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Chapter II: Description of the first survey area

Let us first describe the survey area in its two basic aspects: as a separate composite and as a part in the mosaic of the wider region. Looking at the study area from the first perspective involves its definition as a micro-regional entity and the definition of its inner components. In other words, it is necessary to explain the drawn limits of the surveyed area and the suggested inner divisions. It is a question of finding a topographic or a hydrographic entity and observing and mapping its inner variations. In doing so we had to acknowledge that the way in which we read the present day landscape is to a large degree predetermined by the modern patterns of settlement and land use. These are the parameters that draw the limits of the area, both its outer and inner limits. In the hilly, dry and desolate conditions of the Mid-Vardar Valley, with very scarce resources, one has little choice but to at least roughly follow the limits of the zone of modern agricultural exploitation. Later we'll see that the 'anthropo-geography' of the present is not of such a recent date after all and that it chiefly followed the path cleared by its more distant predecessors.

Once the outer and the inner limits of the area are defined, we'll try to understand its role and place in the wider geographic context and determine its geostrategic value. It is a matter of understanding how is this region situated in the mosaic of similar and contrasting micro-regional entities. We'll also briefly turn to the geographic history of the wider region, to see what place it's occupied in the political, ethnic and administrative divisions of the past and examine its importance in the regional and interregional communication network.

The point is to prepare a background for the survey results. Earlier we've insisted that no landscape is a blank territory. Even when in pristine conditions, all landscapes display physical fragmentations and asymmetries in the distribution of resources. Not all locations in a certain area are inhabitable, nor are the basic natural resources equally accessible to its every corner. Every micro-region has its centre and periphery, just as it occupies a central or peripheral place in the wider regional context. We often worry that much of this had been determined or greatly modified by the hand of modern civilization, when it is far more likely that people have always tended to install their settlements, fields and roads onto the natural surroundings with the least disturbance and minimum efforts. This is true for all pre-modern civilizations; people have made optimal use of the fragmentary, asymmetrical character of the natural surrounding: shaping that ridge into a cart-road, that flattened hilltop into a fort or a sacred platform etc. Complete reshaping of landscapes was rare and exceptional, unnecessary and beyond the capacities of the small communities of peasants and shepherds that settled the regions along the Mid-Vardar Valley. And yet their share in shaping the landscapes of the present is both fascinating and monumental. It is the result of a millennia-long repetitive usage and re-usage of the various landscape components⁸². Resiliently and quietly they've been refurbishing the natural surroundings to their own ends, both side by side and against the forces of nature.

II.1 The valley of Sopot: its drainage basin, size and limits, geo-morphology, communication, natural conditions and land-use

The small stream that flows by the present-day village Sopot is one of the literally hundreds of small streams that drain the hilly and rugged banks of the Mid-Vardar Valley. This

⁸² J. Benesh, M. Zvelebil, 73-93; eds. P. Ucko, R. Layton, 1994; J. Bintliff, 123-149, 2000.

section of the valley is called the Taor Canyon, stretching from the village Taor, 15 kilometers southeast from the centre of Skopje to the plain of Veles (maps II_1, II_2). The majority of the streams that drain the rocky banks of the Vardar are but dry, narrow and often, very deep ravines. Only a few display features of true rivers, featuring well articulated hydrographies. The valley of Sopot is one of these. On a regional physical map, we can observe its headwaters, upper, lower course and mouth (maps II_2a, 2b). Yet the creek is basically nameless; the name the valley of Sopot or the central valley is given here for convenience. The local inhabitants have various names for the different parts of its course, mainly referring to the surrounding hillsides, the dominant vegetation or some local event or person. Truly it is difficult to speak of a river valley with floor and sides. For the greater part of its course, the stream is a barely visible channel cutting across the foothills of the surrounding massifs. From around mid-course, this small channel is suddenly transformed into a deep, V-shaped ravine. Its sides become steep, rising almost vertically for tens of meters. Along certain sections the sides of the small valley merge unnoticeably with the slopes of the surrounding hills.

The valley of Sopot is formed almost 3 kilometers northeast of the present-day village, at the foot of Vranov Rid (point 339 on map II_2b). Two major sleeves, coming from the north and northwest meet at the feet of Vranov Rid, Radičica and Goli Rid. The toponymy is vague, often imprecise because of the ruggedness of the terrain. These hills are a part of the large Tertiary Basin of the central parts of the Republic of Macedonia. Erosion has carved numerous small ravines into the soft sediments consisting mainly of sand and pebbles. The hilly masses are mostly dissected along the NW-SE axis, parallel to the course of the Vardar Valley. The micro-relief is very complex. It is difficult to follow the main ridge line, broken into numerous offshoots and small flattened hilltops. Particularly elusive is the watershed line on the north side, the one that basically separates the drainages of the Vardar and its major tributary, the Pčinja. Along the rest of the valley's course the limits of its drainage are clear. The watershed line follows the ridges of Prisoj and Goli Rid on the west, Radičica on the east and Gaber on the south. It is higher on the western and northern sides, reaching 550 meters above sea level; on the south and east, the limits of this drainage basin are below the line of 400 meters above sea level.

