

The Hellenistic Harbour of Thessaloniki and the Ekklesiastikē Skala*

When Thessaloniki was founded in the late 4th century BCE, it was a city significantly smaller compared to the Roman one of the mid-3rd century AD¹ (fig. 1). The Roman city of this era is well known to us, as its walls followed more or less the same line as those that are preserved today. However, little is known about the fortifications of Cassander's Thessaloniki.

Remains of the Hellenistic wall were detected at the north-eastern corner of the existing fortification². Right there must have been the Hellenistic Acropolis and then the first Roman one, of which the south-eastern corner of the wall was discovered by excavations³ (fig. 2). The Hellenistic wall followed the same direction as the Roman one on the east, as far as the Agiou Dimitriou Street, where a corner tower was excavated⁴. The south part of the wall would have been parallel with the present Agiou Dimitriou Street⁵. The northern limit of the Hellenistic city coincided with the present one at its eastern end, while the western limit has not been traced. The area that the Hellenistic city covered has the highest altitude (145m at the highest point of the Acropolis) and the steepest inclines (30 % to 10 % above Olympiados Street, 8 % to 6 % up to Agiou Dimitriou Street)⁶.

Within the walls of the Roman city, burials were detected by excavations, which help to confirm the outline of the initial city⁷. The *intra muros* burials were forbidden in the Greco-Roman (but also in the Christian) world by a strict and repetitive legislation⁸. However, within the walls of Thessaloniki, there have been detected until now ten Roman burial sites. The explanation is not difficult: All these sites pre-exist the Roman fortification of the middle third century. This means that, when these tombs were dug, they followed faithfully the ethical and written legislation, since they were situated *extra muros*⁹.

The phenomenon of covering burial sites resulting from the residency expansion was not unknown in Late Antiquity

and dealt with. During the expansion of Constantinople, the old cemeteries of Byzantium were filled in to expand the residential area¹⁰. Even in the well-known Edict of Gratian, Valentinian and Theodosius of 381, only the removal of sarcophagi was ordered, while the underground tombs were consigned to oblivion by the legislator¹¹. Thessaloniki proved to be a dynamical city that was constantly growing. Thus, it expanded over these tombs and gradually expanded as far as the sea. Late Hellenistic and also early Roman, that have been detected at various points south of Agiou Dimitriou Street, document this expansion.

Therefore, the Hellenistic and, later, first Roman port was situated outside the city walls, even though this may seem strange¹². The interpretation proposed by J.-M. Spieser, that the passage of Livy refers to the shipyards of the era of King Perseus and the Roman conquest of Macedonia, confirms this hypothesis¹³. Near the shipyards, a military camp was set up on order of Perseus to function as a protection against the Roman attacks. This means that they were probably unprotected, hence they must have been situated outside the city walls.

The direction of the coastline during the Hellenistic and Roman era, in fact, is unknown to us. After the publication of the map regarding the seafront of Thessaloniki by Polycarpo Vitali (1871)¹⁴ (fig. 3) and the little earlier photograph of Abdullah Brothers in the Hungarian State Archives (1864-1867)¹⁵, many research problems received an answer, even if a negative one. The map of Polycarpo Vitali is part of a construction study of the era that proposed the demolition of the sea-wall and the filling of the coast to create two man-made arrays of city blocks for investment («à vendre» on the map). Finally, when the study was implemented, on the map we see the latest version of the sea-wall, but in no way the ancient coastline.

* The paper was translated from Greek to English by Argiri Platsa.

1 Velenis, Teichē 20. – Adam-Veleni, Poleodomia 123-126.

2 Velenis, Teichē 21-26.

3 Velenis, Teichē 63, plans 1 and 2. – Marki, Akropoleōs kai Xenokratous. – Marki, Akropoleōs.

4 Bakirtzis, Agōgos I, 56. 292.

5 Velenis, Teichē 31. – Adam-Veleni, Poleodomia 127-128.

6 Gala-Georgila, Nero 27-30.

7 Akrivopoulou, Taphoi 42-43. 51.

8 Toynbee, Burial 48. – Emmanouelides, Dikaio 177-178. – Mango, Développement 48. – Johnson, Mausoleum 25.

9 Akrivopoulou, Taphoi 42-43 fig. 1.

10 Mango, Développement 47-48. – Mango, Mausoleum 51.

11 CTh. 9.17.6. – Johnson, Mausoleum 25.

12 Akrivopoulou, Limani 14-149.

13 Spieser, Remparts 562-563.

14 Karadimou-Gerolymou, Chartographia 160-161. – Epameinondas, Thessalonikē 1870-1917, 14 fig. 19. – The Vitalis Company undertook the construction of the new dock, for which building material of the demolished sea-walls was largely used. – Anastassiadou, Métropole 205. – Hatzioannou, Astygraphia 47. – I would like to thank Dr Alexandra Karadimou-Gerolymou for her permission to use the map in this paper.

