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Abstract

Death was a part of life, perhaps a frequent and highly visible aspect of daily life in a Late Antique town such as the anonymous city at Golemo Gradiste, village of Konjuh. The residents went about their daily activities of farming, crafts, food preparation, textile production, mining, and metallurgy. The several skeletons found within the city, i.e., two children probably killed by falling debris and several cist burials on the northern terrace, indicate that death was frequent and familiar: for the residents of the city the threat of violent and unexpected death was always present.

Keywords

Golemo Gradiste, Konjuh, human osteology, cist burial, inhumation, Late Antiquity

Disciplines

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LIFE — AND DEATH — IN THE LATE ANTIQUE CITY AT KONJUH

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Abstract

Death was a part of life, perhaps a frequent and highly visible aspect of daily life in a Late Antique town such as the anonymous city at Golemo Gradište, village of Konjuh. The residents went about their daily activities of farming, crafts, food preparation, textile production, mining, and metallurgy. The several skeletons found within the city, i.e., two children probably killed by falling debris and several cist burials on the northern terrace, indicate that death was frequent and familiar; for the residents of the city the threat of violent and unexpected death was always present.

The heavily fortified but anonymous Late Antique city located at Golemo Gradište, village of Konjuh, rose beside the Kriva River, about halfway between Kratovo and Kumanovo, in the county of Kratovo. The city within the fortification walls consists of three parts, the northern terrace, the acropolis, and a southern area—not investigated—that may have served as a refuge. (Fig. 1) The major part of the city stood on the northern terrace, below the separately fortified fortress on the acropolis. During the last 17 years its excavation was the main focus of a long term international project of Gettysburg College in the United States and the archaeological department of the National Museum of Macedonia, now the National Archaeological Museum of Macedonia, in Skopje. (Sanev, Snively, & Stojanoski 2012; Sanev & Kufojanakis 2013; www.konjuh.mk)

According to available evidence, the city was established during the 5th century and substantially re-built in the 6th century, probably in the 2nd quarter of that century, as part of the Justinianic re-fortification of the

Balkans. The fortress on the acropolis was created at that time, as well as the fortification walls surrounding the entire city. Some catastrophe occurred during the second half of the 6th century, most probably a barbarian attack; the Episcopal Basilica and other buildings on the northern terrace were damaged and ceased to function. Much of the population fled for safety from the lower town to the acropolis, where an early 7th century destruction took place. Meanwhile the northern terrace was given over to herding, probably truck farming, limited habitation, and burials.

The evidence provided by excavation suggests that the residents of the anonymous town carried out the usual activities of daily life in the 6th century, although its location within a mining region and its probable function as an administrative center for that region meant that a significant number of laborers and administrators would have been involved in processing iron and lead-silver ores from the mines and arranging for transport of ores, ingots, and/or finished

metal products. The inhabitants also included farmers, shepherds, stone masons, people involved in textile production and food preparation and storage, and - of course - Christian religious activities.

Life in such a provincial city in the 6th century was hazardous and uncertain. In addition to the relatively low life expectancy resulting from accidents, pollution, and ordinary diseases, the Late Antique Balkans experienced earthquakes and other natural disasters, plagues, and recurring barbarian invasions. Undoubtedly the necropoleis around the two known funerary churches and the other cemeteries outside the city preserve the skeletons of men, women, and children who died from a wide variety of causes, both natural and resulting from human action.

