

THE GRAND PALACE IN PLISKA CONSERVATION AND PRESENTATION

The historical fate of Pliska, the first Bulgarian capital with the many years standing between us and the period of its creation, efflorescence and decline, poses problems difficult to tackle and delicate to interpret. Pliska was built after a plan following a general concept which could be restored despite the ravages of men and time.

The climax of Pliska's town planning — the Grand Palace complex—cannot be treated as an independent phenomenon. It forms an organic unity with the palace centre and with the other elements of the Internal City's town planning. Its historic and scientific value, central position and seriously damaged state require a skilful approach to conservation and presentation.

The complex consists of the so-called Kroum's Palace and the Throne Chamber, two representative edifices built shortly one after another. Historical information about these monuments, especially of Kroum's Palace, is scanty. It is probably one of the earliest solid buildings in the Internal City of Pliska. It is supposed to have been set on fire in 811 by the Byzantine Emperor Nicephorus I Ghenyk as seen from a chronicle about the war between Bulgaria and Byzantium during Kroum's reign and from the excavated slack-like material with traces of burning.

Archaeological research with emphasis on Pliska's palace centre started in the spring of 1905 and has been going on since then, elucidating many aspects of early Bulgarian architecture. The probing of 1966 was the first comparatively good research work on the so-called Kroum's Palace. On an area of 4,718.26 sq. m. an edifice was outlined; it was enormous for that time — 74 m long and 59.50 m wide—and consisted of 63 irregular squares and four towers. Between 1976-78 the Palace was thoroughly excavated. Nothing has survived of the original structure save the 30-40 cm thick pad consisting of coarse rubble and fine broken ceramic pieces fused with mortar. A layer of mortar was cast over rammed loose material and reached the upper end of oak woodpiks 30/sq m. The first row of substructure regular stone blocks with sizes ranging between 80 and 100 cm in length and 40 to 50 cm in width. It is interesting to note that the mortar pad and the foundation regular stone blocks were sited in

ditches. The virgin soil on the fields between the walls is a proof of it.

Archaeological studies on the cultural layer throw light on the palace's dates of construction. In unaffected sections the layer is about 60 cm thick and contains ceramic fragments mainly. Some 40 cm below the present-day level there is a lot of fine ceramics of the 12th-14th centuries and between 40 and 60 cm — of the 9th-11th centuries. The comparatively well preserved thin layer of mortar near the south-east corner of the Throne Chamber, but belonging to Kroum's Palace, clearly shows the mediaeval building level. Unfortunately, very little of the real regular stone blocks construction has survived and it is in the north-west tower.

The Throne Chamber poses much more interesting problems. It was built somewhat later on the foundation of Kroum's Palace and overlapped 18 fields and part of the north-west tower. It is strange that the chamber should have been built after the removal of all stone blocks of the destroyed palace. The earliest archaeological research work on the Throne Chamber was done in 1905. This is what has survived of the original building: a superstructure of 2.75 meter maximum height, parts of a brick vault, stone pavements and a few strongly damaged architectural details. The building is 52 m long and 26,50 m wide. It was built of stone blocks of 80-100/40-50/30-50 cms which makes

1. The reserve of Pliska — "Internal City": the northern part of the Throne Chamber (photo taken in 1905)



think that some of the stone material from Kroum Palace had been used a second time.

The Throne Chamber was built later but the Grand Palace complex should be treated as a whole.

The mortar pads of Kroum's Palace will be conserved by a 30 cm plastic clay coat and the trench will be filled with well thickened stone flour to the level of presentation. To reinforce the original of the Throne Chamber it is necessary to replace the eroded stone blocks and the joint that holds them together with mortars similar to the original.

The mortar pad sections exposed directly to the atmosphere receive special treatment and so do the preserved original brick fragments of the Throne Chamber's vaults — chemical conservation for long-term preservation.

The architectural interpretation of the complex is a very difficult task: remnants of the so-called Kroum's Palace are few and do not allow to work out a hypothesis of how it looked. For us the building of the palace along the main town-forming east-west oriented axis of Pliska-Internal City is an important clue to such a hypothesis. Obviously the builders were guided by the desire to make it impressive, both for its size and dominant position. At first glance it seems strange to have two towers on the east façade and two on the west façade. If the palace had expressly defence functions it would be logical to have the towers in the corners and ensure thus the necessary flank scope of fire. Obviously in this case they play a quite different role and the defence function is of secondary importance. The towers built so strongly re-emphasize the east-west axis, more definitely the middle fields. As a type of building Kroum's Palace is logically associated with a past architectural tradition which functionally divided in height the volume of a building into two main parts:

— a 6 meter high ground floor serving as a warehouse and forming a base for the so-called **piano nobile**.