15 Epameinondas, Thessalonikē 1870-1917, 14 fig. 20.

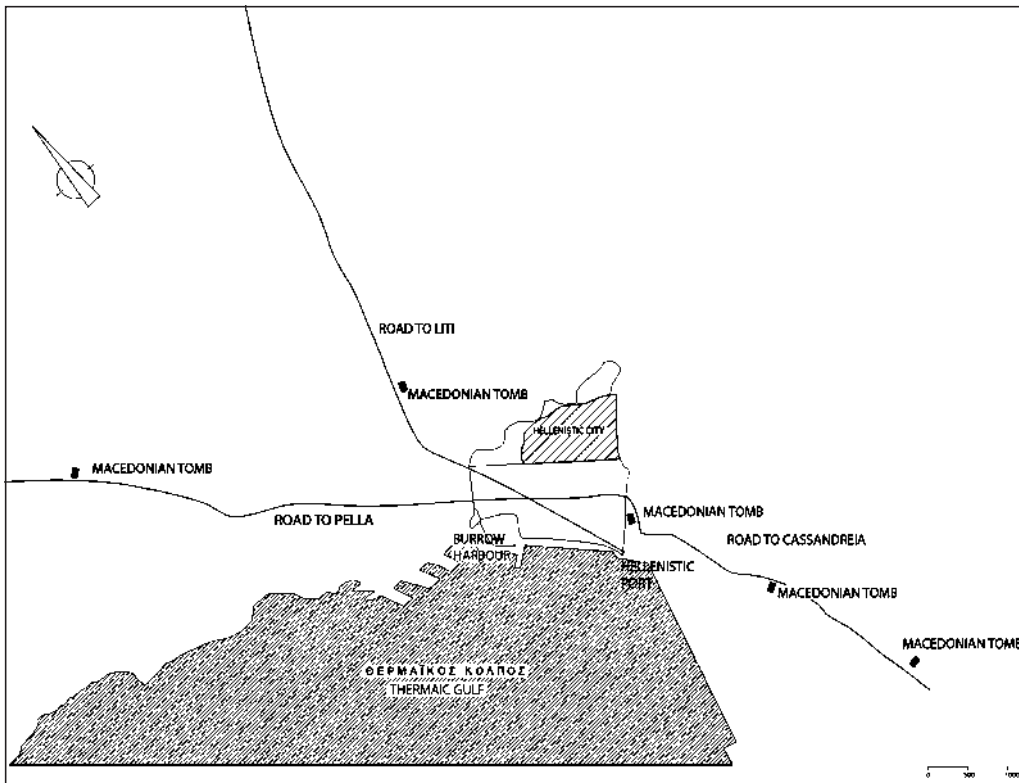


Fig. 1 Map of Thessaloniki and its surroundings, showing the Hellenistic city inside the byzantine enclosure and the country roads, that later became part of the urban fabric (suggestion, based on Sismanidis, Taphoi 56).

We suppose that during the Hellenistic era the coastline was oblique, with the western part much more on the north than the eastern one. The small peninsula, where the White Tower stands today, on the east side of the city, must always have been a steady point. In contrast, the other part of the coastline, from the region where Constantine's port was built and towards the west, was subject to considerable physical changes. The highest point proposed for the western end of the coastline is situated at the present Eleftherias square (Vardari), more or less at the position of the Porta Aurea/Golden Gate¹⁶. If this hypothesis, based on soil observations, is correct, then **Constantine probably built the Burrow harbour at the most suitable spot on the coastline at the time, but it lost its suitability over time.**

Four ancient rivers and other smaller seasonal torrents that constantly transfer alluvial deposits empty into this section of the gulf. In the middle of 20th century, in order to prevent the filling of Thermaikos Kolpos, alterations took place in the riverbeds¹⁷. However, Constantine's port had already been filled centuries ago, and on the west side of the Gulf, a large fertile plain was created. In this plain with the clay loam soil, the »clay plain« was developed¹⁸. Moreover, vegetable gardens and orchards were growing that Kaminatis describes with pride and nostalgia¹⁹. Therefore, the

south-western part of the city, formed from alluvial deposits, was and still is its lowest part.

Thus, Thessaloniki was founded by Cassander in a naturally sheltered location, with some differences in altitude and a distinct topographical relief, with a maximum distance of 800 metres as the crow flies from the sea. Cassander's interest in sea routes is also proven by the other city he founded in an analogous position in Pallini, from where important timber shipments were made in ancient times. The favourable position of Thessaloniki not only monitored the sea routes, but also the network of regional roads that led to it (fig. 1).

Two important regional roads passed outside the city. In the wider hinterland there were already smaller pre-existing towns (which were later merged for the foundation of the new town), which must have used these roads and one or more landing places.

The first regional road came from east Macedonia (Liti, Amphipoli), while the second connected major Macedonian cities in the west (Pella, Aiges and Dion) with Kassandreia in Pallini. Its ending outside Thessaloniki clearly points to the existence of an older trading port at this location²⁰.