All the hill masses that surround this basin, though insignificantly high in absolute terms, have very steep, hardly traversable sides. They present very effective barriers, leaving only two comfortable exits from the area of the valley: one near its confluence with the Vardar and the other, at the point where the massifs of Radičica and Gaber meet, the southwest and southeast corners of the survey area. The easiest way to grasp the drainage of the valley of Sopot is to visualize a right-angled triangle, where Gaber and Radičica are the shorter sides and the Prisoj-Goli Rid hill-chain the longer side.

The valley of Sopot is both the back-bone of the survey area and the main axis of the administrative territory of Sopot. Measured from the centre of the headwater to its mouth, it is 3.6 kilometers long, draining an area of roughly 6.5 square kilometers. The once powerful stream has cut its course deep at the foot of the hills on its left. For the greater part of its course, the right bank is wider and gentler. The stream flows due south until its mid-course, a point where the masses of Prisoj and Radičica almost meet, forming a narrow strait (point of Bodleva Češma on map II_2a). Downstream from this point the small stream gradually turns westwards, making a slow, 90 degrees turn. From roughly the same point its channel is quickly transformed into a deep corridor, with steep sides and well-defined floor. During the last 400 meters, the valley is cut deep at the northern foot of Gaber, following an east-west direction. Its floor is about 30 meters wide at this point, 15 to 20 meters below the edge of its right bank, the southern foot of

Prisoj. In its lower course the valley of Sopot presents a significant physical barrier, splitting the micro-region into very different western and eastern halves.

This transformation of the central valley neatly coincides with the change in the local geologic substrate: Tertiary sand and pebbles in the upper course, Quaternary deposits made of sediments eroded from the slopes of Prisoj and Gaber in the lower course (map II_3). In its lower course the central valley is cut nearly along the eastern limit of the Quaternary deposits, so that its left bank is entirely made of Neogene sediments, while the opposite bank of Quaternary colluvium. Thus the central valley is both a topographic and a geologic frontier. Although part of its drainage, the left bank of the stream belongs to the large Tertiary Plateau of Ovče Pole, not to the Vardar Valley proper.

To the west the barren hills that separate the Vardar Valley from the drainage area of its tributary are made of older, metamorphic rocks, overlaid with interrupted chains of whitish limestone. The limestone belt crowns the ridges of Prisoj and Gaber, at places emerging into massive, rocky outcrops. Particularly imposing is the stretch from the mouth of the Pčinja to the mouth of the valley of Sopot: a 3 kilometers long and over 200 meters tall wall, crowned with a whitish crown of limestone blocks (photo II_1). The limestone belt follows the line of the ridges, descending into the mouth of the central valley and climbs the northwest edge of Gaber. It separates the mouth of the valley of Sopot from those of the neighbouring smaller streams and at the same time, it is a physical and geologic frontier between the drainage of Sopot and the Vardar Valley.

Already a century ago the founder of the geology, human and physical geography of the Balkan Peninsula, Jovan Cvijić observed that the Vardar in its mid-course flows at the foot of hard metamorphic rocks, not through the softer Neogene sediments spreading barely one or two kilometers to the east⁸³. The explanation of the famous natural historian is still valid today: the canyons of the Vardar are younger, epigenetic formations. The hard metamorphic rocks of a Paleozoic date were exposed later, through processes of uplift and erosion. The prevailing geomorphologic tendency along the Vardar is one of valley incision and backwards expansion in the region of the headwaters. Cvijić used the term *regressive erosion* to designate this tendency⁸⁴. Its effects are particularly striking further down the river course, south of the chain of old metamorphic rocks that form the Taor and the Veles Gorge. But even along the stretches of these canyons, the erosive forces were powerful enough to scar the Neogene sediments kilometers to the east of the Vardar.

Two smaller ravines carved in the eastern bank of the valley of Sopot, just before it meets the Gaber Massif are probably the result of this tendency (map II_2a). The northern one is basically a micro-replica of the central valley; it splits the southern foot of Radičica along a north-south axis, turning westward in its lower half. The southern one is twice as short; it is cut in a west-east direction, at the foot of Gaber. Although very small it is an important element in the local topography, opening an easy link between the basins of Sopot and the neighbouring Vranov Stream.

The slopes of Prisoj and Gaber are barren and rocky (photo II_2) and erosion has taken its toll even on the upper portions of the Radičica Massif. In the nearer past, when life and agricultural exploitation was more intense in the area, the slopes drained by the valley of Sopot must have appeared even more desolate than now. At present young oak forest covers large portions of the hills east of the central valley (photo II_3).

⁸³ J. Cvijić, *Osnovi za Geologiju i Geografiju Južne Makedonije i Stare Srbije*, Beograd 1906.

⁸⁴ J. Cvijić, 275, 1906.

