

## NESSEBUR — URBAN UNITY OF PAST AND PRESENT

The three thousand years of continuous existence of the town of Nessebur as a Thracian, classical, mediaeval and modern settlement are explained first of all by its geographic peculiarities — a small piece of land, measuring 300 by 850 m, dipped in the waters of the Black Sea and tied naturally to the mainland by a narrow isthmus. Nature has helped its defence by allowing the building of a wall of no great material and labour expense, behind which a small number of defenders could drive back the enemy attack. The other decisive factor for the survival of the town is its proximity to a hinterland of abundance and the great possibilities of connection with the great trade routes. Nessebur has served as a relay for the cheap raw mate-

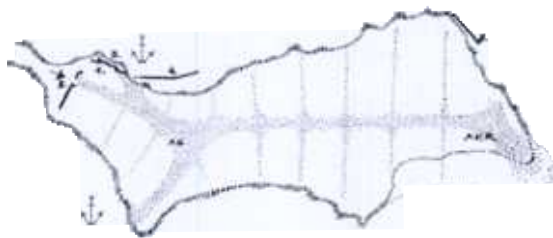
rials and agricultural products of a vast inland region which could be stored safely while waiting for the ships of the faraway buyer.

Today abundant archaeological material gives ground for the specialists to assert that even at the dawn of the first millennium B. C. Messambria existed as a Thracian port where many ships threw their yet stone-cut anchors.

Messambria was brushed by the mighty wave of Greek colonization comparatively late (about 510 B. C.) — more than a century after the foundation of Appolonia (Sozopol) and a number of Black Sea colonies. Perhaps the fact that in the pre-Greek period Messambria was a steady trade partner of the ancient world explains the peculiarity of its devel-

1. Nessebur aerial photograph





2. Nesebur (Messemvria) in Antiquity (6th century B. C. — 4th century A. D.): 1. Thracian fortress wall with a gate, 2. Hellenistic fortress wall and entrance, 3. Hellenistic peripheral fortress wall, 4. Hellenistic fortress wall on the bottom, 5. Late Antiquity fortress wall on the bottom, AG. Probable site of the public square — Agora. AKR. Probable site of the Acropolis



3. Nesebur (Messemvria till the 9th century) in the Middle Ages (5th-15th century): 1. Late Antiquity fortress wall with a gate, 2. Late Antiquity walls to bar the shoals, 3. Late Antiquity peripheral fortress wall, 4. Fortress walls and towers above the port, 5. The Old Metropolitan Basilica. . . 7. A basilica in the school yard. . . 10. The Church Sveti Ivan. . . 11. The Church Sveti Stephan. . . 15. The Church Sveti Arhangeli Michail i Gavrail. . . 17. The Pantocrator Church, 18. The Aliturgetos Church. . .



4. Nesebur today: ancient and mediaeval architectural monuments coexist side by side with houses of the Bulgarian National Revival period

5. Nesebur — ancient part: final building plan

opment. Its name was heard for a long time and the Hellenistic period is the first of several of prosperity and growth.

The Roman domination has neglected Nesebur. The sources for this period are scarce and the picture of the remains of the cultural heritage comparatively poor.