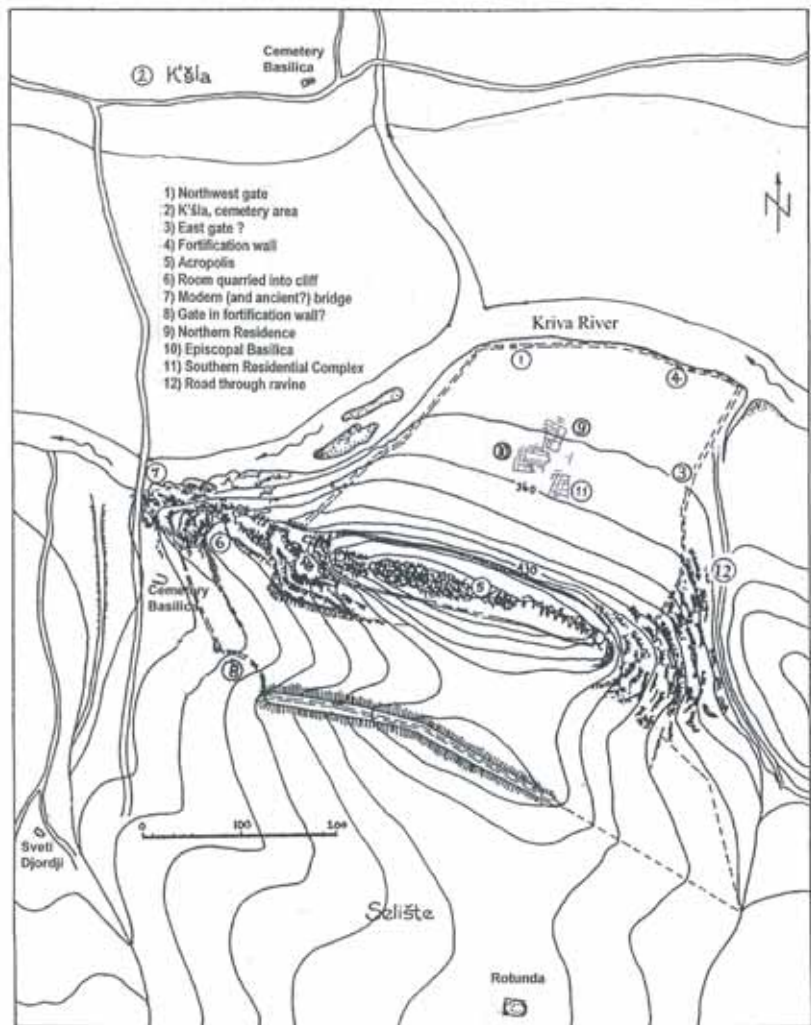


Fig 1. Plan of the site

The first cemetery known to be associated with the city is located on the K'šla plateau northwest of the site. It was investigated by a salvage excavation project in 1995, preceding the construction of a railroad to Bulgaria. The plateau served as a cemetery from the Roman period, for a settlement whose location remains unknown. Forty-six Early Roman graves were excavated, dug into a tumulus at the west end of the plateau. (Ivanovski 1996) On the eastern slope of the plateau a small three aisle basilica came to light; a large vaulted tomb in the south aisle held several burials on two levels.

On the southwest side of the city, in 2014 another funerary church was discovered. It stood on a knoll, near the road that led from the bridge across the Kriva River to a major gate into the south side of the city. Only one, partly articulated skeleton (#10) was found south of the church, but scattered human bones pointed to numerous burials, which had been heavily disturbed

by agricultural activity over many years. No evidence of graves was found on the north side of the church, where Neolithic pottery appeared just below the level from which the north wall of the church had been constructed. Clearly both the K'šla plateau and this hill below the southwest fortification wall were places of burial for residents of the Late Antique city.

For the most part, our project has chosen not to excavate cemeteries for several reasons. First, the focus of our investigations is on the space within the city walls. Secondly, in order to excavate graves and to investigate burial practices and the pathology of the deceased, a great deal of time and patience as well as the presence of a forensic anthropologist would be required¹.

¹ The project has been fortunate to have archaeologists with anthropological training on site when several of the burials found on the acropolis and on the northern terrace were discovered, i.e., Charlotte Maxwell Jones in 2004 and 2005, Matt Nichol in 2009, Katherine Haas Pompeani, now ABD in Physical Anthropology at the University of Pittsburgh, in 2012 and 2016, and Radomir Ivanović in 2014 and 2016. Their names in parentheses after the description of a burial refer to their reports on the skeletons or

With the exception of one area on the K'šla plateau, the burials or skeletons excavated by the project have been found by chance within the fortifications of the city. The exception was the opening of a few trenches on top of the K'šla plateau in 2012 and 2013. A large inscribed grave stele had been brought to our attention by a local farmer, who stated he had found it decades ago while plowing on land owned by his family on the plateau (although recent information from another local resident, who worked on the 1995 salvage excavations, suggests that the stele was found during those investigations). A few disturbed cremation burials were excavated.² Tiny bits of gold leaf, lamp fragments, and a semi-legible coin tentatively dated to the

