

# ARCHAEOLOGICAL DATA ABOUT THE PRESENCE OF LATE NOMADS DURING THE 11<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY IN THE REGION OF VARNA (BULGARIA)

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**Keywords:** *Pechenegs, fortress, Kastritsi, Petrich Kale, northeastern Bulgaria.*

**Cuvinte-cheie:** *pecenegi, fortărețe, Kastritsi, Petrich Kale, nord-estul Bulgariei.*

**Abstract:** *This article focuses on the traces of Late nomads' presence in two fortresses close to Varna: Kastritsi on the seashore, in the current government residence Evksinograd, and Petrich Kale, located at the end of the Avren plateau, near modern Devnya, the former Roman town Marcianopolis. The analysis includes specific finds that are indicative of the presence of a foreign population, interpreted in Bulgarian archaeology as Pecheneg. Their archaeological context outlines the diversity of relations between the local population and newly arrived nomads, which is not always restricted to conflicts and antagonism. The generally accepted idea of widespread devastation and subsequent settlement of the Pechenegs applies only to Varna. The tribes coming from the north show no interest in the abandoned Kastritsi fortress and probably stay here for a short time. The situation is more complicated at the fortress Petrich Kale, where the peaceful coexistence of the new population with the local inhabitants leads to the development of a mixed culture, which intertwines Bulgarian, Nomadic and Byzantine elements.*

**Rezumat:** *Acest articol se concentrează pe urmele prezenței nomazilor târzii în două fortărețe din apropierea orașului Varna: Kastritsi, aflată pe țărmul mării, în actuala reședință guvernamentală Evksinograd, și Petrich Kale, situată la capătul platoului Avren, lângă Devnya modernă, fostul oraș roman Marcianopolis. Analiza include descoperiri specifice care indică prezența unei populații străine, interpretată în arheologia bulgară ca fiind pecenegă. Contextul arheologic al acestor descoperiri conturează diversitatea relațiilor dintre populația locală și noii veniți, nomazi, relații care nu se limitează întotdeauna la conflicte și antagonism. Ideea general acceptată, a devastării pe scară largă și a stabilirii ulterioare a pecenegilor, se aplică doar în cazul Varnei. Triburile venite din nord nu arată interes pentru fortăreața abandonată Kastritsi și, probabil, rămân aici pentru o perioadă scurtă de timp. Situația este mai complicată la fortăreața Petrich Kale, unde coexistența pașnică a noii populații cu aceea locală duce la dezvoltarea unei culturi mixte, care îmbină elemente bulgare, nomade și bizantine.*

The attempts to follow the traces of foreign ethnicities in local culture based on archaeological finds always involve the risk of inaccurate or even manipulative

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interpretation. This applies even more largely to nomadic tribes who resided for a relatively short historical period on the territory of present-day northeastern Bulgaria and left a small number of artefacts of disputable identification. However, with the information already known from a number of settlements with proven Pecheneg occupation in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, it is possible to distinguish a specific group of finds that provide evidence for the occasional presence or more durable habitation of late nomads in the Varna area. This article will focus on the traces of their residence in two fortresses close to Varna – Kastritsi on the seashore, in the current government residence Euksinograd and Petrich Kale – located at the end of the Avren plateau, near modern Devnya, the former Roman town Marcianopolis (Fig. 1).

Regarding Varna, data of Pecheneg population in the middle of the 11<sup>th</sup> century within the boundaries of the settlement that used to occupy the territory of the Roman Baths provide the excavations from the 1960s. During these surveys, in the area of the *palaestra*, several houses with early medieval assemblages involving vessels made on a slow potter's wheel and various bone objects were unearthed. Later, when analyzing the records in the field documentation and the coins from the old excavations, V. Yotov concluded that the discovered by D. Dimitrov and A. Kuzev burnt houses should be associated with the Pecheneg raids of 1048, 1051–1053, and their subsequent settlement within the fortress of Varna<sup>1</sup>. He supported this theory both by numismatic data and by the discovery of some typical finds for the nomads – an openwork leaf-shaped amulet, strap appliqués and other objects of "Russian" origin, which he assumed as imported here by the Pechenegs<sup>2</sup>.