Both roads were integrated into the Roman city of the 3rd century. The road of Pella-Kassandreia reached the Golden

16 Gala-Georgila, Nero 28.

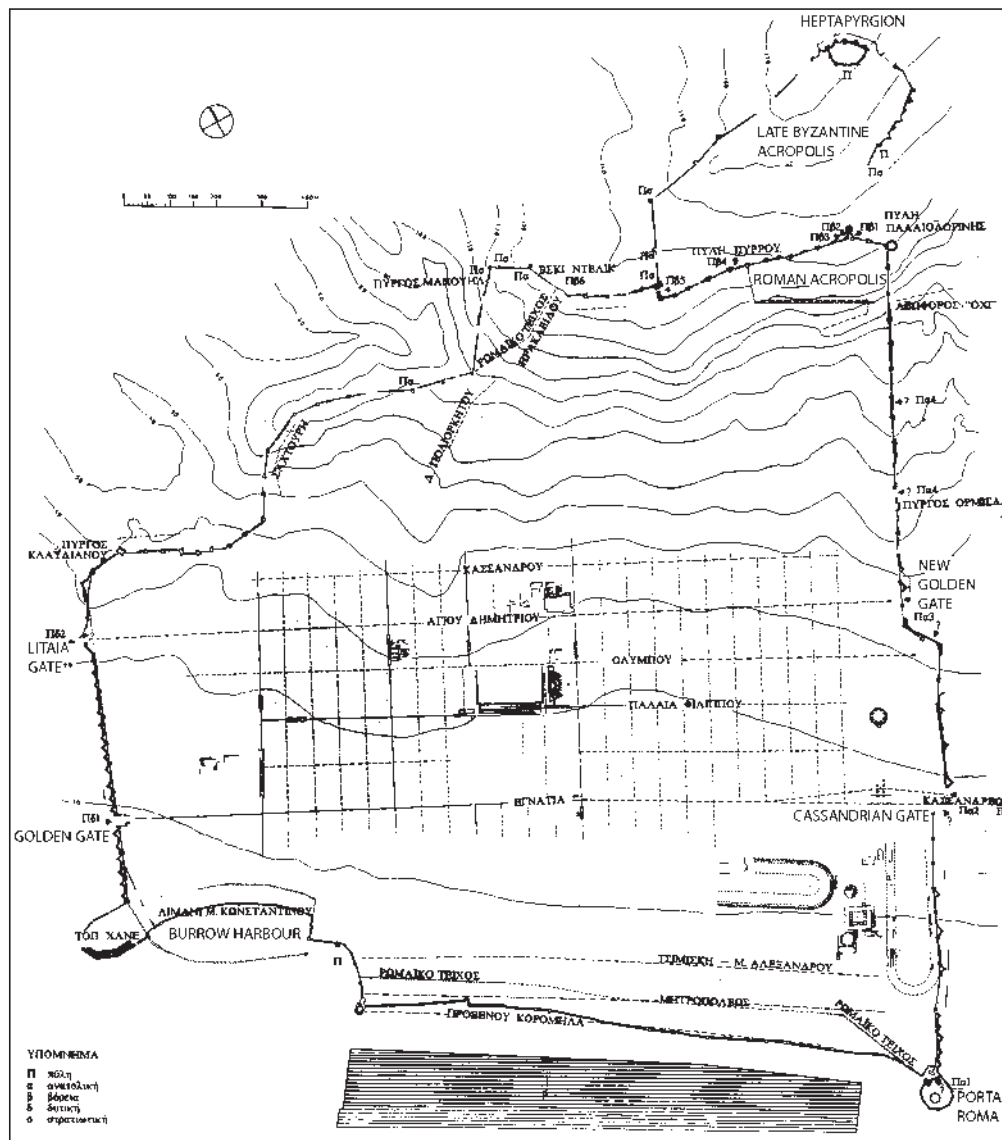
17 Pazarli/Ploutoglou, Dytika.

18 Κεραμήσιος κάμπος, see Lemerle, Miracles I, 2.5.288.

19 Caminates, De expugnatione 6.C.8-20.

20 Sismanidis, Taphoi 55-57. – Akrivopoulou, Limani 146-148.

Fig. 2 Map of Thessaloniki with detailed description of the enclosure. – (From Velenis, Teichē fig. 1).



Gate on the west, ran through the city as a Decumanus Maximus and came out of the Cassandrian Gate on the east²¹. The road of Liti-Amphipoli also ended up at the western wall, at the Litaia Gate, but we are not aware where it originally led initially. At the corresponding gate on the east of the Litaia, whose initial name we do not know, only local roads ended (fig. 2). It is impossible that these secondary roads were the initial destination of the Liti road. We assume that it must lead somewhere else: either to the Pella-Cassandra road, with which it probably intersected, or it led even further south, where it met the sea.