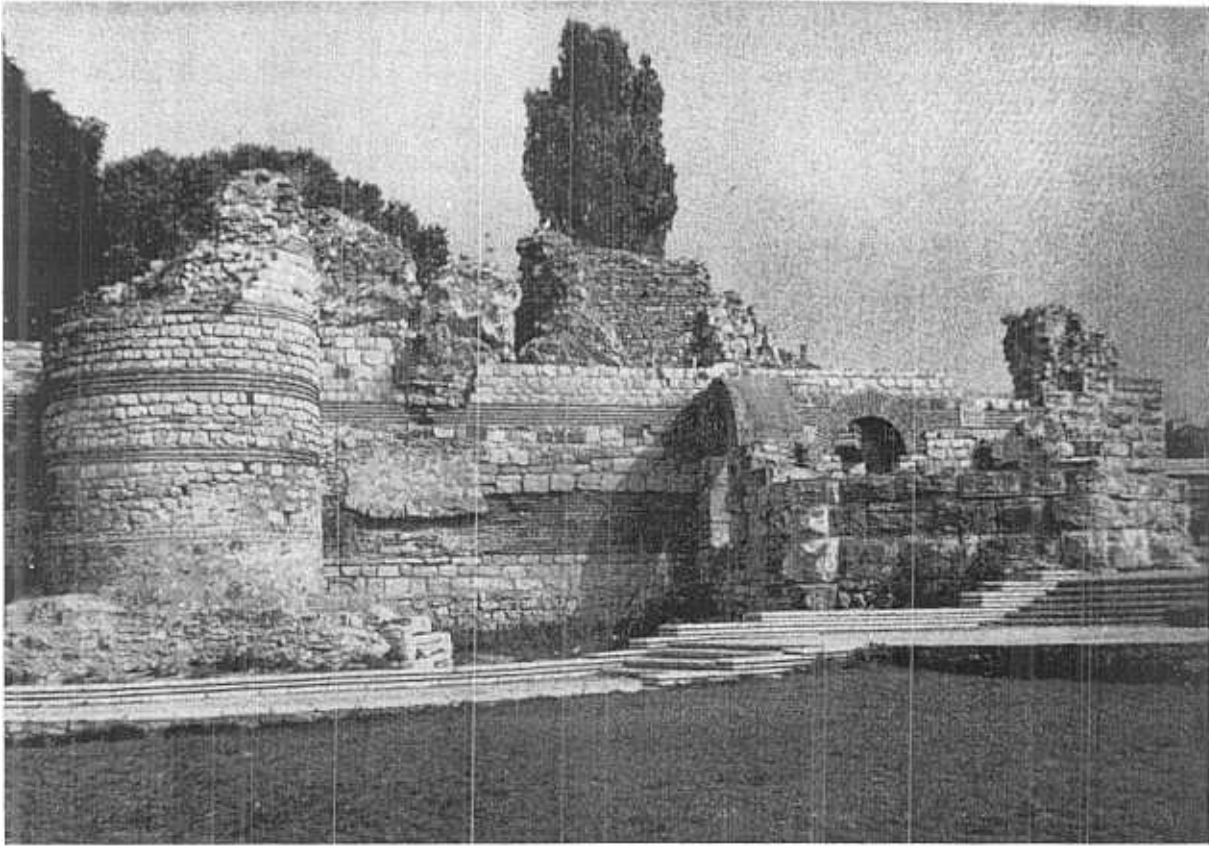
Nesebur benefited a lot from the proximity of the new capital of the Roman Empire which was moved to Constantinople in 330 A. D. In less than two centuries, and obviously exceeding the needs of the far from numerous population, remarkable structures were erected in the Late Antiquity. The early Byzantine period strengthened the political, cultural, economic, military and strategic relations of Constantinople and Messemvria. The perfect conditions for defence and the favourable layout of the harbour allowed the survival of the town during the Barbarian invasions.

A crucial turning point in the fate of Nesebur is the beginning of the 6th century, with the first settlements of the Slavs in the provinces of Moesia and Thrace and the subsequent rivalry between Byzantium and the new Bulgarian state in the Balkans (681). Nesebur and its region were equally distant from and endangered by Constantinople and the Bulgarian capital cities of Pliska, Preslav and Veliko Turnovo.

At the beginning of the 9th century, Khan Krum captured Messemvria but before the town eventually fell under the Ottoman invaders in the 15th century, it changed hands many times during the wars between Byzantium and Bulgaria. These changes however did not influence decisively the architecture which belongs specifically to the mediaeval Bulgarian style.

As part of the Ottoman Empire, now far from the active life and state frontiers, the small harbour town fell back to insignificance and neglect. It is