In contrast to Varna, it can be presumed that during the 11<sup>th</sup> century some foreign nomadic population resided only occasionally in vicinity of Kastritsi. Regular archaeological excavations carried out since 2004 indicate that the fortress was built in the 5<sup>th</sup>–6<sup>th</sup> centuries, most probably in connection with the large-scale fortification building campaign of the Emperor Justinian (527–565). The short Late Antique period of the stronghold ended in the early 7<sup>th</sup> century, and its abandonment after this period is associated with the Slavic-Avar raids along the Black Sea coast from 614–618<sup>3</sup>. At this stage, archaeological investigations do not give any reason to believe that the settlement was destroyed or burnt. There was rather a preventive withdrawal of the population to safer areas for habitation, taking all the valuables with them. Thus, at the present excavations, the dwellings appear to be emptied of inventory, and the latest coins from them – those of Emperor Flavius Phocas (602–610) and of Emperor Heraclius (610–641) of 614 – clearly mark the time of the events described<sup>4</sup>.

For nearly seven centuries the fortress remained in ruins and like most of the fortified settlements in today's northeastern Bulgaria, life was restored here only in the second half of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. However, this hardly means that the old fortification was invisible to the population that inhabited the region of Varna in the 10<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup> centuries or to the nomadic tribes invading from the north. The reason for such a

<sup>1</sup> YOTOV 2004a, p. 320.

<sup>2</sup> YOTOV 2000, p. 242; YOTOV 2005, p. 143–146.

<sup>3</sup> PLETNYOV 2014, p. 51–52.

<sup>4</sup> Numismatic data in the field documentation from excavations in the period 2004–2020, identification of coins – Dr. Igor Lazarenko, Varna Regional Museum of History.

hypothesis gives some isolated finds, whose small quantity allows enlisting them here. These are mostly anonymous *folles*: four specimens of Class A2 (976–1028); four of Class B (1028–1041); three of Class E (1059–1067), and one of Class I (1078–1081)<sup>5</sup>. The aforementioned coins represent an insignificant percentage of the already thousands of numismatic materials from Kastritsi fortress, which in their main part date back to the 14<sup>th</sup> and early 15<sup>th</sup> century. Some of them are hoarded together with late antique coins; others are pierced and worn as medallions, perhaps because of Christ's image on the obverse<sup>6</sup>.

To the small group of finds from the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries can be added a small horn with a drilled hole for hanging, probably to a strap (**Fig. 2/1**). Similar adornments are usually discovered Bulgarian early mediaeval sites, and their utilization is mainly explained with the military costume<sup>7</sup>. Two bone arrowheads also belong to the period preceding the new inhabitation of the fortress during the second half of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. One of them has a circular cross-section and a sleeve formed in the width of the blade (**Fig. 2/2**). This type is known from a number of settlements in Dobruja and is usually associated with the presence of late nomads<sup>8</sup>. The second arrowhead is flat, with a diamond-shaped blade and a long flat spike with a more roughly smoothed surface (**Fig. 2/3**). Among its few parallels is a bone point from the excavations of the early medieval settlement near the village of Durankulak on the Black Sea coast, with a chronology in the 9<sup>th</sup>–10<sup>th</sup> centuries<sup>9</sup>. The bone artefacts described here come from loose layers and cannot be linked to a specific archaeological context. The lack of a distinctive cultural layer from the 10<sup>th</sup>–11<sup>th</sup> centuries in Kastritsi indicates also the complete absence of pottery made on a slow potter's wheel characteristic of the early medieval period, or of representatives of imported Byzantine glazed table types and amphora tare common in the Black Sea region during the same period.

However, a 2006 discovery suggests that it is quite possible to assume a short-term presence of late nomads near the fortress. This is about a grave found about 150 m northeast outside the fortress walls, and described in the field documentation as number 4/2006<sup>10</sup>. The burial is of a man, laid in a rectangular pit shallowly dug into the marl, surrounded from the east by rubble stones (**Fig. 3**)<sup>11</sup>.

The skeleton is in an upright position, orientated in the west-east axis, with the right arm folded towards the chest and the left arm on the waist. The burial pit destroys some older graves probably from the Late Antique necropolis of the fortress. It contains no inventory, but a horse's head, facing north is placed on the left side of the pelvis. This important detail points to analogies with some funerary

<sup>5</sup> Numismatic data from the field documentation from excavations in the period 2008–2020, identification of coins – Dr. Igor Lazarenko, Varna Regional Museum of History.

