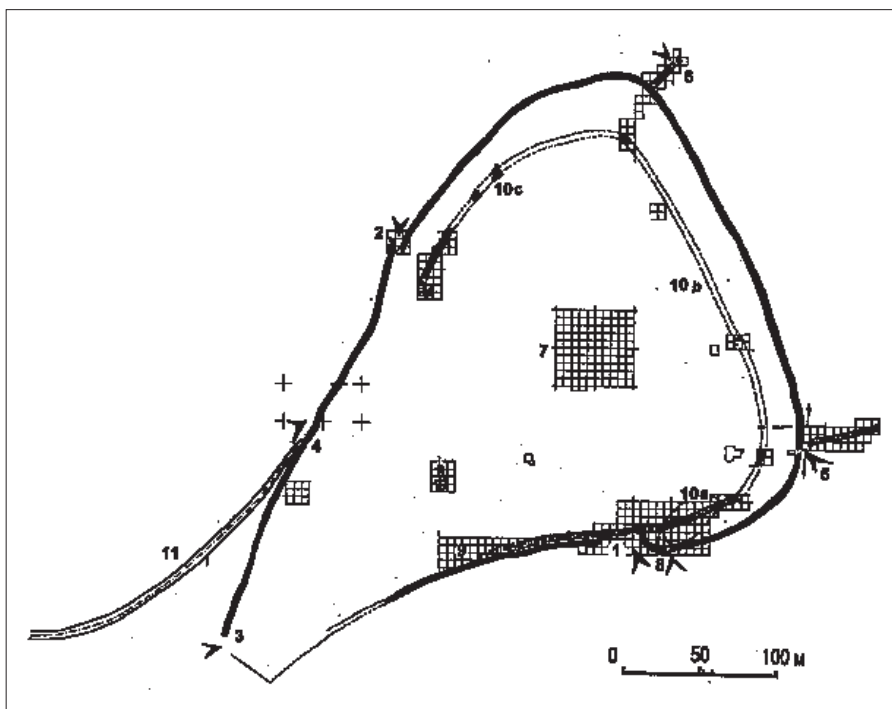


Fig. 2. Plan of the city on the plateau. Scale 1:5000.

1. South Gate; 2. North Gate; 3. South-West Gate (supposed); 4. West Gate; 5. entrance in the Southern diateichisma; 6. entrance in the Northern diateichisma; 7. central trench "The craftsmen's quarter"; 8. tower and postern; 9. building complex in sectors 200-201; 10. inner wall; 11. route to springs and sanctuary.

On a plateau, surrounded on three sides by the River Krapinets (Fig. 1, 1), a powerful fortification defending over 10 ha of territory had been erected (Fig. 2). The only access from the mainland was over a narrow, rocky ridge, about 40 m wide. The main curtain wall had a width of about 3.60 m and a length of 1200 m. It was faced with large rough-hewn blocks of local limestone and had a core of different size stones bonded with well-mixed clay. To enhance its hardness, the clay bond in the external part of the walls had been fired to brick. The walls are usually preserved to a height of 0.40-1.50 m, but, in the north-eastern corner, the main fortress wall is preserved up to about 2.20 m in eight well-moulded horizontal rows. The masonry, width, and ruins of the wall permit a reconstruction to a height of at least 7.0-7.20 m, with the parapet and roof up to 9 m (or more). The existence of a clay bond signifies that the curtain walls had been covered on top to prevent it

washing away. Bearing in mind the severe winters, the curtain top construction should have afforded the fortress defenders some protection against the cold and damp<sup>2</sup>. The considerable width of the wall would have enabled soldiers to pass freely or to foregather anywhere. That is probably why towers were erected only at the most significant points. For the time being one has been detected to the east of the South Gate (Fig. 2, 8); the existence of another tower or bastion is supposed about 80 m to the east. Just to the east of the tower a postern has been located. Detailed research of the curtain track, especially the key posts, will clarify this aspect of the fortification system.

There are distinct monumental gateways to the north and south (Fig. 2, 1-2). An important gate should have existed at the ridge to the south-west (Fig. 2, 3). A smaller entrance in the north-western wall had a vital significance for the city (Fig. 2, 4). A rock-cut road some 230 m long led to a spring in the lowlands, not far from the sanctuary discovered in the area of modern Demir Baba Teke (Balkanska 1998). Near the spring a solid stone reservoir had been constructed (Balkanska 1998, 46-8, plan 1.4, figs. 36-7; Figs. 1, 2; 2, 11). Both the North and South Gates were monumental constructions, revealing several stages of use, linked to the development of the settlement and its fortifications. Clearing the ruins of the North Gate over the last three seasons (Figs. 3-4) has provided the evidence to reconstruct it (Stoyanov/Mihaylova/Gancheva/Stoyanova 2000; Fig. 5).