If the road of Liti is prolonged to the southeast, it crosses with the Decumanus Maximus and it meets the eastern Ro-

man wall of the city, just above the White Tower (fig. 1). At this point, another gate existed, the *Porta Roma*²². This road must have had an oblique route with a north-western – south-eastern direction. Remains have not been located, and even if it had been fragmentarily revealed during rescue excavations, it is very probable that it was not identified since it would have been a dirt road²³. However, other streets with similar directions have been excavated in the southern part of the city²⁴, and also buildings that following these axes, the most important being the Constantinian building below the Hagia Sophia and the adjacent Roman well²⁵. These roads may have followed the coastline, but they were affected by the route of the more ancient road axis. While the city was

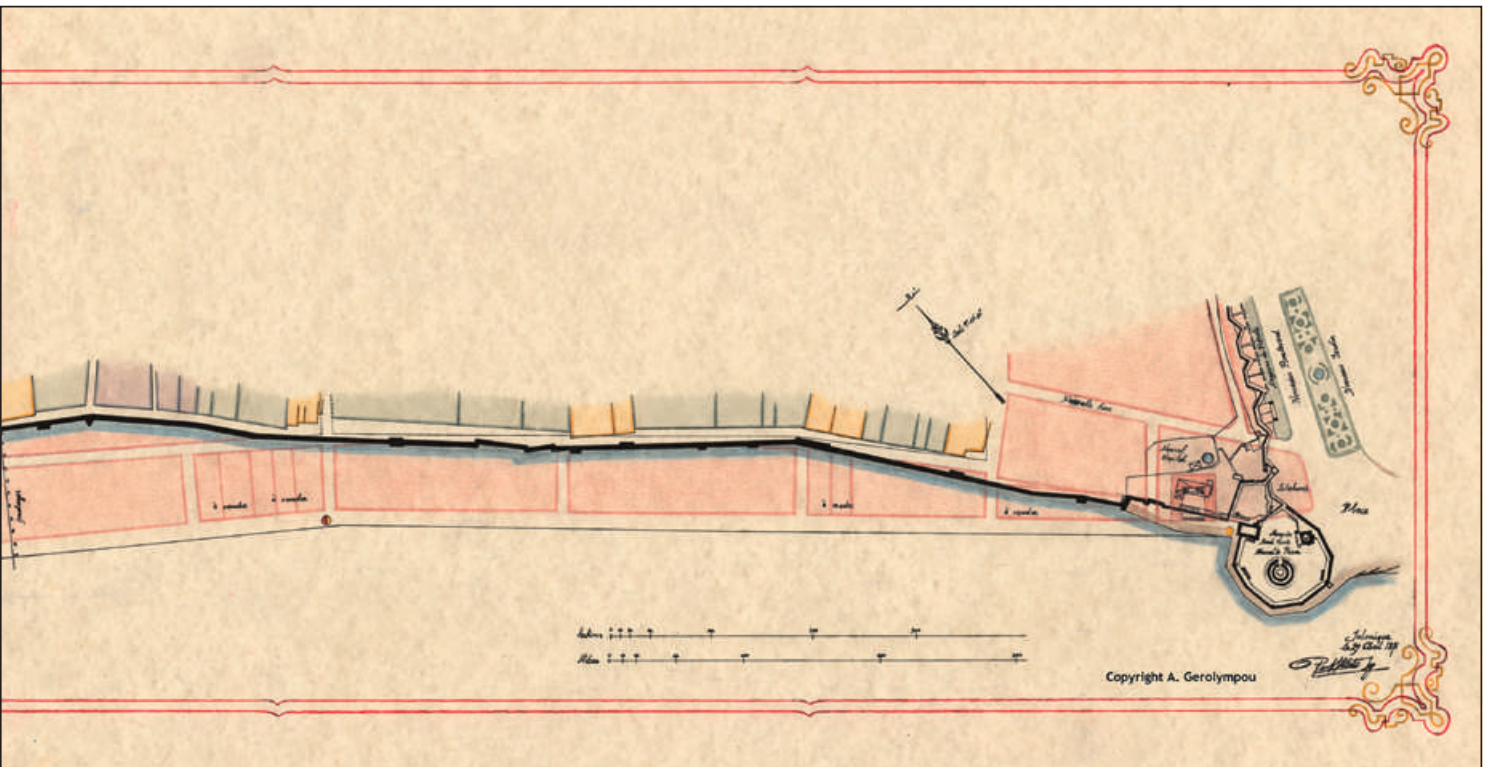
21 Caminiates, De expugnatione 9, description of the Byzantine Mesē, successor of the Roman Decumanus Maximus.

22 Caminiates, De expugnatione 28. 30. – Hatzioannou, Astygraphia 30. – Papa-georgiou, Ekdomé 58. – Tafrafi, Topographie 96. – Spieser, Contribution 49-50.

23 Akrivopoulou, Limani 147-148.

24 Akrivopoulou, Basileōs Ērakraleiou 257-258. The dirt road found in this lot was also oblique to the rest of the city's urban tissue, vertical to the Liti road suggested here.

25 Glaser, Brunnenbauten 113-114. – Atzaka, Problēmata. – Hatzitryfonos, Agia Sophia 107-111. – The date proposed by Mišćović, Ties, for the hexagonal fountain/baptistry is probably incorrect.



to be an unknown before u-shaped arrangement inside the insula, made after the demolition of the sea-wall, since it is depicted clearly on Vitali's map (fig. 3). It is apparent now that Struck's map is a copy of an Ottoman prototype dating to after 1890. The rectangular niche on the eastern end of the sea wall was nothing more than a misunderstanding of the copyist, probably under Struck's guidance.