<sup>6</sup> PLETNYOV 2019, p. 179.

<sup>7</sup> DIMITROV 2009, p. 168–169, and cited literature therein.

<sup>8</sup> VITLYANOV 1996, p. 25, pl. I/c; YOTOV 2004b, p. 31, pl. XXV/386–388; RABAVYANOV 2015, p. 220, pl. 53/1371 and literature cited therein.

<sup>9</sup> YOTOV, 2004b, p. 31, pl. XXV/385.

<sup>10</sup> PLETNYOV *et alii* 2007, p. 566–567.

<sup>11</sup> Field diary of the excavations of Kastritsi fortress in 2006. Scientific archive of prof. V. Pletnyov, Varna Regional Museum of History.

practices that survived among the Pechenegs even after their Christianization. A good example in this respect is a series of graves from the necropolises of Odartsi, in which beside the remains of the deceased are set bones of various domestic animals, including of horses<sup>12</sup>. The association of the grave from Kastritsi with the nomadic tradition seems quite probable given the numerous written and archaeological records of Pecheneg raids in the territory of northeastern Bulgarian lands during the first half of the 11<sup>th</sup> century<sup>13</sup>. However, at this point, with no archaeological surveys outside the walls of the medieval fortress, it remains an isolated case and one plausible explanation for its discovery could be the passing of a foreign population nearby or its short-term occupation in the vicinities of the already abandoned late antique stronghold.

Unlike Kastritsi, the traces of the late nomadic inhabitation in the fortress Petrich Kale are far more clearly noticeable, and give reason to think that here – as at Varna, they settled for a longer period. Located on a hardly accessible rocky promontory above the Devnya Valley, the fortification was erected in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century as a strategic outpost related to the protection of the capital of Lower Moesia – Marcianopolis<sup>14</sup>. Until the early 7<sup>th</sup> century, the fortress was actively inhabited<sup>15</sup>. The subsequent barbarian invasions led to the depopulation of the entire region, including the stronghold above Marcianopolis. Unlike most old towns and fortresses, life resumed here in the mid-9<sup>th</sup> century. The information about the early medieval settlement is still scarce since the surveys held after 2014 have revealed a thin early medieval layer. It contains some typical of the second half of the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> century artefacts amongst which are pots made on a slow wheel with incised decoration or with a greyish-black polished surface, jugs of light-coloured clay covered with red slip, specific types of belt decorations, and various bronze and glass adornments<sup>16</sup>. They are usually accompanied by coins of Emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenetos (913–959) and folles Class A1 from the reign of Emperor John I Tzimiskes (969–976)<sup>17</sup>. The relationship of the fortress with the capitals of the First Bulgarian Kingdom evidence lead seals of Prince Boris Michael (852–889), and Pisota – a 10<sup>th</sup> century official well known through some discoveries from Pliska and Veliki Preslav<sup>18</sup>.

How the events from the beginning of the 11<sup>th</sup> century affected the material culture of Petrich Kale. Written sources abound with reports of Pecheneg raids in the 30s and 40s of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, which caused widespread destruction and abandonment of settlements in Dobruja region. Describing the latest defeat of the Byzantine army in 1048, John Skylitzes remarks that the Rector Nikephoros encamped in "a locality called Diakene, not far from the Hundred Hills"<sup>19</sup>. Bulgarian historiography

<sup>12</sup> DONCHEVA-PETKOVA 2005, p. 54, graves nos. 218, 374, 463, 500, 503, 505.

<sup>13</sup> PLETNYOV 2014, p. 151–165.

<sup>14</sup> MANOLOVA-VOYKOVA, LAZARENKO 2021, p. 353–354.

<sup>15</sup> MANOLOVA-VOYKOVA 2019, p. 94–98.

<sup>16</sup> PLETNYOV *et alii* 2015, p. 676; PLETNYOV *et alii* 2016, p. 722; PLETNYOV *et alii* 2017, p. 598; PLETNYOV *et alii* 2018, p. 529; MANOLOVA-VOYKOVA, LAZARENKO 2019, p. 505.

<sup>17</sup> Numismatic data in the field documentation from excavations in 2015, 2017 and 2018, identification of coins – Dr. Igor Lazarenko, Varna Regional Museum of History.

<sup>18</sup> LAZARENKO 2019, p. 539–560.