In 1996 an inner wall was discovered, spreading over more than 5 ha. It has a width of 4 m and runs almost parallel to the east curtain wall and parts of the south and north curtains at a distance of 10-30 m from them, crossing through the western part of the city (Fig. 2, 10a-10c)<sup>3</sup>. In structure and height the inner wall differs considerably from the outer. It has entirely stone groundwork, only about 0.80 m in height in the section to the east of the South Gate (Fig. 2, 10a). The facing masonry is of rough-hewn stones, seldom reaching the size or appearance of blocks. In the entire eastern and western track (Fig. 2, 10a-c) it has just a low stone socle in one or two rows. Between the faces there are stone cross rows, thereby forming stone cells. These were filled with rammed clay and rubble admixture. The walls had been built up in height with clay, probably reinforced with a wooden framework. For the time being, it is hard to be specific about the character of the

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<sup>2</sup> In 1999 clear evidence was found that the towers and walls were covered with roofs of clay construction and local or Corinthian tiles. See Stoyanova 2000.

<sup>3</sup> Initially, considering the trace of the inner wall in the proximity of the North Gate and the lie of the land, we presumed that the inner wall crossed the plateau from the section mentioned straight to the south towards the south facing wall in sector 200. See Stoyanov 1999, 1078, fig. 2; Stoyanov *et al.* forthcoming, fig. 2. The trenches in this section revealed that the wall was probably further to the west: compare Fig. 1 and the part of K. Shkorpil's plan inset into Fig. 1.



Fig. 3. North Gate - western part (wing), from the north.

construction. In some sections the layer around the stone groundwork contains bits of clay fired to brick. That is to say, the wall had been built of fired adobe or, most probably, layers of well-mixed and rammed clay fired *in situ*. Against the background of the solid construction of stone blocks, and even, in some sections, well-moulded *quadrae* (Fig. 3), the inner wall is not that solid and its construction was carried out with obvious haste. It is evident that the fortress's defenders had been forced by circumstances to increase its defensive potential with a minimum drain on resources and time. The wish to increase defensive potential, especially to the south where there is a hill suitable for setting up siege devices, explains the enlargement of the south facing wall to the west of the South Gate in a section about 60 m in length<sup>4</sup>.

During this second stage of building (or earlier), two crossing walls (*diateichismata*) were attached to the east curtain with proper gates (Fig. 2, 5-6). The section that had been added to the defended area has been settled with reference to the ruins of buildings excavated at the southern *diateichismata*. The covering of gravel in the entrance passages of both gates provides further con-

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<sup>4</sup> On the preliminary interpretation as two parallel and consecutive walls divided by a narrow corridor, see Chichikova *et al.* 1992, 76-7, figs. 9-10; Cicikova 1994, 35, figs. 2,