Bakirtzis' suggestion was somewhat correct though, as he proposed the eastern part of the seashore as the most appropriate position for the Hellenistic Port. There was a prejudice that the port could not have been situated outside the city walls for protective reasons. However, the truth is that the port was situated *extra muros* from the beginning, and so it was established in the mental map of the city, and it continued to exist in this position. Moreover, this port was mainly commercial with most probably little infrastructure. For that reason, Constantine decided, or was forced, to construct a second, larger and better protected port at the end of the period of wars with Licinius. The new military port, the Burrow Harbour, was surrounded by a wall and became more efficient³⁶.

Outside the walls, the eastern shoreline was discovered through excavations next to the YMCA building in 2002,

when construction of a large car park began. The findings detected their date the facilities and the usage of the space from the early Hellenistic period onwards³⁷. Across towards the east, at the Municipal Theatre (Theatro Kipou), auxiliary port facilities were found and identified already in 1997³⁸ (fig. 6). As the excavation of the YMCA car park moved on, Early Christian workshops for building material were located at a spot well-situated for transshipment and trade³⁹. These findings show the position of a port in operation already from the 3rd century BC until the 5th-6th century AD at least⁴⁰. To reach this port since Roman times and later, one had to pass through the *Porta Roma*. It is not at all impossible that its name referred the main destinations of the sea route: Rome or New Rome.

The exact position of the gate has not been identified by excavation, but the name was preserved for centuries. In two documents of the Xenophon Monastery of Mt. Athos, a gate with this name is mentioned in Ippodromiou Square, close to a small Theotokos Monastery that was the property of the Xenophon Monastery⁴¹. The Theotokos Monastery may have been on the site of the present church of Hagios Konstantinos and Helene, where a part of a Late Byzantine cemetery has been excavated⁴². Moreover, relatively close to

36 Zosimus, *Historiae* 2,22. – Cameniatas, *De expugnatione* 4. – Kydones, *Oratio* 611. – Xatzioannou, *Astygraphia* 44-45.

37 Tsimbidou-Avloniti, XANΘ. – Tsimbidou-Avloniti/Theodoridis, XANΘ 321-325.

38 Toska et al., *Synkrotēma* 424-426.

39 Marki, XANΘ.

40 Tsimbidou-Avloniti/Theodoridis, XANΘ 324.

41 *Actes de Xenophon* 20,3; 26,4.

42 Vavylopoulou-Haritonidou, *Hippodrome*.



Fig. 4 The waste pipe found in Komnenon and Kalapothaki Streets, piercing the sea wall. – (Courtesy of Ephorate of Antiquities of Thessaloniki City, 2018).

the present visible part of the eastern outwork, a small walled up gate is preserved⁴³. Anyway, the position of the *Porta Roma* is certainly to be located behind the Sphendone of the Hippodrome, whose boundaries have been detected directly north-east of the present church of Nea Panaghia⁴⁴. It would be wise to search for it south of today's Tsimiski Street and possibly also on Mitropoleos Street.

I think it is very probable that the Roma Gate is the hexagonal yard that is depicted annexed to the enclosure of the White Tower in Vitali's map (fig. 3). It is mentioned by Evliya Celebi as the gate of the archives building (Islahane or Di-vanhane)⁴⁵. In the aforementioned map, it seems that it had three openings, one towards each side of the sea and one towards the city. It was probably demolished together with the sea wall during the 1870s.

The siege of one of the two city ports is described in the Miracles of Saint Demetrius in the context of a Slavic raid on Thessaloniki, which took place in the first decades of the 7th century (c. 614)⁴⁶ (fig. 7). When the Thessalonikians realised the danger approaching from the sea, they tried to protect this port. They constructed underwater wooden bases to support a chain that would close the mouth, and behind the chain, they set up an underwater fence with sharp edges. This fence protruded only slightly out of the water in order to be as invisible as possible and to stop the logboats of the Slavs, who, unaware of any danger, would try to enter the harbour (fig. 7, 7-8). Behind the fence, they made a floating bridge of ships out of the ones that were already lying there to have space to fight in case of a landing (fig. 7, 6). They

also dug a moat in front of a Theotokos church, which was near the port, because the place there had been unfortified, which, as the text mentions, was common knowledge. As it turned, this weak spot was discovered by the Slavs who were watching the gulf before the attack. The defenders laid traps camouflaged with branches and leaves in this ditch. Finally, they fenced the port's dock, which was also unfortified, with a palisade of plank revetments and other wood.

The attack took place from two directions at the seafront (and from other positions on the land that are not specified, but anyway are not our focus here). One group attacked the tower that was situated on the west of the Eklēsiastikē Skala, a place name that is mentioned for the first time here (fig. 7, attack wave a). The aim was to invade the small gate that was situated very close to it. A second group attacked the unfortified place that was protected by the moat and the traps (fig. 7, attack wave b).