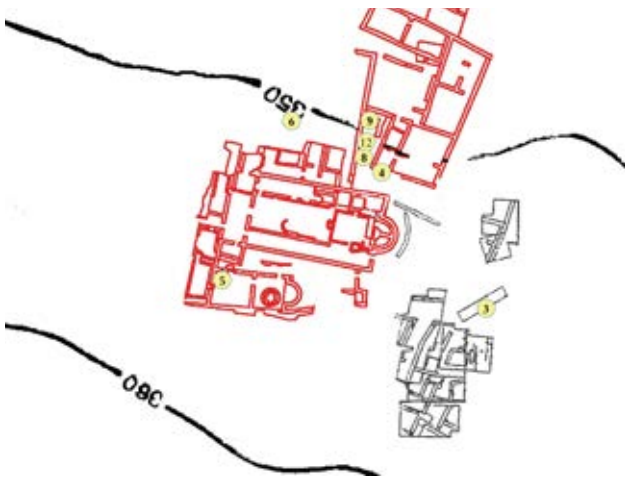


Fig 2. Positions of graves on the north terrace

2nd century came to light. The most interesting find was a glass object identified as a breast pump!

Of ten Late Antique burials or skeletons encountered in our excavations, two were found on the acropolis, one was associated with a church outside the fortification wall, and seven were found on the northern terrace. (Fig 2)

In 2004, at the east end of the acropolis (Sector IG, Trench 4), the skeletons of two children were found, resting on a steep slope above a rock-cut staircase. Initially these discoveries were interpreted as burials, with heads to the west and feet toward the east,

but after the excavation of the second skeleton, it seemed more likely that they had been killed, perhaps by falling debris, and left where they fell.

burials; those reports, along with those of anthropologist Fanica Veljanovska from the Archaeological Museum, are included in the project documentation.

² Mihail Stojanoski supervised the excavation.

The first skeleton (#1) had been severely disturbed and damaged, by roots, rodents, and our excavation before we recognized it. The right half of the lower body was resting on rocks at a higher level than the rest of it. The elbows were bent so the hands rested on the stomach. The skeleton was recovered in ca. 450 fragments, with a few bones entirely missing. (Maxwell Jones 2004a)

The second skeleton (#3) from the acropolis was excavated in 2005. It was in somewhat better condition, although it too was lying amidst debris and directly on top



Fig 3. Grave # 3

of one step of the rock-cut staircase. (Fig. 3) The right arm was bent across the chest, but the left one stretched out to the left. The left leg was bent at the knee and lay under the right one. Overall this skeleton does not give the appearance of a burial. (Maxwell Jones 2005)

Both skeletons were those of children, 8-12 years of age, with the second one perhaps a year or so younger. No artifacts were found with them. Although we have hypothesized that they were killed by falling debris, fatal injuries could not be identified on the skeletal remains.

At the end of the 2004 season, after five seasons of excavation on the acropolis, two test trenches were dug on the northern terrace. One (Sector II, Trench 3) revealed a drain and several cist graves, some of which had been disturbed and partly destroyed.

Fig.4. Grave # 2



Fig.5. Grave # 4

Apparently a small cemetery was established here, ca. 20 m southeast of the Episcopal Basilica, whose presence was still unknown to us in 2004. Two cist graves, side by side, were intact, and one was excavated.

Four roughly worked stone slabs had been placed upright on each side of the grave, together with one slab each at head and foot, to form a box or cist. Six roughly worked stone slabs were then placed across the top of the vertical ones. The stone at the west end of the south side of the grave was a re-used piece of an inscribed block, interesting epigraphically for its 2nd century inscription mentioning Julius but not relevant for this burial. The skeleton (#2) was that of a male, extended on his back with arms crossed on the chest. (Fig. 4) The deceased was certainly over 60 years of age and probably considerably older. He had done heavy physical labor, perhaps for much of his life. By the time of his death, he had lost most

of his teeth and was suffering severely from arthritis. (Maxwell Jones 2004b; Veljanovska 2004)

Above the remains of the Northern Residence (Sector II, Trench 27) in 2007 a small child, 4-6 years old, had been buried in a carefully built cist grave with an east-west orientation. (Fig. 5) Stone slabs formed the sides; bricks marked the ends. Prior to the discovery of the cist, a rectangular tile with a cross engraved on one side was found next to it. Its size matches the size of the cist so we can assume that it was used as a cover for the grave rather than as a grave marker. The skeleton (#4) was found laid on its left side, buried without any grave goods. (Sanev, Snively, & Stojanoski 2011, p. 350)

In 2009 a cist grave was discovered in the northwest corner of an annex of the Episcopal Basilica (Sector II, Trench 44), more specifically in the room just west of the baptistery on the south side of the basilica; it may have served as a catechumeneion, but its function cannot be definitely determined. Unfortunately the chronological relationship of the burial to the church remains uncertain; the grave was constructed either shortly before or shortly after the basilica was damaged and ceased to function.