There is another peculiarity related to the geology of this area. The contact zone between the Neogene sediments and the rocks that form the canyons of the Mid-Vardar is marked by a chain of outcrops made of isolated red conglomerate (map II_3). They appear in the central valley's mid-course and in the southeast corner of the area as low offshoots of the surrounding hill-masses. All major gullies in the area, including the two mentioned earlier, were carved close to the line where the softer Tertiary sediments meet the older Paleozoic rocks, flanking the Vardar Valley. The prominence of these small rocky outcrops is partly because of the color and the texture of the rock, but their appearance is equally accentuated by the work of erosion, by the recesses cut in the softer sediments surrounding the red conglomerate. They are naturally the most dominating and strategically positioned locations in the survey area and both were adapted into forts, during certain periods of the past (photo II_4).

The basin of Sopot is a separate, geographically well defined micro-region. Along most of its perimeter it is clearly separated from the neighbouring micro-regions. Basically there are only two comfortable exits from the area; points where the watershed line is broken and where the surrounding ridges gently descend into the plains. The one leading westwards into the Vardar Valley is the mouth of the central valley, one of the rare points offering easy communication between the left and the right banks of the Vardar. The gently descending ridges of the Taor Gorge are both crossed by a local road and the modern Skopje-Thessalonica highway. On the opposite southeast corner of the area, a low flattened ridge, spurring from the southern slopes of Radičica presents barely a symbolic barrier between the drainage of Sopot and the drainage of the neighbouring Vranov Stream. Both the highway and the local road leave the area at this point, passing under the low plateau of red conglomerates, at the northeast foot of Gaber. The local road follows the small gully, carved at the foot of this hill, while the highway follows the shortest line, cutting across the middle of the foothills and over the central valley (map II_2a, the highway is marked by a full red line; the local roads, black, interrupted lines)

Two other roads spring from this central axis, leading northwards. One follows the course of the central valley until the point of Bodleva Češma, where it parts into a branch leading up the steep hillside of Radičica and a branch that heads across the gentler right bank for a local pass leading towards the mouth of the Pčinja and the village Vetersko. The other local road leads northwest, cutting across the western slopes of the Prisoj-Goli Rid hill-chain, parallel to the modern road and the Vardar Valley. It is drawn several hundred meters away from the edge of the canyon cliffs, avoiding the deep impenetrable ravines that dissect the surface into barren and isolated ridges. On a regional physical map this natural communication is shown as an alternative path to the village Vetersko (map II_2b). The passer-by can also continue up the Vardar and arrive at the mouth of the river Pčinja, 5 to 6 kilometers northwest of Sopot. If there ever was an interregional road passing through the area of Sopot, it must have followed this line of communication rather than the overgrown, at places impenetrable floor of the Vardar Valley.

There is an ambiguous relation between the present day village and the Vardar Valley floor. Sopot is situated only 250 meters from the Vardar's left bank and yet, the village and its land belong to the "interior", like all other villages situated along this section of the Vardar Valley. Even the most exposed houses are hidden from sight from the valley floor. The settlements in the region are either situated on the banks of some of the larger streams that flow into the Vardar or in the more spacious foothills, hundreds of meters above the valley floor. There is a plain and apparent explanation for this pattern. Along this stretch, the Vardar flows through a chain of steep, inhospitable canyons. Their sides are rocky, often rising vertically for hundreds of meters. The valley floor is narrow, reduced to small and often isolated terraces

(photo II_5). Larger stretches of flat land appear only around the mouths of its larger tributaries. These too present rare points of exit from the narrow valley floor. During its course through the narrow Taor Gorge, the Vardar is fast and treacherous. It is bridged over on two locations, two times near the mouths of its larger tributaries, the Pčinja and 5 kilometers downstream near the confluence with the valleys of Sopot and Solp.

The scarcity of spacious arable land is not the sole problem on the valley floor. There are no freshwater sources in the canyon; the polluted waters of the Vardar are barely good for irrigation. A number of small monasteries and isolated chapels situated either on the edge of the high cliffs of the Taor Gorge or on the valley floor signal that prior to the building of the Skopje-Thessalonica railway in the late 19th century, this stretch of the Vardar Valley was a secluded and peripheral corridor. The small and isolated hamlets, mostly appearing on the gentler right bank would hardly survive without the railway line.

Nevertheless access to the banks of the Vardar was important for the inhabitants of the villages in the region. The villagers of Sopot for instance, occupied a narrow isolated terrace, to the right of the mouth of Sopot's valley. It is a thirty meters wide stretch, clasped between the descending limestone ridge and the fast river. A small, now barely visible path links this isolated corner with the village. At present this small terrace is like the rest of the valley floor, densely overgrown. Sheets of modern rubbish brought by the river cover the small sandy pockets. Surface remains and testimonies of the older inhabitants revealed that once, this was an exploited and gladly visited part of the village area. A number of small gardens, supported by terrace walls made of finely cut limestone blocks can still be seen preserved in very good condition at the foot of the ridge. People came to swim and fish here, to rest and escape the hot, treeless foothills. It was a discrete and pleasant corner of the local landscape.