<sup>19</sup> GIBI 1965, p. 319–320.

usually associates the aforementioned Diakene with Devnya – the former Roman town Marcianopolis<sup>20</sup>. If we accept this identification, it should be presumed that the military collisions mentioned by John Skylitzes were conducted in the immediate vicinity of Petrich Kale. However, the fortress itself remained away from the clashes between the Byzantine army and the Pechenegs, and at this point, the excavations provide no evidence of significant destruction or large-scale burning in the early to mid-11<sup>th</sup> century. Numismatic data confirms field observations and indicates a continuous coin circulation including anonymous *folles* of Classes A1, A2, A3, B, C, D, E, G, I, K, *folles* of the Emperors Constantine X Doukas (1059–1067) and Michael VII Doukas (1071–1078)<sup>21</sup>. Along with those, a specific series of finds marks the infiltration of a new nomadic population that seems to have settled here in the mid-11<sup>th</sup> century and cohabited with the stronghold's residents. Arguments in favor of this hypothesis provided even the first excavations of the fortress in 1961, when several bone arrowheads were recorded (**Fig. 4/1, 3, 5, 6**).

In the same year, a fragment of a cauldron with "internal ears" was found in a dwelling (**Fig. 5/1**), the relation of which to the Pecheneg material culture south of the Danube is now securely established<sup>22</sup>.

A supplement to the group of finds associated with the nomadic culture is another eloquent artefact – a bronze leaf-shaped amulet with six openwork cuts (**Fig. 4/8**), belonging to a small group of finds from settlements in present-day north-eastern Bulgaria, which clearly traces the waves of the Pecheneg raids in the 11<sup>th</sup> century<sup>23</sup>.

The latest excavations of Petrich Kale resumed in 2014 raise once again the issue of the relationship between late nomadic tribes coming from the north and the local population. Several other bone arrowheads (**Fig 4/2, 4**) and a bone kisten (war-flail) with a longitudinal cylindrical hole for attaching an iron bracket (**Fig. 4/7**) come from the 11<sup>th</sup> and early 12<sup>th</sup> century layers. Another evidence of Pecheneg settlement in the fortress gives a fourth pit excavated in 2022, which at a depth of 1.85 m reaches the southeast corner of a monumental building constructed in the *opus mixtum*, probably from the Roman period of the stronghold<sup>24</sup>. When excavating the pit, an unsuccessful attempt was made to break the solid construction, after which the bottom was buried at a higher level than reached. The fill of the pit contains various contemporaneous artefacts, including a *folllis* of Emperor Justin II (565–574) and a silver application from the same period. Indicative for the chronology of the pit are the rest of the finds – highly corroded iron plates, fragments of glass bracelets, a bone handle and two vessels dating back to the late 10<sup>th</sup> and early 11<sup>th</sup> century. One of them is an amphora (**Fig. 5/3**), which belongs to the most widespread tare type in the Black Sea region, known in the classifications of the middle Byzantine pottery as

<sup>20</sup> DUYCHEV 1972, p. 244–245.

<sup>21</sup> Numismatic data in the field documentation from excavations in 2014–2017, 2019 and 2021, identification of coins – Dr. Igor Lazarenko, Varna Regional Museum of History.

<sup>22</sup> DONCHEVA-PETKOVA 1971, p. 34–36; DIMITROV 1975, p. 37–42; DONCHEVA-PETKOVA 2003, p. 245.

<sup>23</sup> YOTOV 2000, p. 242–243 and literature cited therein; BONEV 2009, p. 178–181.

<sup>24</sup> MANOLOVA-VOYKOVA, LAZARENKO *in press*.

Type I after N. Günsegin<sup>25</sup>. The same vessels spread in the interior of the Bulgarian lands during the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries<sup>26</sup>. Along with the amphora, an almost completely preserved Pecheneg cauldron was found in the pit (**Fig. 5/2**).

Thus, the results of the archaeological investigations of Petrich Kale give reason to conclude that Pechenegs settled and lived here as a peaceful population. As already mentioned, no traces of crucial cataclysms or abandonment of the fortress at the time of the Pecheneg invasions have been found, at least so far. The dwellings of the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries are on-ground or semi-dugouts usually constructed on or between the remains of Late Antique walls. The cultural layers related with them contain pottery made on slow and fast wheels and a wide range of everyday household objects typical of the period in iron, bone, glass, and metal. The significant amount of Byzantine coins and a few fragments of imported Byzantine tableware proves the maintenance of commercial contacts with the port cities along the coast. Probably soon after the cessation of the military conflicts, towards the end of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, the fortress walls were partially renewed, through which life in the settlement was normalized and in the 12<sup>th</sup> century it became a small rich town on the road leading from seacoast to Veliki Preslav.