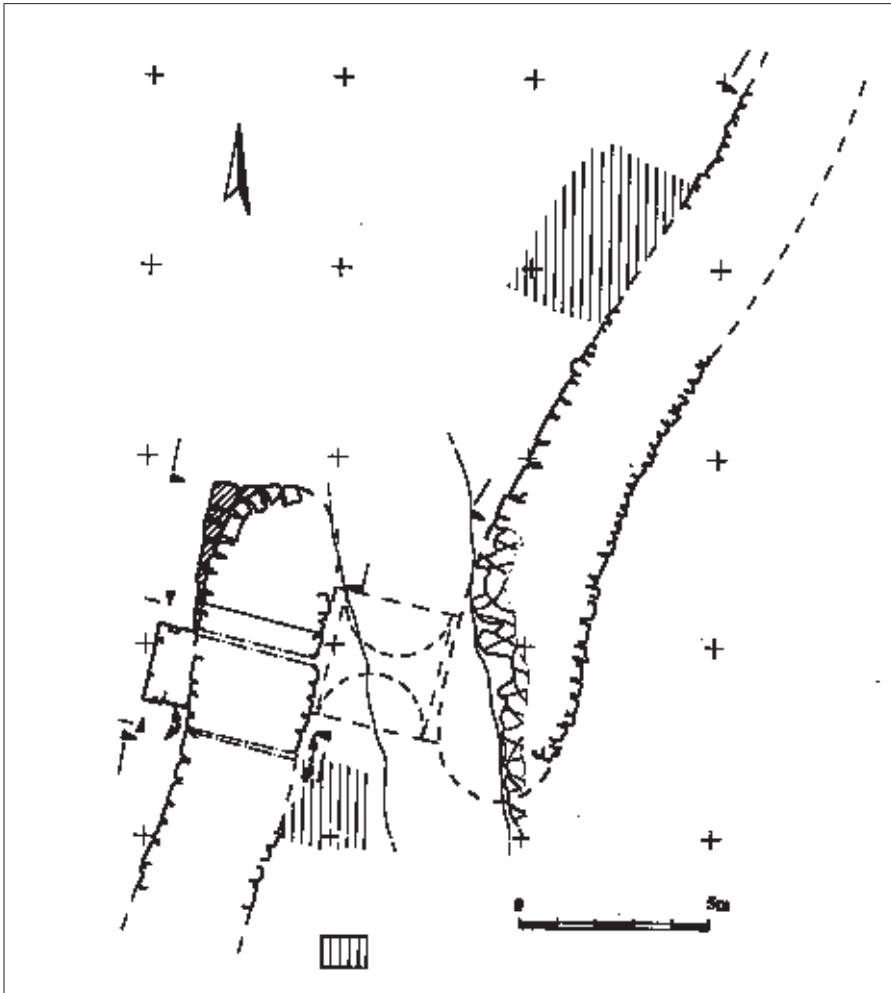


Fig. 4. Plan of North Gate; hatched areas = stone ruins. Scale 1:200.

firmation. Together with the site defended by the *diateichismata*, the inner city (citadel) occupies about 7.5 ha. So far, I know of no parallels for such planning and fortifications anywhere in Early Hellenistic Thrace or adjacent areas. The building of an inner circuit in the fortress, the reconstruction at the South and North Gates, and the building of the *diateichismata* are to be dated to the end of the 4th-beginning of the 3rd century BC. Stratigraphic observations give firm and relatively accurate evidence for dating both stages in the evolution of the fortification and the city as a whole. Amphora stamps are of principal importance for dating. The combination of their

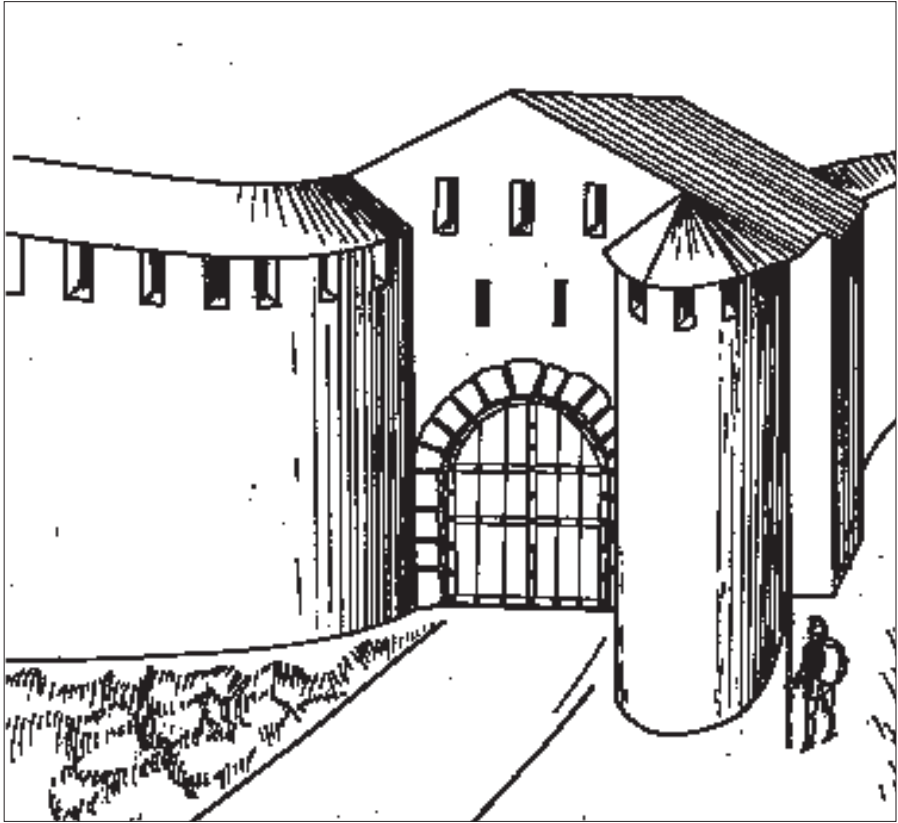


Fig. 5. Probable reconstruction of the North Gate (by the author).