Over one hundred meters up the river course, there is another terrace, several times larger than the one belonging to Sopot. It is an important location for this micro-region, because it is one of the rare points where the Vardar can be crossed. At present a hanging bridge connects the river banks. On both sides of the river there are comfortable exits from the bottom of the canyon, upstream through the valleys of Sopot and Solp. It is also possible to continue up the course of the Vardar, along its left bank, but not downstream, towards the plain of Veles. The steep, southwest side of Gaber falls sharply into the river bed, effectively blocking downstream land communication (photo II_5). Therefore the small river terrace acts as a major local crossroad. Too important to belong exclusively to some of the surrounding villages, it became a monastic land. A wide, but badly maintained dirt road leads from the monastery to Sopot. It climbs the descending ridges of the Taor Gorge and continues eastwards, parallel to the Skopje-Thessalonica highway; this is the main west-east communication line in the study area.

Although geographically it is not a part of the drainage basin of Sopot's central valley, the young terraces by the Vardar were included in the survey area. They were after all a part of the village territory, a place where a number of everyday activities took place. There are no permanent streams on the surface in the village area. The floor of the valley of Sopot is dry for decades and access to the waters of the Vardar must have been of great importance. It is another question if this was the case in the more distant past. Until the early 20th century there was another, smaller village just across the monastic complex, around the mouth of the Solpski Potok, on the Vardar's right bank. According to early 20th century ethnographers, the small complex dedicated to St. George started to thrive in the early decades of the 20th century, after the demise of the village⁸⁵. It is possible that in the more distant past, the land of the monastic

⁸⁵ M. Filipović, Severna Veleška Sela, 489-573, *Srpski Etnografski Zbornik* XXIX 1935.

complex was part of another settlement's territory. Over the last century it has become a "forecourt" of Sopot's hinterland and it was included in the survey area.

As a micro-regional entity, the valley of Sopot is the obvious core of the village administrative area. It makes up to between 60 and 70% of Sopot's hinterland, which also includes the rugged terrain between the left edge of the Taor Gorge and the ridge of the Prisoj-Goli Rid hill-chain (maps II_2a, 2b). The village area measures approximately between 9 and 10 square kilometers. However the bulk of the village productive territory, the great majority of the agricultural fields are concentrated on barely 10% of this land. If we look at the agricultural divisions of the land, we'll notice a multitude of field borders, longitudinal sub-divisions and dozens small terraces on the steep sides of the lower valley (map II_2c). These are clearly signs of a long-term, intensive agricultural exploitation, concentrated on a relatively small portion of the village hinterland. The plough-zone didn't expand but became "denser". The rest of the parish land are steep and barren slopes and were mostly used for extensive herding. The inhospitable hillsides sum up to between 80 and 90 percent of the village area. On the other hand, only very small portions of the hillside are flat: the narrow ridges of the hills and the small flattened hilltops. With rare exceptions, these types of locations are most affected by soil erosion and the strong northerlies. The entire hillside is rugged and rocky. Soil layer and vegetation are thin. Only grasses and low scrubs grow on Prisoj. Young oak forest has spread over most of the hills to the east of the central valley, but only recently, in a time of almost complete abandonment of the village and the surrounding fields.

The difference in the vegetation cover between the hills east and west of the valley of Sopot is naturally related to the local geo-pedologic substrate. The Prisoj-Goli Rid hill-chain is made of porous, limestone. The small amount of water falling from the atmosphere quickly sinks beneath the surface, allowing the growth of only the toughest, least demanding plants. East of the central valley on the slopes of Radičica, the oak grows on brighter clayish soils that seem to retain water for longer. They have suffered less from erosion because the terrain is gentler and less fragmented. But along steeper stretches and along the watershed line, the typical soil layer is suddenly replaced by small and medium-sized rounded rocks and sparse grasses and scrubs replace the dense oak groves. The orientation of the hillside is also a factor: the northern faces are regularly covered with much denser vegetation than the southern slopes. The most obvious example is the Gaber Massif; its northeast face is almost completely covered with oak, while the southern side is totally desolate. Finally, there are still finer variations regarding plant cover between different micro-relief forms. Thus on Prisoj grazing-land was organized by small and shallow ravines, called simply the "holes" by the local shepherds. On these micro-depressions the soil layer is expectedly thicker and the grasses higher and denser. Each flock had its own "hole" and these were most likely rotated between the village families at certain intervals. Most of the small paths that traverse the hillside were cleared for the daily commuting of flocks avoiding the flat land at the foot of the hills. They are either drawn across the gentler slopes of the hills or along the very edge of the foothills, to avoid intrusions into the plough-zone.