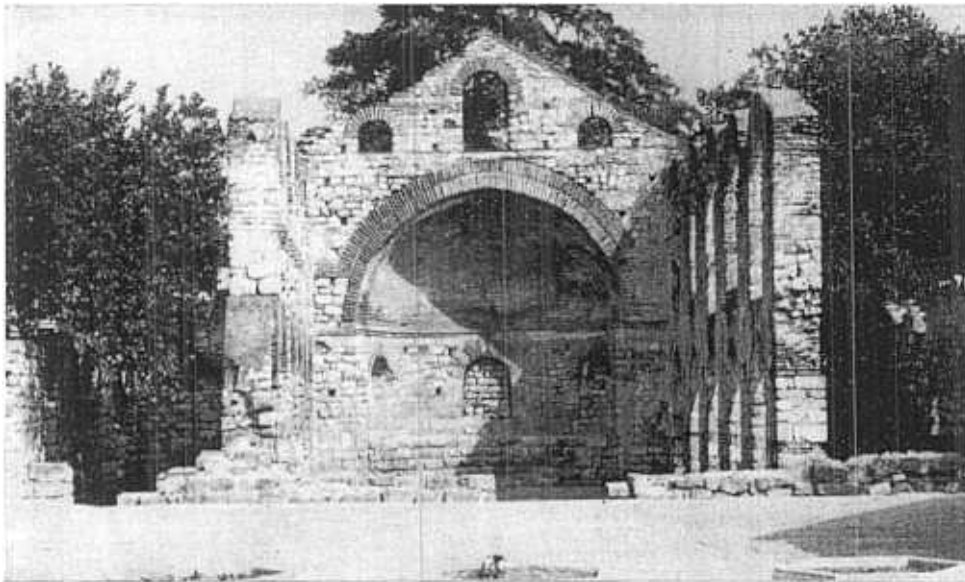
6. The Late Antiquity fortress wall with a round and pentagonal tower at the entrance viewed from the west

only the end of the 18th century, with the stabilization of the economy and the prosperity brought by crafts and trade, that saw the new blossoming of Nessebur which bears the characteristics of the Bulgarian Revival period. Each period of the historic development of Nessebur witnessed a specific urban structure in accordance with the ideas and the exigencies of the time; but, nevertheless, the peculiarity of the geographic conditions called for the preservation of the basic scheme. The access by the narrow isthmus was the only natural place for the town gate and the main fortification system. The shape of the peninsula dictates a mainstreet starting from the gate and running west-east as a backbone cord. The harbour activities, being the reason for the existence of the town, produce a short transversal north-south artery leading to the port while the crossing with the mainstreet forms the public centre.

All that is left from the building activities of Thracian Messambria is a small part of the fortification

wall with a gate at the northwest part of the peninsula.

Hellenistic Messemvria, in all probability, had an urban scheme in the tradition of the Aegean cities. Underwater archaeology in recent years has proved that the fortifications did not protect only the most vulnerable west coast, but followed the coastline north and south too. The existence of another harbour on the north coastline was discovered as well. So the street layout included another major transversal artery. It should be expected that the centre of Messemvria was situated between the two streets leading to the harbours where they crossed the mainstreet. This centre was surely the place for everyday social activities (the agora), a social, political, commercial and cultural centre. According to many scholars' opinion, the cult centre (acropole) was situated in the eastern part of the peninsula. Literary sources claim that there was a theatre in the town but its location is undiscovered yet. Many pieces of well processed marble column bases



7. The Old Meropolitan Basilica

and other remains show the existence of large and elegant decorated buildings, which have not been localised so far.

In early mediaeval times no essential changes in the urban structure took place. In the 5th century an overall renewal of the fortification system was carried out, the layout of the walls being minimally displaced. The axis of the main gate was moved by 7-8 metres. The location and the form of the towers, the structure and equipment of the gate, the building technique and the materials were quite new. In the harbour zone, stout walls with inside curved niches, unfamiliar elsewhere, appeared. For different reasons, but usually after destruction, the fortification walls were rebuilt and strengthened. New towers, outside and inside the walls were built. At a later period, the gate was blocked by a wall at two different entrances. Later on, a new opening was made south of the main gate. All these changes were executed in the course of centuries as late as the last years before the Ottoman domination.

The urban development however could be traced through two main periods. The first belongs to the Late Antiquity and early feudalism. Along with the fortifications, important buildings and equipment were built: a gravitation aqueduct 14 km long, public baths, five enormous early Christian basilicas, etc. Later on several monasteries were founded in or near the town. It is very probable

that some of them included the territory of the pagan acropolis at the east end of the peninsula.