This description, short but adequately accurate regarding topographical data and the military methods has provoked a great deal of interest. Consequently, many efforts have been made to identify the battlefields. As Spieser noted, the description of the defensive preparations seems to have just jumped out of the pages of Philo's *Poliortetica*, a work of the 3rd century BC⁴⁷. The writer of the Miracles has omitted essential elements for the understanding of these techniques, such as that the sharp fence of the city port entrance was supported underwater by a wooden base that was fixed on big rocks that had been thrown in the seabed. The same applies to the moat with the traps.

43 Eleftheriadou, *Philikēs Etaireias* pl. 231.

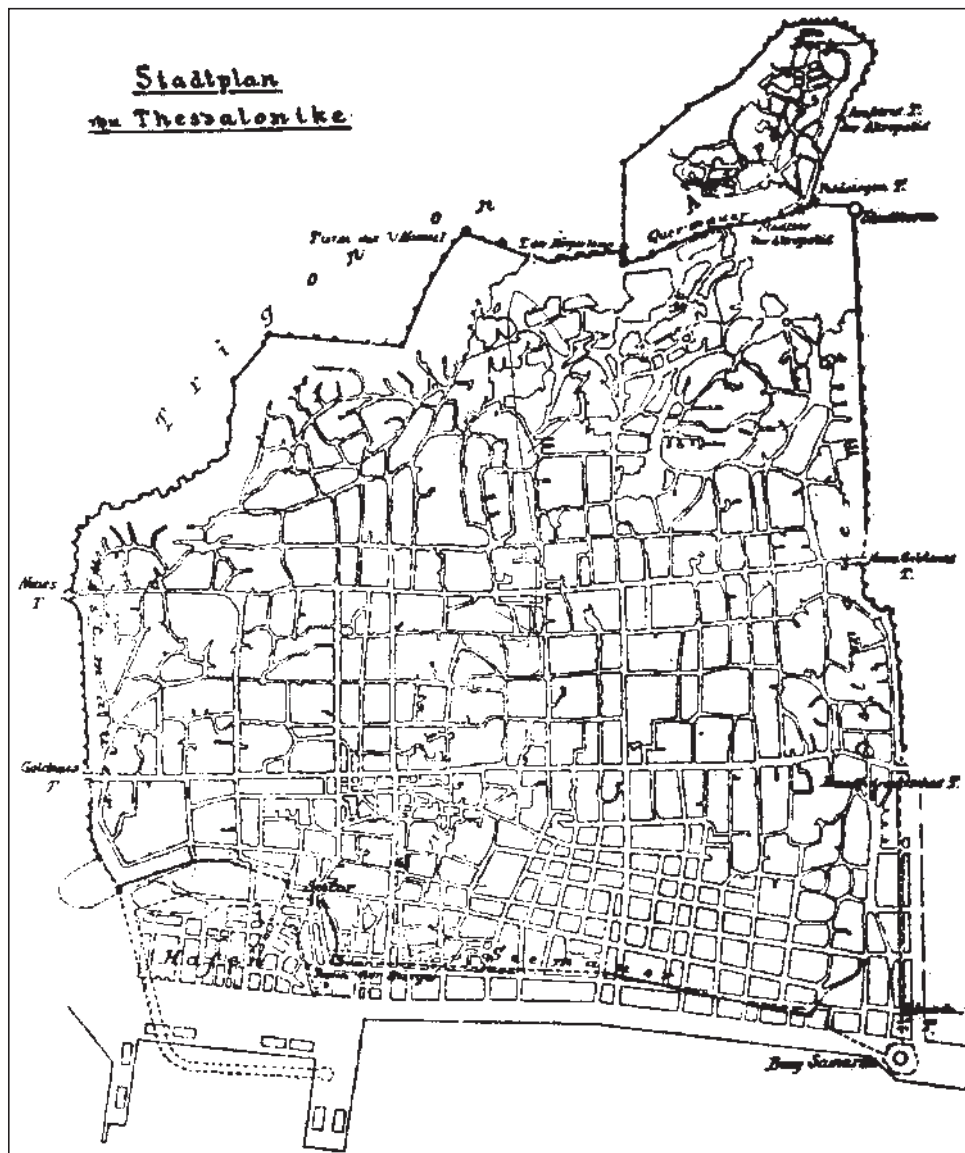
44 Kousoula, Nea Panaghia.

45 Vickers, *Sea Walls* 264. – Bakirtzis, *Thalassia ochyrōsē* 323-324.

46 Lemerle, *Miracles* I, 2.1 (169-179) and II, 184-185. – Original text and modern Greek translation in Bakirtzis, *Thaumata* 236-247.

47 Spieser, *Philon* 366-368.

Fig. 5 Struck's map of Thessaloniki, suggestion of the sea wall route, with a rectangular niche near the White Tower. – (From Struck, *Eroberung*).