The asymmetrical distribution of resources, typical for most of the land along the Middle Vardar Valley has greatly confined the inhabitable zone, particularly on its left bank. It explains the conspicuous disproportion between the number of inhabitants in the villages and the size of their administrative territories. In its prime Sopot had up to 30 households, which sums up to between 100 and 150 inhabitants sharing a territory of almost 10 square kilometers! Even the size of the actively cultivated zone, measuring nearly a square kilometer is more than sufficient to feed a village of this size. After the demise of the Ottoman Empire and the *çiftlik* system in the

first decades of the 20th century, the dependant peasants suddenly become owners of over 5 hectares of arable land on average. According to early 20th century ethnographers, this amount of land was exceeding the productive capacities of the traditional, individual farmer and large portions of the individual landholdings were left fallow or simply, unexploited⁸⁶. But the relatively oversized village area is also related to the predominant economy of the village, the sedentary herding. Large portions of the arable land are actually reserved for fodder, most commonly clover and rye. In fact according to some of the farmers, these cultures were grown on the fields closest to the village houses, while wheat was grown on the more distant fields, half an hour walk from the village centre. In the summer, the numerous flocks of sheep and goats required extensive pastures and most of the hillside of this micro-region was used for grazing. All villages in the wider region have disproportionately large hinterlands, consisting of smaller “cores”, where the houses and the bulk of the agricultural land are concentrated and several times larger “peripheries”, used as extensive pastures and woodland.

To all the scarcities of flat arable land, water and other natural resources, we must add the relatively unfavorable climatic conditions in the study area⁸⁷. The Mid-Vardar and the neighbouring plateau of Ovče Pole are among the driest regions in the Central Balkans, with an annual precipitation of barely 500 cubic mm⁸⁸. Most of this falls in the form of strong, often porous rain, in the months between December and May, followed by a long period of drought, with only a few rainy days in the period between early June and late September. This is a very unfavorable regime for most cultures grown in the region.

The temperature amplitudes during the year are extreme: the medium monthly temperatures range from several degrees below zero in the months of January and December, to almost 15 degrees Celsius by late April and in some years, to over 25 in the months of June, July and August. In fact relatively high temperatures have been measured as late as mid-October.⁸⁹ The winters are brief and not very cold in absolute terms, but in reality the cold northerlies and the fog, clogging the valley in early winter, create rather harsh outdoor conditions. By mid-February, the number of sunny days steadily increases, inciting the brief cycle of nature. As in all other regions along the Vardar, the warm currents from the Mediterranean protrude quietly and slowly; the cold continental currents on the other hand arrive suddenly, followed by strong winds and storms.

The local regime of precipitation has pre-conditioned a rather brief cycle of nature. It starts in the last month of winter, stirred by the unusually warm periods in the month of February. By late spring the fields are ready for harvest and grapes and walnuts are harvested as early as September. During most of the year the landscape appears dry and barren. Green belts are limited to the valley’s floor and the north-facing slopes. Only certain grasses in the hillside were seen repeating the cycle in the second half of the year. During most of the year the rest of the landscape is brown and gold, marked by the cleared agricultural fields and the oak forest.

It is important to acknowledge the possibility that in the past, the area of Sopot looked very different from today. Thus far, the only historical accounts referring to this landscape in the past are the observations of ethnographers made in the early 20th century⁹⁰. As far as we know

⁸⁶ M. Filipovič, 531, 1935.

⁸⁷ Gj. Tanev, *Počvite pomegu Pčinja i Vardar, sekcija Skopje-Veles II*, Skopje 1969.

⁸⁸ Gj. Tanev, 4, tab. 2, 1969.

⁸⁹ Gj. Tanev, 4, tab. 1, 1969; It is noteworthy that these measurements were made at a station near Skopje.

Local amplitudes in temperature and precipitation could be slightly more extreme.

⁹⁰ J. Cvijić, 200, 1906; M. Filipovič, 493-494, 1935.

this micro-region was never treated separately by earlier travellers. A century ago, the landscape around Sopot was far drier than the one described in this study. This is simply the result of the almost complete abandonment of the village in the mid decades of the last century. Its effects were the gradual abandonment of the agricultural fields east of the central valley and an almost complete retreat from the hillsides, especially the more distant Radičica. Thus the cultivated area has contracted mainly on the lower, right bank of the central valley, in a radius of about 500 meters around the present day village, at the southern foot of Prisoj.

According to the meaning of the name Sopot and according to local narratives, waters were plentiful in the study area in the more distant past. The frequent toponym of Sopot is an Old Slavic word for a powerful spring, a strong gush of water.⁹¹ In the Ottoman census for the years 1467-1468, no less than three watermills are recorded in the village area⁹². All older inhabitants will tell the story of the young Ottoman landlord, who used the skins of 100 sheep to calm the powerful springs of Bodleva Češma, in the valley's mid-course. At present the village fountain tapping water from this spring is dry. Two other springs are still active. Both are found on the southern slope of Prisoj, close to the village. The first is lower, standing only 380 meters to the northwest of the village, by the local northwest road, close to the village cemetery (blue dots on map II_2a). The second is further up the hillside, more than 700 meters from the village, in the same direction. These springs feed the two fountains of the present-day village. However these sources are not particularly prolific, especially during the later summer months and most people are forced to rely on water tapped from wells. These faint clues scattered across the local toponymy and oral tradition indicate that water was perhaps much more abundant in the past.