The following mediaeval period is characterised by the deepening of the feudal relations and the further polarisation and centralising of the social state power. This is the period of the successful slavonisation of the regions around Nessebur, the prolonged submission under the Bulgarian mediaeval state and the manifestations of the Bulgarian mediaeval architectural school. But the new needs of society and the diminishing prospects and resources reshaped once again the image of the town. The decaying basilicas are no longer repaired and their surroundings—squares and atriums, are gradually covered by new constructions. The clear-out planning of the streets is gradually lost too. Technically poor buildings fill the empty spaces, including the street running along the inner side of the fortification walls. A number of smaller churches are being built, all of them in a more decorative and lighter style. These decorative and picturesque buildings are a reflection of new tendencies which illustrate the contribution of the Bulgarian mediaeval architectural school.

At the beginning of the Ottoman domination, building activities in Nessebur came to a halt. A lot of churches were abandoned. The fortifications lost their meaning and were used as foundations for new public and private buildings. The town water supply system was forgotten. Haphazard sources



point out that the connections with Constantinople and especially the Orthodox Patriarchate were still preserved and some of the families close to the former emperor's court still lived in Nessebur. Later on towards the end of the 18th century, the economic boom developing in other seaside, mountain and Rhodope settlements changed the outlook of Nessebur decisively. The new houses with their stores, the shops, the bakeries in the market streets completely changed the outlook of the town. The new urban structure was subjected to new laws and provided a new impact by organically linked, visually separate, picturesque ensembles. The occasional mediaeval churches blend successfully in the overall panorama.

The first fifty years after the Liberation of 1878 witness an unenviable destiny for Nessebur. Away from the areas of economic growth, the town was deprived of grounds for development and fell quickly into decline. This proved a disaster especially for the ancient houses and gradually, abandoned by



8. The school yard with basilica remains

9. The Late Antiquity fortress wall with a round and pentagonal tower at the entrance viewed from the south





10. The Church Sveti Stephan after restauration of the monument and its frescoes

their inhabitants, they began to vanish.

As a result of the basic socio-economic changes in Bulgaria after World War Two, new conditions for exclusive revival emerged. On the one hand, the riches of the cultural and historical heritage turned out to be serious attraction both for specialists and the modern tourists. On the other, the natural setting with its picturesque shores, the favourable climate, the sea and the beaches point towards a new future as a place for intensive leisure. The revival of interest in Nessebur has proved of vital importance for the survival of its rich cultural heritage. A considerable number of remarkable buildings from Antiquity, the early and late Middle Ages and the Bulgarian Revival have survived.

The monumental fortification system with its tight joints without mortar between the square stones of different sizes has stood up and endured all human and weather assaults for almost eight centuries. The late mediaeval fortification system presents in itself one of the highest achievements in architecture. It illustrates the most essential recommendations of the great theoreticians in the art of fortification like Philon of Byzantion (c.

2nd century B. C.), Vitruvius (25 B. C.) and Vegetius (5th century A. D.) on the shape and size of the walls; the form, place, dimensions of the edges, of the towers; the form, size and the defence gear of the main gate; the forward fortification *prothisma*. Moreover, the best technical achievements of the Roman building practice were applied by using *opus mixtum*. Standing in a contemporary setting, the ruins of the fortification system of Nessebur are not only a document of historic value but they also have queer charm.

The remains of five great basilicas are a convincing testimony to the revived political and economic prestige of Messemvria during the 5th and 6th centuries, the Old bishopric church being a landmark of the town today.

An important asset to the history of Bulgarian mediaeval architecture consists of the churches structurally almost entirely preserved; the New Bishopric (St. Stephan), St. Paraskeva, Sts. Archangels Michael and Gabriel, the Pantocrator and the Aliturgetos Church. These are among the few precious churches that still have the typical façade decoration and show the exuberance of the original, com-

mon to the Bulgarian Middle Ages.