chronology with that of the coins, imported pottery and some metal finds leads to the conclusion that the foundation of the city should be dated to the beginning of the last quarter of the 4th century BC<sup>5</sup>.

For the time being, the evidence from all trenches indicates that we are dealing with a deliberately-founded city of prime economic, political, and military significance. There is no evidence to date for the existence of any earlier settlement, however small – for example, of the 5th-first half of the 4th century BC – so the hypothesis of a new-built town is logical. The new

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<sup>5</sup> The existence of Thasian stamps belonging to group 335-325 BC of Debidour (1986) gave grounds to date the foundation of the city to about the 330s BC (see, for example: Stoyanov 1999, 1079). The revision in the chronology of Thasian stamps from the late group (Avram 1996), and the dating of coins and glazed pottery, indicate a later date (Stoyanov 2000d).

political situation in Thrace at the beginning of Lysimachus' reign probably provoked this great shift in the policy of Getic rulers in the 320s BC (Lund 1992, 19-50; Domaradzki 1992, 100-1).

The destruction of the Thracian city of Sboryanovo may be dated to the middle of the 3rd century BC, when a devastating earthquake struck, whose effects are visible in the necropolis (Christoskov/Stoyanov 2000), at the monumental tombs of the eastern necropolis (Gergova *et al.* 1995) and also in the Early Hellenistic level of the sanctuary at Demir Baba Teke. Evidence for this catastrophe has been distinguished more widely in north-eastern Thrace (Christoskov *et al.* 1995). Observations throughout the city show that after this date it was not restored. Some finds in the surface level indicate limited residence on the plateau at the end of the 2nd-1st century BC, but there are no traces of solid dwellings or the reconstruction of the curtain walls, so a genuine cultural level is out of the question.

The fortified area had been densely occupied by dwellings, workshops, and other buildings. During the second building stage the grid had probably been related to the eastern curtain. Local tradition was followed in the matter of architecture. Buildings were constructed with a solid wooden framework, plastered on both sides with a thick layer of well-mixed clay, fired to brick. This provided reasonable insulation against heat and damp. During the second building period most of the buildings had stone bases. The dwellings and the better-documented buildings are supposed usually to have had two rooms, with an entrance to the south or south-east. At the exit to the springs, as in the central excavation, there is evidence for a set of rooms; as in the previous case, it seems that they were connected with a courtyard or court with a pavement of small rubble. Probably, monumental buildings had existed in the city, imitating the tendency to a Hellenistic pattern. In 1998-9 the investigation of a large building complex (over 300 m<sup>2</sup>) began in sectors 200-201 (Fig. 2, 9). It lay against the south facing wall, and its double-pitched roof had been covered with tiles. According to the finds it had a military function, but perhaps some other (public?) use as well (Stoyanova 2000; Stoyanov/Mihaylova/Gancheva/Stoyanova 2000). One might consider that the architects and masons who built the tombs of the royal family and aristocracy stayed at Sboryanovo. This could be indicated by the above-mentioned buildings, discovered in different places but built in the same technique as the tombs.

The results of borings taken around the reservoir and to the north of the sanctuary indicate the existence of a suburb outside the fortified part of the city (Balkanska 1998, 15-6, 46-8). Data for residential and/or other buildings have been registered also to the north of the river elbow and to the north of Dipsiz göl (Turkish – the bottomless lake). One more outer suburb might have existed on the slope to the north of the fortress, an area suitable for habitation. This hypothesis is nourished by the information of K. Shkorpil that, between the fortresses on Kamen Rid (Fig. 1, 7), Kale



Dimitrovo (Fig. 1, 5), and that on the small hill to the north (Fig. 1, 4), there was “an old town, situated in the valley among them and on the peninsulae” (Shkorpil 1905, 485-6, Tabl. CVIII. 3 - I-III). This means that the fortified city and its outskirts may together have occupied a territory of about 20 ha (or even more), with a population of 3000-4000 plus. Add a garrison of at least 500 soldiers as well as cavalry, and the picture of a prime strategic centre is more than clear<sup>6</sup>.