The cist was similar to those described above, with three stone slabs on north and south sides, one each at head and foot, and six cover slabs. The occupant was an adult male (#5) between 35 and 45 years old, ca. 1.60 m in height, of muscular but slender build. (Fig. 6) His left arm was bent sharply across the left side of the chest; the right



Fig.6. Grave # 5

arm rested on the stomach. There are two items of note. A healed fracture of the left femur suggests that the man would have walked with a limp or even needed a cane. A small bronze cross, found in the chest area, was probably worn by the deceased rather than being a grave offering. (Nichol 2009; Snively 2011, p. 191, fig 2) This burial within a church raises several issues, to which we shall return.

North of the Episcopal Basilica (Sector II, Trench 68), in 2012 in the remains of an unidentified structure, another cist grave held the remains of an adult male (#6), between 26 and 34 years of age at time of death. The cist had been damaged by falling debris so that the slabs on the south side had fallen away and the cover slabs were much disturbed. It was unclear whether 13 bronze coins found nearby had been buried with the deceased. The occupant of the cist had been interred with head at the west end, facing east. The arms were bent with hands clasped over the pelvis. Although the deceased had at some time suffered a back injury, it had completely healed, and the cause of death is unknown. (Haas 2012)

At the west side of the Northern Residence, in a triangular space between the southeast wing and the west wall of the building (Trench 98, Sector II), two skeletons came to light in 2014 and one in 2016. The stratigraphy and the building history are complicated in this area. Three large pits had been dug into the triangular space, apparently after the destruction of the residence, i.e., the west wall and the southeast wing. Whatever the original purpose of those pits might have been, presumably storage, they had gone out of use and had been partly filled or, in the case of the southern pit, had been completely filled, before they were re-used for burials.

The first skeleton (#8) was buried in a cist grave oriented east-west; the grave rested on top of the filled-in southern pit. It was an adult male, buried with his hands at his sides and without grave goods. Unfortunately over time the fill in the pit settled, so that the legs and pelvis of the skeleton



Fig.7. Grave # 8

were found about half a meter below the feet, upper body, and head. (Ivanović 2014) (Fig. 7)



Fig.8. Grave # 12

The second burial was oriented north-south in order to fit into the middle pit; the head was at the north side and feet to the south. Two or three stone slabs marked the edges of the grave, but no proper cist had been constructed and no capstones were present. The body may have been wrapped in a shroud. The complete and well-preserved skeleton (#12) was that of an adolescent, 11-13 years old. (Fig. 8) The left hand rested on the pelvis, but the right arm was bent so that the hand was next to the head. He or she may have died of long-term complications resulting from injuries to neck and head. (Ivanović 2016; Haas Pompeiani 2016)

During excavation of the northern and largest pit, a number of large stones were found nearly a meter below its top. A skeleton (#9) appeared, poorly preserved and lying on her left side in a contracted position against the south face of the pit. (Fig. 9) The position of the body and the lack of

Fig.9. Grave # 9



grave construction suggest that the body was dumped into the pit rather than formally buried. The skeleton was that of an adult female, with a bronze ring on one finger and an earring found at the left side of the skull; the ring and earring appear to have been items of personal adornment rather than grave goods. (Ivanović 2014)

What conclusions can we reach from this material about life and death in the Late Antique city at Golemo Gradište?

First of all, the burial of a man wearing a cross within an annex room of the Episcopal Basilica raises more questions than it answers. If he was buried there while the church was still functioning, then he may be an example of the custom of burying highly respected members of the clergy within the church they served. (Snively 1998, 494-495; Cantino Wataghin 1999, 159-160) If, as seems more likely, he was buried after the church had gone out of use, he might still be a clergyman, buried within an abandoned basilica because it seemed an appropriate place.