— one or more storeys of living or representative premises above the **piano nobile**.

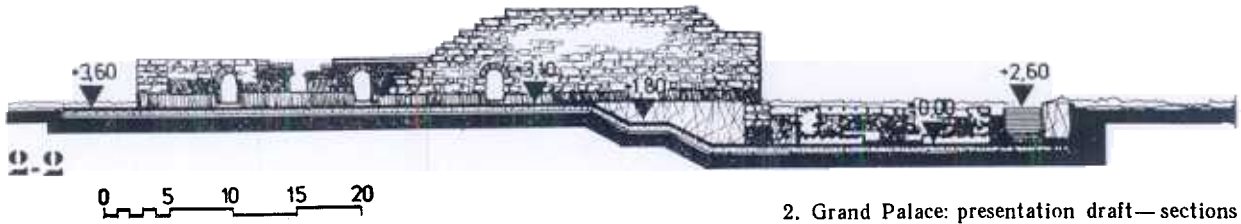
An outer staircase between the east and west towers led to the piano nobile level in Kroum's Palace. The Palace is definitely oriented in these directions, therefore these were probably parade stairs and an active element in the architectural artistic outlook. As to the towers, their main function was vertical communication. This is evident from the remnants of four nuclei, presumably part of the staircase, built with mortar-fused ground stone. Visitors today tend to regard the Palace and the later Throne Chamber as a whole. It is the main

reason for the comparatively reserved presentation giving prominence to elements that are an undeniable fact. To enable visitors to read the plan the presentation scheme envisages to reintegrate the walls to the original level of the East Gate passage (± 0.000). The reintegration will have imitative character relying on data provided by prints on the mortar pads left by the original stone blocks. An exposition opening is to be made in the south-west corner so as to have direct contact with the only surviving original there. It has been sought to reinforce the feeling of "going underground" by restricting space with prop walls of visible concrete with uneven surface. An appliqué of low iron-works will represent a conventional reconstruction of Kroum's Palace and tell of its creation and history.

It is important to know how the Throne Chamber stands on the foundations of Kroum's Palace. The Palace-Chamber transition requires a special approach and treatment. The Throne Chamber presentation is a key element for its solution.