I believe that the port described here is the unfortified Hellenistic one with its dock. This dock is also mentioned in Pouqueville's letter to Tafel⁴⁸ (fig. 7, 4). After their survey, the enemies docked more on the east and as a result, they had a great view at this port and of the southern part of the eastern wall (fig. 7, 9). It seems that they had no reason to risk an attack at the fortified port that was situated on the west. The Hellenistic port served probably only for commercial activity, and for this reason the timber transport ships named *κυβαίτες*⁴⁹ that were situated there at that moment, were commandeered by the defenders (fig. 7, 6). The neighbouring church of Panaghia might have stood either on the site of the small late Byzantine monastery/metochion owned by the

Xenophontos monastery or on the position of the present New (Megalē) Panaghia Church (fig. 7, 1). The moat constructed to protect the church, which was in an unfortified area (which had literally become unfortified, literally, but was not always in this state) also protected the port. Such a moat began from the eastern edge of the port, as the western one bordered the tower and was thus protected. There, to the east, a torrent emptied, whose bed was detected by excavations⁵⁰. The moat that was constructed so quickly must therefore have been a cleaning and expansion of this torrent's bed, which offered many branches and leaves to naturally hide the traps (fig. 7, 5).

The other group of the attackers dashed at the tower on the west of the Eklēsiastikē Skala to invade the small

48 Tafel, *Egnatia* 10. Pouqueville quotes a part of a letter of the French Consul, Mr. de St Sauver, who had noticed an underwater dock near the White Tower: «Pour c'est qui est du port du Thessalonique, il n'est défendu que par un misérable fort appelé Tour de Sang, où l'on étranglait les Jenissaires, qui ne

prétendaient pas être pendus comme des Bacals ou regrattières. On voit sous les eaux les restes d'un môle».

49 Lemerle, *Miracles* I, 2.183.

50 Tsimbidou/Theodoridis, XANΘ 324.

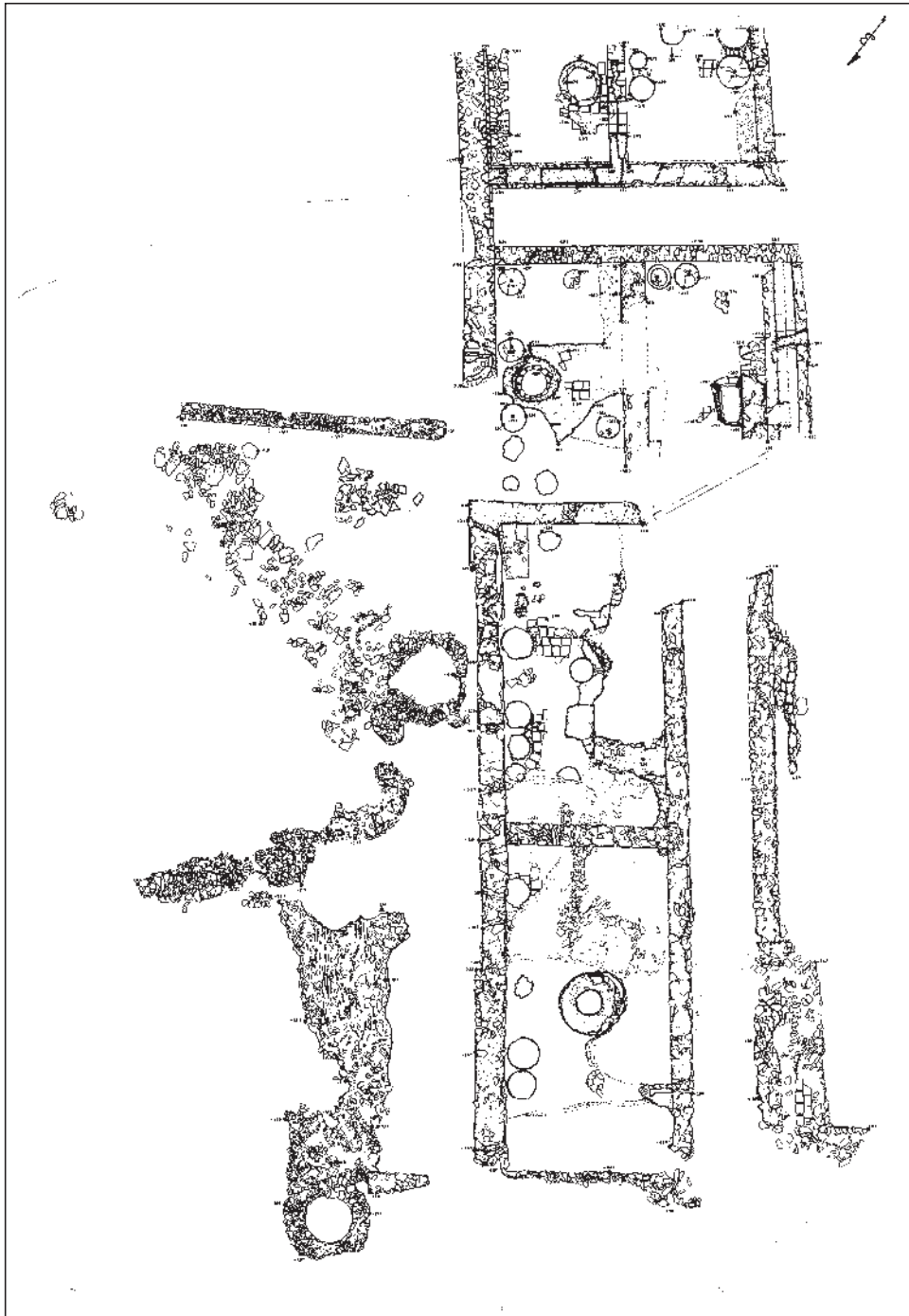


Fig. 6 Excavation at Teatro Kipou. Ground plan. – (Courtesy of Ephorate of Antiquities of Thessaloniki City).