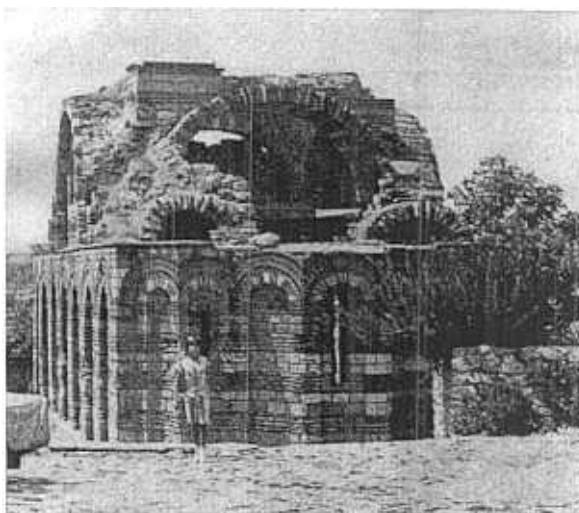
The irreversibility of the historic development backed by a mature pursuit of beauty shows itself in the numerous houses and street ensembles built about two centuries ago which illustrates the Bulgarian Revival period architecture in Nessebur.

The rich architectural heritage gives to the town an individual unique image. The public concern about the future of Nessebur was expressed in a government decree of 1958 by which the town was declared a preservation area and given annual subsidies for the upkeep and restoration of the monuments. The same year the development of the seaside resort "Sunny Beach" was started in the proximity of Nessebur. As a result of these two initiatives, architectural heritage and tourism are permanently linked. The time when the monuments were of interest primarily to the specialists is long forgotten. The drive towards and the satisfaction from the contact with cultural heritage becomes a reality for a growing number of people each day. And the growth of public interest leads to the widening of the spectrum of requirements. The past is included in the modern activities and setting only to be appreciated more vigorously. In the small-scale Nessebur the specific problems of the environment and the group of preserved buildings blend in the overall problems of the town-planning. In the past, the gradual change of the image of the town with each period brought new stylistic forms to those preserved in the buildings and constructions. Ancient and mediaeval fortifications and towers, ruins of the basilicas, picturesque churches were engulfed in anachronistic environmental development. But in spite of this, a certain unity binds old and new. The universal human scale and the natural experience brings to a balance the differences in periods and styles into captivating harmony. The main problem facing today's town planning of Nessebur is the preservation of this unity, while according the new dynamic contemporary needs with the ancient heritage but without imitating the old forms. The peninsula has the exceptional qualities of natural beauty. Thousands of tourists by the sea and the sunny beaches are cared for in hotels and private houses, all of them with a view on the architectural heritage of Nessebur. The socio-economic impact of tourism shows favourable and constructive trends in the following directions:

1. The tourist catering is a new considerable labour consuming activity for the region of Nessebur. For an ancient town, long deprived of the historic grounds for its survival, a new attractive and acceptable perspective for further development marks



11. The Pantocrator Church after restoration

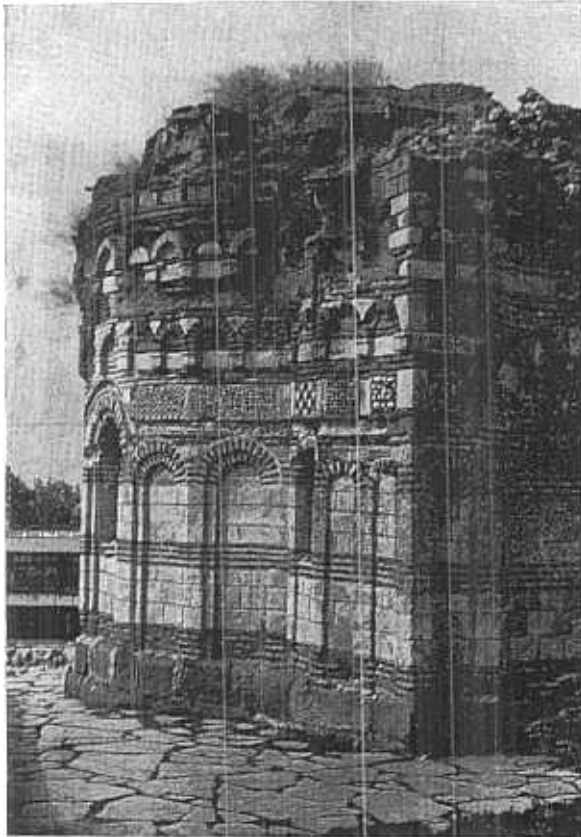


12. The Church Sveti Arhangeli Michail i Gavrail

13. The Church Sveti Ivan







14. The church Joan Aliturchetos

the first obligatory step in the direction of revitalisation.