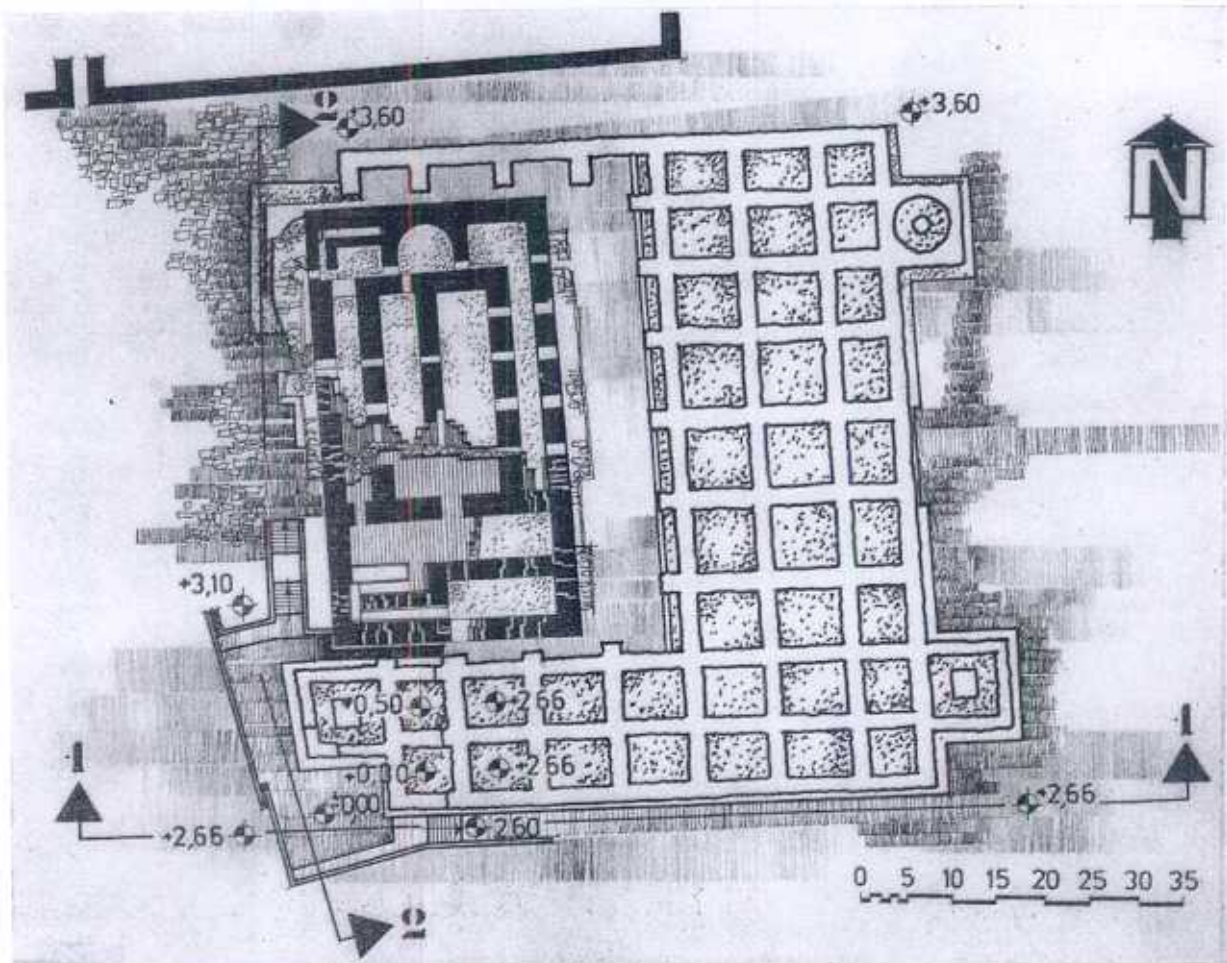
First of all, the Throne Chamber is situated in a strange way with its main axis north-south, i. e. perpendicular to the main town-forming axis. A more profound analysis poses a series of questions that permit many equally good hypotheses. It is obvious that the present superstructure is part of a ground floor functioning as a warehouse. The two premises in the south part across the long axis were under an ante-chamber. The ratio between the thickness of the south façade wall (1.60 m) and the transverse wall dividing the two premises (each about 5 m long) gives rise to the assumption that the floor construction of that ante-chamber was a trimmer joist. No doubt, the four transverse premises in the middle part were topped with vaults. The piano nobile level then was about $+5.56$ m in relation to the adopted ± 0.00 . The south-west corner of the Throne Chamber especially the "thinning" of the west façade wall deserve great attention. The space enclosed here by the transverse indented wall which protrudes into the west wall speaks of a possible secondary staircase that disappeared long ago.

Many hypotheses may be suggested about the Throne Chamber's architectural outlook but it is risky to assert what it was really like. Hence the presentation based on comparatively clear constructive elements. Out of the preserved heels of the vault and grooves of the transverse wall it is possible to reconstruct the vault's inner curve that approximates a parabola. The vaults of the two middle lengthwise spaces of the ground floor had apses of



2. Grand Palace: presentation draft—sections

3. Grand Palace complex: presentation draft — plan (on left the Throne chamber)



identical height whereas the side spaces apses were lower. Block bonding perhaps levelled those differences up to the Throne Chamber floor level. The partially reconstructed vaults will be built of lighted colour concrete bricks to make our interference clear. The floor construction of the reconstructed level above the transverse premises will be filled with concrete and steel. As no floor elements have been discovered in the Throne Chamber and the ante-chamber, we cannot commit ourselves to any lasting material. The floor will be treated as a grey-yellowish pavement. A modern flight of stairs will be built in the south-west corner because the original one does not lend itself to reconstruction. The plan is to underline the apse with three rows of regular stone blocks. Presentation work in the Throne Chamber will be preceded by coating the original with Fuller's earth and epoxide resin to make a dilatation joint. The superstructures will be of minimum weight so as

not to deform the original. A joint of copper sheet will be left between the original and the superstructures to mark modern interference.