gate that was situated very close (**fig. 7, attack wave a**). The Eklēsiastikē Skala is more difficult to define. Maybe even the Hellenistic port itself was named like this. The sudden appearance of this term could be interpreted as a simple weakness of the narrative. Apparently, the author took some topographical reference points of the city for granted, just as he considered the description of the techniques of de-

fence to be self-evident, so that he handed them down to us incomplete.

The tower to the west of the Skala⁵¹ would in this case have been the south-eastern tower of the fortification, say the today's White Tower (**fig. 7, 3**). The small gate next to the tower could have been the opening towards the sea-wall, which most probably existed in the *Roma* gate (**fig. 6, 2**).

51 Lemerle, *Miracles I*, 2.186.

Fig. 7 French map of Thessaloniki, the [Burrow] Harbour and the environs, dating to 1784: **1** Theotokos Church. – **2** Porta Roma. – **3** Tower west of the Eklēsiastikē Skala. – **4** Pouqueville's Dock. – **5** Moat with traps. – **6** Cargo ships. – **7-8** Chain and fence. – **9** Observatory. – (Courtesy of Thessaloniki History Centre).



The identification of the Eklēsiastikē Skala presupposes a gate above of the seafront and a tower west of this gate. I believe that these two elements were present only on the east. The first reason is the flow of the narrative. In general, I assume that the narrative is concise, not incomplete. I would consider it an important weakness from the writer's side (and not a simple omission, as the more specific constructive details of the defensive constructions) to move the action suddenly and, especially at its peak, to another geographical space, for which no previous reference had been made. Not to mention that he had already briefly described the spaces of action; the Eklēsiastikē Skala is not only was not included

in them but also is one of the only place names he provides in the entire narrative. The place name »Eklēsiastikē« is easy to explain, as the road that led directly there was the one that passed by the Metropolis (Hagia Sophia), by the Palace and the Hippodrome (southeast of everything), which had gradually been given to monastic and ecclesiastical estates (which still exist today), but also by one of the Theotokos churches that we discovered. This road led to the *Porta Roma* that had two openings that led to the sea, one within the walls and one without. Hence, I consider Eklēsiastikē Skala to be the Hellenistic port situated outside the city walls to the east of the White Tower⁵².

52 Different approaches have been used in earlier scholarship, but in none of them was a position for the Eklēsiastike Skala outside the city walls sustained. Bakirtzis, *Thalassia ochyrōsē* 320-321 and Bakirtzis, *Thaumata* 402 suggested that the Eklēsiastike Skala should be sought next to the White Tower, on its western side. Marki, *Limania* 174-175, is more or less in accordance with Bakirtzis. Hatzioannidis/Tsamis, *Apothēkes* 189, suggest for the Skala a site at the end

of today's Katouni Str., inside the Burrow Harbour. Odorico, *Limani* 138-141, contradicted Bakirtzis and, in accordance with Vickers, *Sea walls* 269-271, suggested the Burrow Harbour as the place of the siege and of the Eklēsiastiki Skala. Fotiadis, *Teichos* 121 and Livadioti, *Limani* 165, suggest for the Hellenistic port a site in the middle of the sea-wall, on the extension of today's Aristotelous Square.

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Summary / Zusammenfassung

The Hellenistic Harbour of Thessaloniki and the Ekklesiastikē Skala

The paper deals with the transformation of the urban outline of Thessalonike from its foundation in the Hellenistic period via the Roman centuries to the Early Byzantine period. These changes also affected the structure and use of the city's seaside and until today complicate the definite identification of harbour sites and their shape throughout these centuries. The paper presents some recent archaeological findings and proposes a new localisation of the so-called *Ekklesiastikē Skala* mentioned at the occasion of a siege of Thessalonike in the 7th century AD.

Der hellenistische Hafen von Thessaloniki und die Ekklesiastikē Skala

Der Beitrag befasst sich mit der Transformation der urbanen Gestalt von Thessaloniki von seiner Gründung in der hellenistischen Zeit über die römischen Jahrhunderte bis zur frühbyzantinischen Zeit. Diese Veränderungen wirkten sich auch auf die Struktur und Nutzung der Küste der Stadt aus und erschweren bis heute die eindeutige Identifizierung von Hafestandorten und ihrer Form im Laufe dieser Jahrhunderte. Der Beitrag präsentiert einige neuere archäologische Funde und schlägt eine neue Lokalisierung der sogenannten Ekklesiastikē Skala vor, die anlässlich einer Belagerung von Thessaloniki im 7. Jahrhundert n. Chr. erwähnt wird.