2. The houses from the period of the Bulgarian Revival restored as cultural monuments keep their individual and group qualities. But this is not enough to preserve them for the future. The contribution of tourism turning them into profit making resort lodgings ensures their upkeep.

3. The fast development of the tourist business calls for accelerated and radical introduction of works of great expense such as transport (highways, streets, harbour, bus stations, airport), electricity supply, water supply, sewage, waste disposal, afforestation, planting, reinforcement of the coast, etc. All this improves progressively Nesebur, enhancing the environment, the presentation of the architectural heritage and assuring the steady inflow of financial means for the preservation programmes.

4. Tourism requires the expansion of the complex catering activities and the general improvement

of trade. The reconstruction and adaptation of old shops and the building of the new ones help achieving a compact and continuous street image. The possibility of bringing back to life the old shops for real customers is of utmost significance.

5. The intensified inflow of visitors to the town, its monuments and museums enhances the criteria and the level of conservation, upkeep and presentation of the cultural heritage.

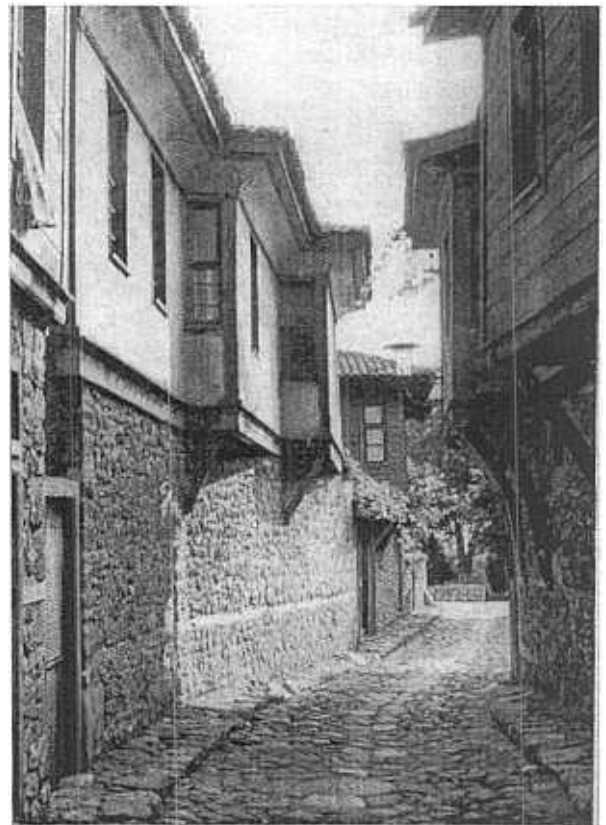
Contemporary life brought about new meaning to some of the town areas as a result of the interest of the visitors.

The monumental walls and towers of the fortification system are quite an attraction with their robust impact especially at the main gate and the entrance to the harbour.

The picturesque multicolour decoration on the mediaeval churches the Archangels, Pantocrator and Aliturchetos is not only a testimony of past grandeur, but an attraction too, which stops every group of tourists.

The Old Bishopric Church moulds with its ruins

15. An architectural ensemble of the Revival period





an exquisite open air space suitable for a number of stage events. The shows and performances held each year are remembered vividly for the unusual impact of the original stage setting.

Some of the churches preserved almost entirely have new functions. St. John the Baptist houses a small museum with objects characteristic of Nessebur ancient and mediaeval times. St. Stephan is an obvious "show off" with its original architecture, but beyond the quiet of the lapidarium in the courtyard, it displays treasures of wall paintings of the 16th century covering the entire interior space.