The evidence of excavations on the site of “Kamen Rid”, the bore to the north of Ginina tumulus, the field surveys, and the aerial investigations testify to the existence of a sanctuary (?) on Kamen Rid and more settlements, farms or manufacturing suburbs in the vicinity of the Getic centre (Stoyanov 1999, 1078, fig. 1; 2000a). Over a more extensive area, the field surveys of recent years have shown an extraordinary concentration of settlements and necropoleis (5th-3rd centuries BC) within a radius of about 30 km of Sbornovo (Radev 1992, map; Stoyanov forthcoming a, map 1). In Thrace such an unusual demographic picture is appropriate only for the capital of a considerable state. It is my belief that the characteristics of the three vaulted tombs unearthed after the tomb in the Ginina tumulus, as well as the other tombs and graves of different types, support this hypothesis (*cf.* Fol *et al.* 1986; Chichikova 1992; Gergova 1996).

The quantity and variety of imports, especially the number of amphora stamps already discovered – 226 in about 5% of the studied territory – testify to the impressive consumptive and distributive capacities of the Getic city: 155 (about 70%) of the stamps are Thasian, 45 (about 20%) are Sinopean, and the rest are shared among Akanthos, Kos, Herakleia, Chersonesus, Rhodes, and other as yet unidentified centres. To these must be added the unstamped amphorae of Chios, Peparethos (so-called ‘Solokha I’), Corinth, Rhodes, Cnidus, Colophon, and other unrecognised centres – more than 12 overall. The regular and considerable volume of goods transported in amphorae is proved by the fact that in the Thasian stamps, all of late type, we have 40 *eponyms* out of 99 clear samples (dating from 323 to 257 BC according to the classification of A. Avram [1996]; starting earlier in that of M. Debidour [1986]). Twenty-five of the *eponyms* are present two or three times. There is well-documented import of black-glazed ware, other pottery types, and luxury goods (perfume, terracottas, strigils, etc.). It is obvious that the most developed destination in commercial and cultural relations is to the south-west: Thasos and the north-western part of the Aegean Sea. It is appropriate to suppose that Thasian merchants were the agents of trade between the Getic hinterland and a considerable part of the Aegean basin. The two other significant destinations were, evidently, the western Anatolian coast and its related islands, and the centres of the Pontic

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<sup>6</sup> For the principles of estimating the garrison, see Adam 1982, 161.

basin. It is interesting that, after visual study of the character of the clay, among the black-glazed pottery found at Sboryanovo, the production of the workshops of Thasos, Macedonia (?), Samos, Pergamum, and Asia Minor could be identified, as well as that of Attica. Probably most of the imports came into Thrace in the greater and more important amphora cargoes.

Taking the city to be the political, economic, and cultural centre of the Getic state, it should be associated with lots of coins (Dimitrov 2000). Coins point out clearly that the principal direction of contacts for Sboryanovo had been towards the Greek colonies of the western Pontic coast. It is well-known that, because of their low value, bronze coins were mostly distributed close to the minting centres, or in adjacent regions in regular relations with them. The western Pontic issues are representative of their validity as a means of payment, and furthermore of the regular relations of the Thracian city in Sboryanovo with the western Pontic colonies, especially Odessos. The most direct route linking both cities is by land (see Fig. 6). The coins testify to apparent relations with Histria, conducted via the River Danube and its tributary, the Krapinets (the routes of transport amphorae). They are documented by the treasure from the village of Todorovo (50 silver drachmas and 3 staters of Alexander type). A small Histrian coin, as well as the Histrian coins issued in Sboryanovo, may prove the frequent flow and great value of Histrian coins at Sboryanovo. Moreover, the coins of Lysimachus, the Anatolian drachmas of Alexander the Great type, and probably the Macedonian bronze coins, are indications of the contacts of Sboryanovo with other areas. The rest of the archaeological material, and the information for independent minting in Histria (315-305 BC), yielded by the treasure from Todorovo, make clear the actual condition of the Pontic colonies during the reign of Lysimachus: in contrast with the statement of Diodoros, they had been allowed to develop their traditional relations with Asia Minor and the hinterland of Thrace without obstruction (Dimitrov 1997; 2000).