In conclusion, it should be emphasized that the discussed archaeological finds associated with the Pechenegs from the three nearby sites – Varna and the fortresses of Kastritsi and Petrich Kale outline the diversity of relations between the local population and newly arrived nomads, which turns out to be not always restricted to conflicts and antagonism. The generally accepted idea of widespread devastation and subsequent settlement of the Pechenegs applies only to Varna. They show no interest in the abandoned Kastritsi fortress and probably stay here for a short time. The situation is more complicated at Petrich Kale, where the peaceful coexistence of the new population with the local inhabitants leads to the development of a mixed culture, which intertwines Bulgarian, Nomadic and Byzantine elements.

### Catalogue<sup>27</sup>

1. Horn with a hole drilled in the wide end for hanging. The surface is polished and decorated with five bands of shallowly incised, obliquely placed lines. L. 8.2 cm. Kastritsi, 2014, sq. XXV/19. RHM-Varna, Inv. no. IV 1014 (**Fig. 2/1**).
2. Bone arrowhead with circular cross-section, sleeve drilled into the width of the blade. L. 3.1 cm; d. sleeve 1.1 cm. Kastritsi, 2013, sq. XXV/16–17. RHM-Varna, Inv. no. IV 897 (**Fig. 2/2**).
3. Bone arrowhead with flat diamond-shaped blade, narrow neck with ring, long flat spike. Kastritsi, 2010, sq. XXIV/16. L. 11 cm, w. max. 2.5 cm. RHM-Varna, Inv. no. IV 532 (**Fig. 2/3**).
4. Bone arrowhead with circular cross-section, sleeve drilled into the width of the blade. L. 3 cm, d. sleeve 0.65 cm. Petrich Kale, 1961, sq. II–10, layer II. RHM-Varna, Field Inv. no. 8/1961 (**Fig. 4/1**).

<sup>25</sup> GÜNSENIN 1989, p. 269–271; GÜNSENIN 1990, p. 21–24.

<sup>26</sup> DONCHEVA-PETKOVA 1977, p. 100–102.

<sup>27</sup> Abbreviations used in the catalog: d. – diameter; h. – height; Inv. – inventory; L. – length; sq. – square; w. – width.

5. Bone arrowhead with circular cross-section, sleeve drilled into the width of the blade. L. 3.2 cm, d. sleeve 0.7 cm. Petrich Kale, 2021, sq. F9/2, floor level, near a hearth. RHM-Varna, Field Inv. no. 88/2021 (**Fig. 4/2**).
6. Bone arrowhead with circular cross-section, sleeve drilled into the width of the blade. L. 4.3 cm, d. sleeve 0.78 cm. Petrich Kale, 1961, Rock-cut structure, sq. XI/51–52. RHM-Varna, Field Inv. no. 243/1961 (**Fig. 4/3**).
7. Bone arrowhead with circular cross-section, sleeve drilled into the width of the blade. L. 4.1 cm, d. sleeve 0.95 cm. Petrich Kale, 2020, sq. F9/2, pit no. 16. RHM-Varna, Inv. no. IV 702 (**Fig. 4/4**).
8. Bone arrowhead with triangular shape, quadrangular cross-section and short spike. L. 3.5 cm, w. max 1.8 cm. Petrich Kale, 1962, found under the fortress ladder. RHM-Varna (**Fig. 4/5**).
9. Bone arrowhead with flat triangular shape and flat triangular spike. L. 7.7 cm, w. max 1.8 cm. Petrich Kale, 1961, sq. II–5. RHM-Varna, Field Inv. no. 35/1961 (**Fig. 4/6**).
10. Bone kisten (war-flail) with longitudinal hole for attaching an iron bracket. L. 4.8 cm, d. max. 4.6 cm, d. hole 0.9 cm. Petrich Kale, 2022, sq. E9/15, in adobe layer. RHM-Varna, Inv. no. IV 887 (**Fig. 4/7**).
11. Leaf-shaped bronze amulet with six openwork cuts, three of which are preserved. The obverse decorated with small grooves and incised lines. H. 5.8 cm, w. max. 4.8 cm. Petrich Kale, 1961, sq. II–18. RHM-Varna, Field Inv. no. 729/1961 (**Fig. 4/8**).
12. Cauldron, fragment. Made on a slow wheel of coarse gray-brownish fabric. The outer surface decorated with asymmetrically applied horizontal incised lines. D. 31 cm, h. preserved 6.5 cm. Petrich Kale, 1961, sq. XIII, house no. 63. RHM-Varna, Field Inv. no. 784/1961 (**Fig. 5/1**).
13. Cauldron, fragment. Made on a slow wheel of coarse light brownish fabric. The outer surface decorated with horizontal incised lines. D. 21 cm, h. 10 cm. Petrich Kale, 2022, sq. F8/23, pit no. 2/2022. RHM-Varna, Inv. no. IV 966 (**Fig. 5/2**).
14. Amphora made of orange-brown clay. Shoulders and body shallowly grooved. Upper part of the body covered with beige slip. On the shoulders – *dipinta* with red slip. H. 29,8 cm, d. rim 7,7/6,6 cm, d. max. 24 cm. Petrich Kale, 2022, sq. F8/23, pit no. 2/2022. RHM-Varna, Inv. no. IV 984 (**Fig. 5/3**).