It should be noted that the great tourist interest for the preservation area could deviate the urban planning and endanger the unique natural, geographic, cultural and historic merits of Nessebur, although the exact limits of intervention are carefully and clearly stated in the official documents. The problems and their possible solution could be visualised by a triangle. The first side represents the needs of the architectural heritage. The second — the multiple dynamics of a developing town. The

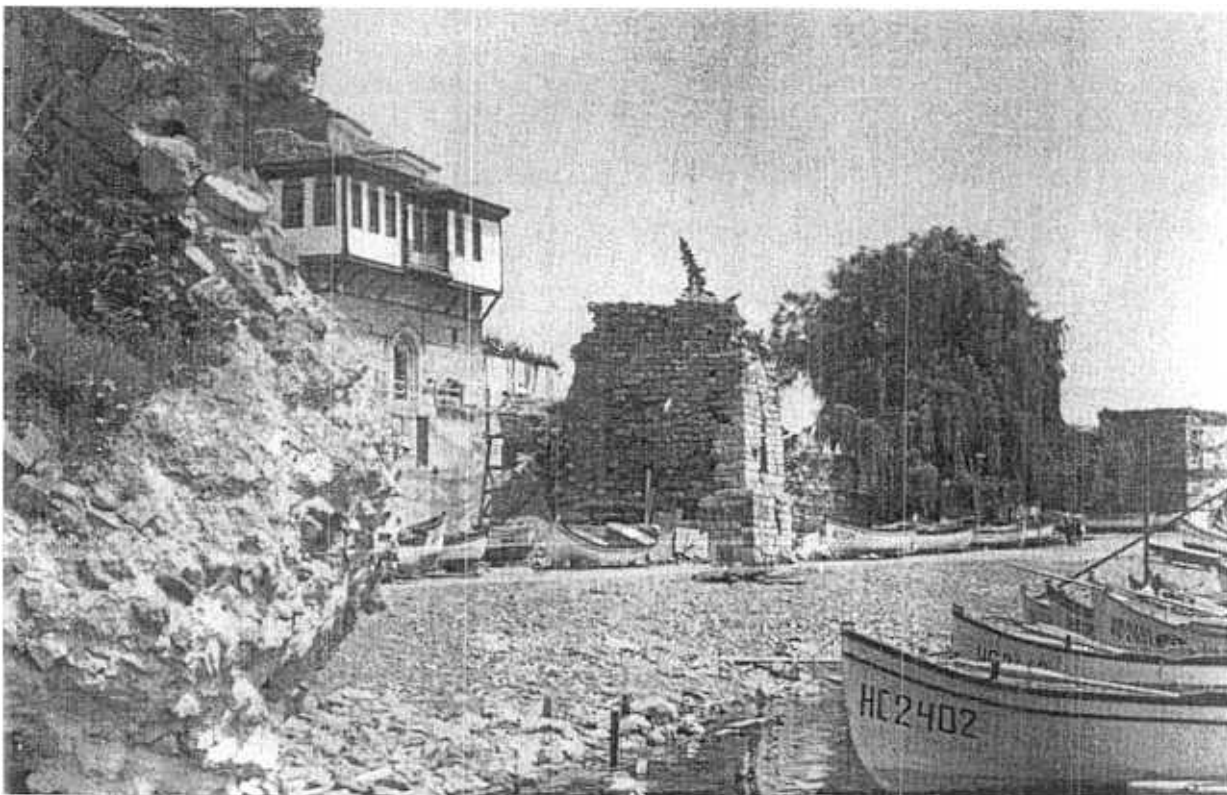
third — the active economic charges of the tourist industry. Regretfully the triangle is not equilateral. The interests of contemporary life and modern tourism are more forceful and clearly expressed. The laws of economy predetermine this ratio and it explains some of the following negative results in the urban reality of today's Nessebur:

1. The rent-income incentive results in migratory increase of the population and strong pressure for new house building licences. After the permissible density of works is reached the pressure for building permits in the tiny courtyards starts, in view of additional income for the owners. The intensity of the pressure succeeds in producing, in some cases, unfavourable urban results contradicting the image of the preservation area.

2. The necessity for greater market space and catering facilities in high season leads to the use of kiosks and booths ill-fitting the historic image and the piling in the streets of boxes, crates, etc.

3. At some points near remarkable monuments, the aesthetic unity is disrupted by misplaced telephone

#### 14. Mediaeval fortress walls and towers and a house of the Revival period



booths, publicity posters, electricity poles and boxes, etc.