One of the most interesting finds in the city is of six bronze coin imitations, three of Histrian silver coins, two of Alexander the Great drachmas, and one of his tetradrachma. Furthermore, in the central part of the city a bronze-casting for coin has been discovered (weighing 0.94 g). The imitations of coins made in this cast are anepigraphic. The archaeological context of these finds includes crucibles and furnace utilities (Stoyanov/Mihaylova 1996; 2000). These imitations probably had no political significance and their production can be explained by the demands of local trade. Thus, in the last quarter of the 4th century BC and in the first half of the 3rd century BC, the Getic centre at Sboryanovo had the vivid features of a city with a developed domestic and foreign market, based on the exchange of goods and commodities for money (Dimitrov 2000).

The city had been a prosperous production centre. The rich collection of tools, articles, and waste (more than 300 artefacts) testifies to metalworking workshops, producing tools, iron and bronze armour, and jewellery, and

toreutics of bronze, silver, and gold. There were workshops at three localities of the city at least (Stoyanov/Mihaylova 1996). The explicit data for the production of tools, arms, jewellery, and toreutics permit a reconsideration of already known chance finds of matrices and other instruments of toreutics, and also the evidence for iron working. Definitely, some of the toreutics and jewellery, from the Sveshtari necropolis (Fol *et al.* 1986, ills. 9, 14, 16-7), as well as the well-known frontal of a harness from Sveshtari, had been produced by local workshops. Most likely, the golden Pegasus from Vazovo was also made in the Getic capital (Stoyanov/Mihailova 2000). There are grounds for supposing that metalwork was produced for the local Thracian and Getic market (Stoyanov 2000d). Obviously, the import of goods in transport amphora – mainly wine and olive oil – had to be paid for with money or, more often, in goods of equivalent value. The conditions and data for the intensive farming and stock-breeding (Stoyanov 2000b; Ninov 2000) indicate that a considerable part of the export from the Getic lands would probably have been cereals, livestock, hides, and other agricultural raw materials and semi-manufactured goods.

The fairly large quantity and, especially, variety of wheel-made local tableware of grey, grey-black or black colour, gives some possibility of distinguishing the different centres of production (Nikov 2000). The above-mentioned existence of sufficient quantities of clay of a suitable quality in the vicinity gives grounds for suggesting the existence of local pottery workshops, probably situated outside the residential part of the plateau, meeting the needs of the city and the region. Combining typological analysis with laboratory analysis of samples of pottery and local deposits of clay will answer this important question.

The combination of evidence on settlement patterns, cemeteries, coin hoards, and single finds from south-eastern Romania and north-eastern Bulgaria enables us to outline the probable extent of the territory of the Getic state in the 4th-3rd centuries BC (Fig. 6). From the old residence near Borovo at Yetrus to the west (*cf.* Stoyanov 1998b, 85-7; forthcoming b) the border may have stretched to the south of the stronghold at Kralevo, passed through the Shumen plateau (with two or three forts), then to the north-east on the Voevodsko and Stana plateaus (with their great fortified settlements). This line has another which may be set against it: that has as the most north-westerly point the fortress at Golyamo Eleme mountain at Kaspichan, with a front to the north; it includes the fortified settlement at Dragoevo to the south-west and the fortresses along the western periphery of the Provadia plateau at Yankovo, Kostena river and, to the south-east, one at Mogila. Then, the border probably turned northwards along the valley of the Souha to Lake Oltina on the Danube (where, after *ca.* 275 BC, the large Getic settlement of Satu Nou appeared). To the north of the Danube, the territory on both banks of the lower reaches of Argesh-Dimbovitsa, reaching Yalomitsa and Vedya, was incorporated. The city at Sboryanovo is at the centre of this