The burials on the northern terrace illustrate the changing views of the residents of a settlement about what was intramural and what was extramural. Fairly clearly, the northern terrace, once abandoned by most of its inhabitants, was no longer considered a part of the city and was therefore a legitimate place for burial. This phenomenon, i.e., the changing perception of what was inside the settlement and what lay outside, not necessarily corresponding with the line of fortification walls, has been observed at a number of Late Antique sites. (Snively 1998, pp. 496-498)

It is not clear how the residents of the city in the late 6th century or later, i.e., presumably living on the acropolis, chose where to bury their dead. The cemetery at K'šla had been functioning at least since the 2nd century AD, and there is some very tentative evidence to suggest that both the basilica there and the one aisle church southwest of the city were built in the 5th century. The information is insufficient to say how long burial continued in those two clearly extramural necropoleis. Perhaps in a precarious situation, burial on the nearby terrace appeared safer than in more distant cemeteries.

With the exception of two skeletons (#s 9 and 12) in pits, the bodies found on the northern terrace had been buried with some care in well constructed cist graves but without grave goods. Apparently the cist was the standard type of built grave during the second half of the 6th century at this city. No evidence of grave markers has been observed. It is interesting to note the contrast with the burial found at the new southwest cemetery church, where no trace of a grave construction was observed, and with the elaborate two-story vaulted tomb containing several occupants in the small basilica at K'šla.

This discussion would not be complete, however, without a mention of the empty cist grave found in 2007 in Sector IIA, Trench 1, northeast of the Northern Residence. Oriented roughly east-west, the cist included a re-used architectural block with a moulding at the east end. The usual vertically placed stone slabs formed the sides of the cist in its eastern half; they created an even and level surface on the top. The western part, however, consisted of built walls, although they could represent later intervention. The west end was open. The cist occupied the northeast corner of a room or perhaps of a space marked off by one course of stones, located within the walls of a larger room of an earlier phase of construction. Preservation was insufficient to describe the delineated space as a precinct or the foundation of a structure enclosing the cist

grave.

As mentioned above, the assumption is that the burials on the northern terrace took place after the catastrophic event that caused most of the population to flee to the acropolis for refuge, i.e., sometime in the last decades of the 6th century. Several burials must have been placed in abandoned but still standing buildings on the terrace, as indicated by the roofs and walls that eventually collapsed over them.

The skeletons found in association with the Northern Residence (#s 4, 8, 9, and 12) present some chronological questions. The pits in the triangular space at the west side of the residence had gone out of use and had been partly or completely filled in, before bodies were buried in or above them. One of the stones employed to construct the cist for skeleton #8 was a broken fragment of a screen slab from the Episcopal Basilica; the church had ceased to function and was being robbed but was probably still standing by the time of that burial. Skeletons #9 and #12 were deposited while the triangular space was accessible and while the middle and northern pits were still partly open. Skeleton #4, the small child, however, had been found above the east wall of the triangular space, above the collapsed roof and walls of the residence, and in association with several poorly built walls that appeared just below the modern surface. Thus the child's burial is later than the ones found in the re-used pits and, since nothing was found to provide a date for it, could even be a century or several

centuries later.

Finally, even the small number of skeletons discussed here demonstrates all too clearly that life in a provincial city was difficult and dangerous, or even "nasty, brutish, and short". The young child in the cist grave reminds us that infant mortality was high in antiquity, although we do not have the kind of evidence found at Stobi, where graves of children and infants lined the fortification walls. The young teenager from the middle pit in the Northern Residence showed healed fractures and may have died from complications of a childhood injury. At least two of the adult skeletons also had suffered and survived bone fractures. Notably the man buried in the church probably had a life long limp as a result of his injury.

The very fact that at least three individuals among those buried on the terrace did survive serious injuries points to the availability of medical care in this provincial city. The nature of the healed injuries suggests intervention on the part of trained professionals rather than recovery as a result of luck and benign neglect.³

One man had reached old age, but after doing heavy physical labor during his life and suffering painfully from arthritis in his later years. The skeletons demonstrating healed trauma as well as the two children on the acropolis show that for those living in this city the threat of serious injury or violent and unexpected death was always present.

³ We thank Katherine Haas Pompeani for this observation.

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