4. The natural environment in the town is damaged most of all by the traffic lanes and parking lots. The expansion of the harbour and the bus parking lot changed considerably the southern coastline of the peninsula. Two natural elements — the shore and the sea, are pitilessly divided by an artificial strip of land.

The natural elements of the sea and the land coupled with the man-made architecture have produced during the ages a blend of harmony and beauty. Even

a partial disruption of some of the elements leads to the destruction of the harmony and renders the others meaningless. That is why the adherence to the Recommendation of UNESCO General Conference (Nairobi 1976) for the historic zones and their contemporary role is a sure guarantee against some aberrations in the town planning of the architectural preservation area which may seem at certain points of development quite useful and tempting.

Dimitar SUSULOV

## RESUME

*Fondée par les Thraces (XI<sup>ème</sup> ou X<sup>ème</sup> siècle avant notre ère), la ville de Nessebar connaît un épanouissement remarquable dans les domaines administratif, économique et culturel à l'époque grecque (V<sup>ème</sup> — IV<sup>ème</sup> siècle avant notre ère) puis décline lentement durant la période romaine. Après la fondation de l'Etat bulgare (681), la ville appartient tantôt à Byzance, tantôt à la Bulgarie. Après l'invasion ottomane au XV<sup>ème</sup> siècle, la ville est plongée dans un marasme de plusieurs siècles, qui ne prend fin qu'au XVIII<sup>ème</sup> siècle avec le début du Réveil national bulgare. La ville acquiert alors son caractère spécifique, très pittoresque.*

*Mais, à toutes les époques, les particularités géographiques du site — son port et l'isthme étroit qui le relie au continent — ont été des facteurs déterminants dans l'urbanisme de Nessebar et ont imposé la continuité dans le réseau des rues qui a conservé le même tracé. Cette continuité exceptionnelle au niveau de l'urbanisme a eu pour résultat d'assurer l'unité et l'harmonie entre des édifices d'époques et de styles différents: fortifications antiques et médiévales, basiliques, petites églises médiévales, maisons et boutiques datant du Réveil national.*

*La ville a connu, à l'époque contemporaine, un grand développement et, malgré les efforts déployés pour la sauvegarde de ses monuments, le patrimoine historique a subi quelques vicissitudes. Aux exigences de l'urbanisme contemporain et de la population se sont ajoutées les contraintes du tourisme qui connaît un grand essor.*

*Les monuments historiques — notamment les maisons — ont peu retrouvé des fonctions nouvelles ce qui assure de façon efficace leur sauvegarde et leur entretien. Des sommes importantes sont consacrées à l'aménagement de la ville, à la consolidation des côtes, aux transports.*

*Mais, à côté de ces faits positifs, on relève quelques tendances nuisibles au développement harmonieux de Nessebar. Le développement du tourisme entraîne des constructions nouvelles, la créations de grands parkings, etc. Cette pression du tourisme crée une situation défavorable, au plan de l'urbanisme, et c'est au prix de grands efforts que l'on réussira à éviter des conséquences néfastes sur la zone protégée de Nessebar.*

1. Nessebar vu à vol d'oiseau
2. Nessebar (Messambria) pendant l'antiquité (VI<sup>ème</sup> siècle avant notre ère — I<sup>ère</sup> siècle de notre ère)
3. Nessebar pendant le Moyen Age (Ve — XVe siècle)
4. Nessebar aujourd'hui: monuments antiques et médiévaux et ensembles de maisons datant du Réveil national bulgare
5. Nessebar, la ville ancienne, plan d'aménagement définitif
6. Rempart du bas-empire
7. La basilique Starata-mitropolia (l'Ancienne église métropolitaine)
8. La cour de l'école avec des vestiges d'une basilique
9. Vue du sud du rempart bas-empire
10. L'église Sveti Stephane
11. L'église du Pantocrator
12. L'église Sveti Archangeli Mihail i Gavrail
13. L'église Sveti Ivan
14. L'église Ioan Alitourghetos
15. Un ensemble architectural de l'époque du Réveil national
16. Rempart et tours du Moyen Age et une maison du Réveil national (XIX<sup>ème</sup> siècle)