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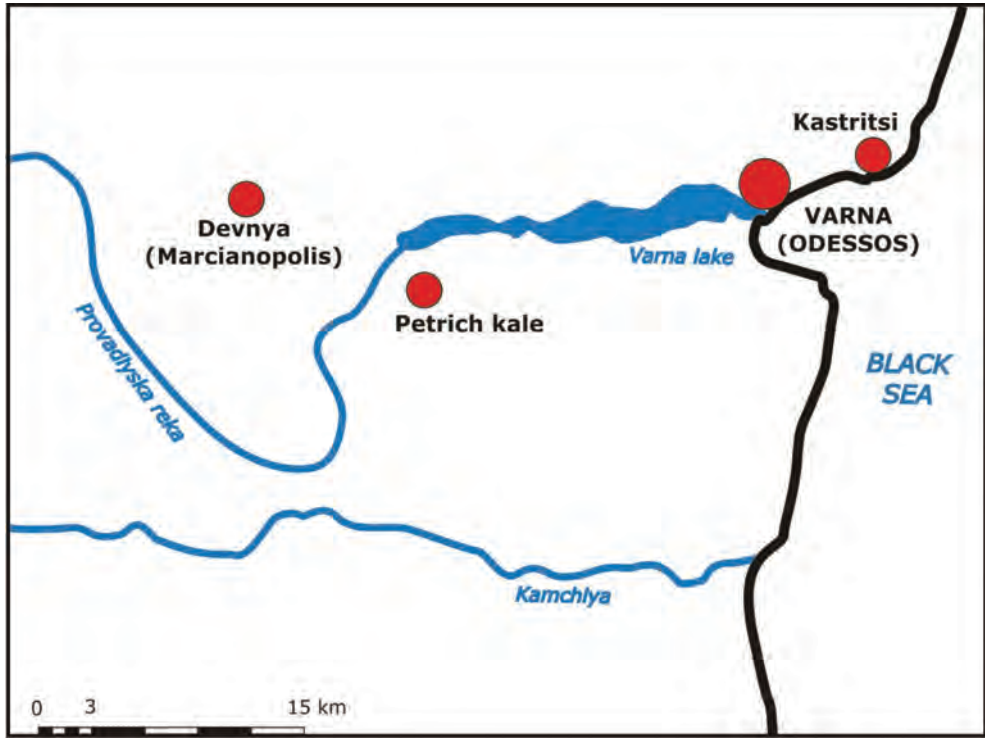


Fig. 1. Location of the fortresses Kastritsi and Petrich Kale.



Fig. 2. Bone artefacts from Kastritsi fortress.



Fig. 3. Grave no. 4/2006 from Kastritsi fortress.



Fig. 4. Artefacts of supposed nomadic origin from Petrich Kale fortress.



Fig. 5. Cauldrons and amphora from 11<sup>th</sup> century contexts of Petrich Kale.