Although drier, the hillsides west of the central valley are much richer in freshwater springs. The lower hill-chain east of the central valley is on the other hand more abundant with vegetation, especially along its upper course. However no water sources are shown on the topographic map nor are there any mentions in the local narratives and the local toponymy. As explained earlier, the abundance of vegetation compared to Prisoj is due to a number of other factors, including the geological and soil layers, relief and agricultural exploitation. A toponym broadly referring to the headwaters of the neighbouring stream, the Vranov Dol, suggest that the area was specifically used for tree cutting. These forests belonged to the inhabitants of Novačani, 3 kilometers to the southeast of Sopot. It is most reasonable to expect that the inhabitants of Sopot harvested wood from the upper course of their valley. These areas are presently returned almost to a pristine condition and are rarely frequented by humans.

The intensively surveyed area roughly corresponds to the ploughed zone of the village territory. It basically consists of the foothills of the massifs surrounding the valley, its floor and sides and the two terraces on the Vardar Valley floor. As explained in the preceding paragraphs, this sums up to about 10% of the village territory and about 15 % of the territory of the valley's drainage basin. In absolute terms a total of 1 square kilometer was intensively surveyed. This is surely not a representative sample of Sopot's administrative area. The survey blocks spread mostly over Quaternary and Tertiary deposits, covering only a tiny fraction of the masses built of older Paleozoic and Mesozoic rocks. Expressed in percentages, more than 75 percent of Sopot's hinterland is made of Neogene sediments, 20 percent are the rocky ridges of the Taor Gorge and only a minor fraction belongs to the colluvial deposit in the central part of the area. On the other hand, the latter sediments occupy nearly 40% of the area intensively surveyed. The surveyed sample is even less representative of the micro-region regarding land use and topography. Only

⁹¹ Lj. Stankovska, *Makedonska Onomastika*, Skopje 2002.

⁹² M. Sokolovski, *Turski Dokumenti; Opširen Popisen Defter, 4 (1467-1468)*, Skopje 1971.

very small stretches of the inhospitable hillside were surveyed, although this topographic zone occupies almost 90% of the micro-region studied.

Even if we attempted to survey a representative sample of the micro-region, it would have been very difficult, if not impossible, to conduct the survey practically. We saw that most of the hillside is very rugged and large stretches are simply impenetrable: basically all sides of Prisoj, the western side of Radičica and the almost vertical sides of the Gaber Massif. A larger portion is covered with dense, impermeable oak forest: the hill-slopes on the valley's left side, as well as the gentler slopes around its headwaters. Systematic field walking along these stretches is impossible. Ground inclination and visibility allow intensive survey only along the narrow ridges, i.e. the watershed line. This is a narrow, 20-30 meters wide tract of land, mostly barren with scattered pockets of thin soil. Where the soil layer is thicker, as in the shallow recesses around the heads of the steep ravines, the tall and dense grasses completely obscure the surface. We did however manage to survey a remote corner around the headwaters of the central valley, deep into the Neogene Basin. Though topographically it is not a part of the hillside, this locality fairly resembles the unexploited, untamed conditions along the hill ridges.

Intensive survey of a representative sample of the various topographic and geological units of the region was never the chief aim of this research. The idea was rather to survey the territory of a geographic and administrative entity as a separate whole and to trace the history of its central settlement. Technically the survey covered a small, unrepresentative part of the micro-region, but a great percentage of what was left outside the survey area was simply inaccessible, overgrown or barren rock. Furthermore it was clear that the central settlement and the basic practices of sedentary life took place in the foothills, where all the essential natural resources are concentrated. It made no point to pretend that the two basic zones of the area, the hillside and the foothills offer equally favorable conditions for the development of sedentary life.

But as a consequence of this purposive sampling we cannot claim a complete reconstruction of the human landscape in the studied micro-region. In all likelihood based on the findings of other surveys and the extensive surveys in the periphery of the Sopot, there are isolated remains of past human activities even in the hillside, in-between the drainage basins. In fact most of the sites discovered by earlier researchers, hill-forts and religious buildings belong to the hillside and the watershed zone, in particular. But these are mostly the so called, special-purpose sites, not the settlements proper. The hillside, at least the hills around the Sopot couldn't sustain a larger settled community, although they were an integral part of the central settlement's hinterland. They were important for communication and contained important natural resources, primarily wood and pastures. They also played an important role in the local myths and religious practices. The centre of sedentary life however was in the foothills. It is an oasis of flat and fertile land in otherwise rugged and desolate surroundings. In that sense, we did manage to completely survey the inhabitable portion of the studied micro-region and the data and material gathered allow reconstruction of the history of the area's central settlement.

II.2 The 11 survey sectors or the main topographic components of the survey area

Although small and relatively homogenous regarding topography and land use, the surveyed area is not a compact, blank piece of territory. The prevalent characteristic of the region along the Mid-Vardar is extreme topographic fragmentation. In every geographic entity we can observe a number of topographic components or sub-units. These are more or less physically

separate surfaces, occupying particular locations in the local geography, displaying various ground conditions, lack or abundance of natural resources and different land-use. As elaborated in the previous chapter it was decided to divide the survey area into separate sectors for both methodological and theoretical purposes. The limits of most of the sectors in the study area were drawn along natural borders; only the southern foothills of Prisoj were artificially divided into four sectors because of its size and the large amount of surface finds (map II_4).