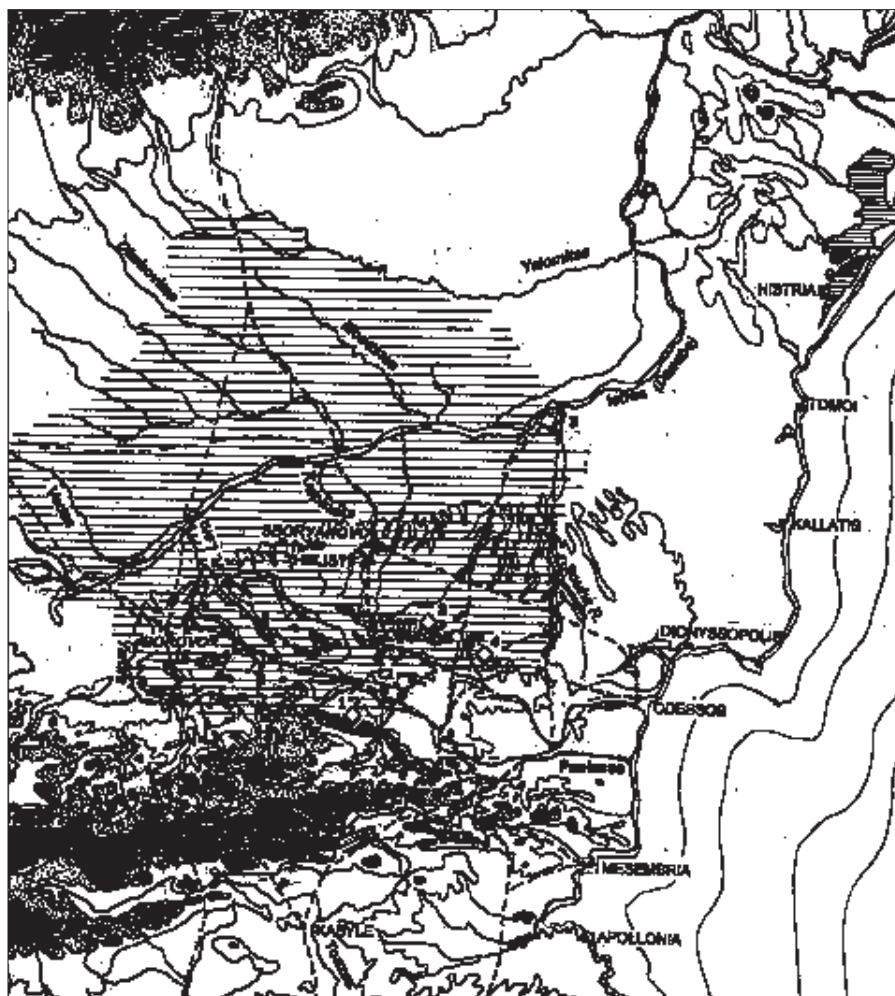


Fig. 6. Map of north-eastern Thrace with supposed territory of the Getic state in the Early Hellenistic period. 1. fortified settlement of Kravevo; 2. forts on Shumen plateau; 3. the Lisy Vrah fortress on Voevodsko plateau; 4. the Stana plateau fortress; 5. the fortified settlement at Satu Nou.

territory and of the probable routes through the region (Stoyanov forthcoming a, map 1; forthcoming b, map; *cf.* Fig. 6).

Even this brief presentation of the Getic city at Sboryanovo confirms the idea of identifying it as the capital of a powerful Getic dynasty of the Early Hellenistic period. It has to be pointed out that there is as yet no evidence

of any other Getic site throughout the entirety of the tribal territory able to compete with it in economic capacity, fortifications (*cf.* Sîrbu/Trohani 1997) or the presence of a large necropolis with monumental tombs such as those found in Sboryanovo. The only Getic city to be mentioned in written sources during this time is Helis – the residence of Dromichaites, to which he brought the captured Lysimachus. The city has been unearthed and we know now that it emerged in the political history of the region as a comet and was destroyed by an earthquake.

Comprehensive information about the Thracian capital at Sboryanovo and the related territory poses some questions: whether the establishment of Celtic enclaves in the region of Eastern Haemus and, especially, the foundation of their kingdom in eastern Thrace, were disastrous for the economic and cultural development of north-eastern Thrace. That the city reached its apogee in the first half of the 3rd century BC (until the disastrous earthquake of *ca.* 250 BC) suggests some other explanation. On the other hand, the question is whether the Getic capital was relocated. In conjunction with the ideas of various numismatists about the existence of an imitative minting centre in the Yantra-Roesenski Lom region from the 3rd century BC onward, I suggest that after the collapse of the capital at Sboryanovo (= Helis?), the political and economic centre of the Getae returned to its previous locality in the region of Borovo. The concentration of coin imitations in the lower basin of Rousenski Lom in the 2nd-1st centuries BC have led D. Ivanov to suggest that the centre of political and economic life in the area was then based somewhere in the Pirogovo-Rousse-Nikolovo territory (Ivanov 1985, 60; *cf.* Stoyanov (ed.) 2000, map 2).

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