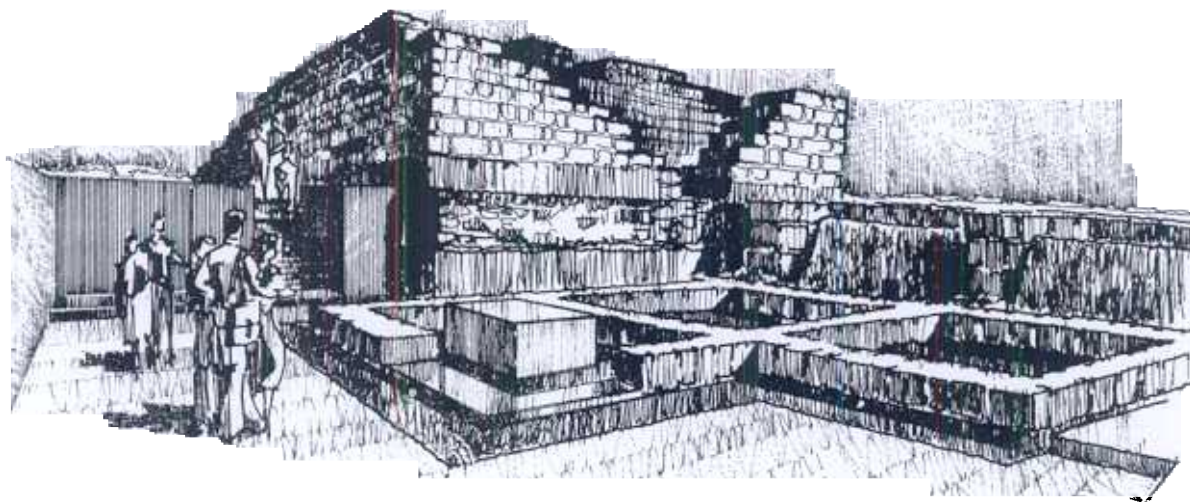
To place the Throne Chamber in a suitable exposition medium, the Kroum's Palace fields will be raised to reach the East Gate passage and the existing original stone pavements will be levelled. Inside the Palace the fields will be worked upon with uneven surface concrete to which broken ceramic pieces will impart a brown-reddish colour. The remaining fields enclosed by the reintegrated walls of Kroum's Palace will be gray-beige and filled in much the same way but without ceramic pieces added to them.

Last but not least comes the drainage. It is one and the same for both buildings: in each square of Kroum's Palace a draining well will be built; similar wells of bigger capacity will be dug in each premise of the Throne Chamber.

To finish the picture, a discreet alley network with

4. Remains of the Throne Chamber





5. Perspective reconstruction and presentation project

grass joint should surround the complex and lights should be in keeping with the atmosphere. The presentation of the Grand Palace complex suggested here is an indivisible element of the overall concept about mediaeval Pliska's presen-

tation and reveals to a maximum extent the unique ruins and the town-planning structure that existed

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RESUME

Le „Grand Palais“ de la première capitale bulgare, Pliska, est le point culminant de la structure historique de la ville. Sa situation au centre de la cité intérieure souligne ce rôle. Il est évident que l'architecte de l'époque a voulu souligner l'importance respective de ces édifices tant par leur dimension que par leur situation. Le projet de restauration et de présentation du „Grand Palais“ a tenté de suivre au plus près les données de l'urbanisme et de l'architecture afin de mettre en valeur les deux édifices essentiels de cet ensemble: le Palais de Kroum et le Palais du Trône, construit un peu plus tard.

Les travaux de restauration proposent, en premier lieu, de conserver les vestiges originaux en bon état, afin de leur éviter toute ingérence plus importante, aujourd'hui ou dans l'avenir. La ligne directrice est de conserver intact le monument et de mettre en valeur l'ensemble. La présentation de l'ensemble, se fondant sur les recherches menées sur l'architecture et la construction,

met l'accent sur le Palais de Kroum et sur le Palais du Trône. Pour faciliter le contact direct du public, une attention toute particulière a été apportée à maintenir l'équilibre dans la présentation des deux palais.

L'aménagement d'un environnement qui serve de lien entre le „Grand Palais“ et les autres monuments de Pliska, est un autre point important de l'étude. Cet aménagement, souligné par un éclairage approprié, traitera l'ensemble du „Grand Palais“ non comme un phénomène isolé, mais comme un monument lié organiquement à l'urbanisme de la première capitale bulgare.

1. Zone protégée de Pliska — „ville intérieure“. La partie nord du Palais du Trône (photo d'archives de 1905)
2. Le Grand Palais. Projet de présentation des vestiges — coupes
3. L'ensemble Grand Palais. Projet de présentation des vestiges — plan (à gauche le Palais du Trône)
4. Vestiges du Palais du Trône
5. Projet de reconstitution et de présentation — perspective