Sector I covers the two terraces on the left bank of the Vardar, outside the valley of Sopot (photo II_1, map II_5). A large portion of the surface is overgrown, while the central parts of the larger western terrace are occupied by the monastery. Despite the unfavorable ground visibility we managed to survey about 15000 sq meters, divided into 13 field blocks.

Because it is incomparably larger than all other sectors of the survey area, the southern foothills of Prisoj was subdivided into four parts: sectors SW-II and NW-III and sectors SE-IV and NE-V. The artificial borders were drawn along the line of the highway and the local, north-south road, connecting the valley's floor and Prisoj's southern slopes; these are basically the longer and the shorter axis of the foothills (map II_6). All four sectors totaled 96 field walking units or 262 000 square meters. This is more than one quarter of the entire survey area. Apart from abandoned locations and dumping yards, surface conditions were for the greater part excellent. Visibility is good and considerable portions of the sub-surface are exposed.

The floor and the sides of the central valley in its lower course were included in sector VI. Only a small portion of the surface is cultivated, with most of the fields belonging to the lower half of the valley, south of the Skopje-Thessalonica highway. This narrow but fertile stretch of land shows traces of intensive agricultural exploitation in the recent past (map II_2a, photo II_7). The area was divided into 17 field blocks, measuring about 35 000 sq meters.

The fields on the right bank of the central valley, stretching between a rocky outcrop on the north (photo II_11) to a low and barely accentuated ridge that symbolically separates them from the plain at Prisoj's southern foot belong to sector VII or the eastern foothills of Prisoj (map II_7). The entire area is intensively cultivated and features good visibility conditions (photo II_8). The survey covered approximately 75 000 sq meters, divided into 25 field blocks.

Sector VIII covers the floor and the banks of the southern of the two ravines, east of the central valley and cut at the northern foot of Gaber. It is much wider and gentler than the gully to the north. It is 50 meters wide at the floor and 450 meters long, measured from the point where it merges with the central valley to the western foot of the low plateau jutting out of the northeast face of Gaber (map II_7). The sector also includes the narrow, disintegrating bank that separates the two ravines and the low plateau protruding from the northeast face of Gaber (photo II_4). Low ground visibility has confined systematic intensive survey to an area of 38000 square meters, barely a half of the sector's actual area.

Opposite the eastern foothills of Prisoj spreads the wider and the slightly taller foothills of Radičica. The area is roughly rectangular, measuring nearly 900 meters in a north-south direction and 250 across the shorter axis (map II_7, photo II_8). This gentle ridge called Ramnište was covered by sector IX. It features worse ground visibility in comparison to the sectors west of the central valley, but conditions were more even within the sector's limits. 33 field blocks occupying an area of almost 100000 square meters were intensively surveyed (map II_7).

The neighbouring ridge to the east, along with the western foot of Radičica was included in sector X. This ridge runs parallel to Ramnište and at about the same height, its tip ending slightly further south. Its maximum length is 750 meters, the maximum width, 250 meters. The

western foot of Radičica has almost the same size, but a large portion of its surface is covered with the young oak forest. This is a peripheral part of the studied landscape, lacking the usual field terraces and hedges. 24 fields blocks were drawn on the southern half of the sector, on Jakupica proper, plus 9 in the northern half, on Radičica's slopes. An area of almost 145 000 square meters was intensively surveyed (maps II_7, photo II_9).

The upper course of the central valley is a rugged and irregular area, 1.3 kilometers long and 400 meters at its widest. Only a few smaller stretches of land are cleared. They are arranged theatrically, on two levels on the right bank of the valley (maps II_2b, II_9, photo II_10). Each stretch of cleared ground is divided into several agricultural fields. As usual we followed the given divisions of the agricultural land. A total of 31 field blocks, measuring over 133 000 square meters were intensively surveyed.

II.3 The geo-strategic importance of the valley of Sopot in its wider geographic context

Although the survey area described in the preceding sections is only the inner, central part of this natural micro-region, there is a fascinating diversity regarding natural conditions, local topography and land-use. The differences between the eleven sectors are neither barely perceived nor overemphasized. They are real and the full understanding of the distribution of surface finds is only possible through separate analysis of each sector independently. The preceding detailed description of the study area by sectors had the double goal of presenting the outer and the inner limits of the intensively surveyed zone and of presenting the studied micro-region as a partly integrated entity consisting of a number of uneven sub-units, each with specific conditions and varying potential for the growth of human settlements. It is the background against which we'd like to analyze the findings of the survey. But before we turn to the survey result, it is important to broaden the perspective and examine the place of this micro-region in a wider geographic context.

One general reason to survey this particular micro-region was its geo-strategic importance and its place in the historical geography of the lands along the Mid-Vardar Valley. As explained at the beginning of this chapter, the small valley of Sopot offers a natural exit from the Taor Gorge, the second largest canyon in the Vardar Valley. It is the most exposed point on Vardar's left bank, offering access to the plateau of Ovče Pole on the east and south, towards the small plain of Veles. It is impossible to travel by land downstream from the mouth of Sopot's valley and avoid the village. It is moreover one of the rare points where the Vardar is bridgeable, linking the mountains on the river's west bank with the main north-south corridor. Because of its "central" location, Sopot is a major local crossroads and a station on the interregional road along the Vardar Valley. The modern Skopje-Thessalonica highway literally passes through the village. It is very likely that in the more distant past, there was also an arterial interregional road, closely following the valley of the Vardar. The chain of visually connected hill-forts in the furthest corners of the study area and along the Vardar, upstream from Sopot is most likely the remnant of a highly developed road infrastructure. They are not only visually interconnected, but they also cover different sections of the surrounding area. Earlier researchers thought that the ancient road along the Vardar, known as the Via Aksiaor at least one of its branches,⁹³ passed through the area of Sopot, closely following the trajectory of the modern highway. In fact one of the stations on this road, *Kephalon*, has been identified with the small hill-fort over the

⁹³ This road is mentioned in the Tabula Peutingeriana, in the section, Naissus-Scupi-Stobi-Thessalonica and in few other itineraries of the Late Roman Period, I. Mikulčić, 1982.

monastery of St. George, a kilometer to the west of the village.⁹⁴ The fort indeed occupied an ideal location for a road station, standing only fifty meters above the point where the modern road leaves the Taor Gorge, turning east towards the village. However there are still major disagreements among historians and archaeologists concerning the exact trajectory of the Via Aksia.⁹⁵ Particularly problematic are the discordances between the distances recorded in the ancient itineraries and the lengths of modern roads. This is a clear indication that for the greater part, the modern Skopje-Thessalonica road doesn't follow the line of the ancient Via Aksia.⁹⁶

The steep, narrow canyons of the Vardar Valley were rarely used for long-distance communication prior to the building of the railway in the 1870's. They are neither comfortable nor safe and were often avoided, although the valley floor provides the most direct link between the central Balkans and the Aegean. In the Ottoman Era for instance, the main Skopje-Thessalonica road passed over 3 kilometers to the east of Sopot, avoiding the narrow straits in the Vardar Valley. Likewise west of the Vardar, a caravan route leading south from Skopje to the towns of Prilep and Veles followed a chain of low mountain passes, crossing over the shoulders of the mountain ridges rather than through the Taor Gorge.⁹⁷

The Taor Gorge is part of an important physical barrier. It is a segment of a long mountainous chain stretching perpendicularly to the course of the Vardar and linking the mountains of the central Republic of Macedonia with the mountain ranges in the eastern part of the country (map II_1). It thus separates the upper and the middle course of the Vardar, as well as the plains of the northern and the central Republic of Macedonia. This chain consists of low hills, like the ones surrounding the valley of Sopot. It is nonetheless an effective barrier, a kilometer-wide belt of rugged, inhospitable terrain. It effectively blocks not only communication, but the movement of air-masses, particularly those coming from the south. Although only 20 kilometers apart, the plains and the plateau to the north of these hills have slightly colder and longer winters⁹⁸. Today as in the past, state and administrative borders followed this natural frontier line.

Annexing the ancient Macedonian Kingdom in 167 BC, the Romans drew the border of the newly acquired province north of the modern towns of Veles and Sveti Nikole. In fact during the Late Roman Period, the provincial border between the provinces of Macedonia II and Dardania follows exactly this chain of low hills. This is plainly indicated by the language used on the Roman inscriptions: Latin to the north of the mountain chain, Greek in the lands to the south. The road station *Kephalon*, identified by some archaeologists with the hill-fort near the Sopot, is the northernmost Greek toponym on the Via Aksia. The next station towards Scupi

⁹⁴ I. Mikulčić, 99-101, 1982.

⁹⁵ F. Papazoglu, Les villes de Macédoine à l'époque romaine, *Bulletin de Correspondence Hellénique* Supplement XVI, 1988; T. Tomoski, Beitrage zu einer Rekonstruktion der Strecke Scupi-Stobi auf der Tabula Peutingeriana, 113-125, *Ziva Antika* VI-1 1961; B. Georgievski, The ancient road Scupi-Stobi after the Tabula Peutingeriana, 117-134, *Macedoniae Acta Archaeologica* 12 1991.

⁹⁶ This is far more likely than to assume gross errors in the historical records as I. Mikulčić, 99, 1982 and elsewhere, following F. Papazoglu, 87, 1957.

⁹⁷ The road networks of the Ottoman Period are an unfamiliar topic among historians and archaeologists from the region. There is I believe plentiful indirect evidence related to communication and transport in this period, ranging from various historical documents, local narratives and toponyms, to archaeological evidence consisting of the remains of special purpose settlements, caravan-sarays etc. For the mentioned caravan routes, M. Filipović, 510, 1935; A. Stojanovski, *Dervendistvoto vo Makedonija*, Skopje 1974.

⁹⁸ J. Cvijić, 198-199, 1906.

bears a Latin name, Praesidium.⁹⁹ Like the supposed interregional road, the border-line was marked by a chain of roughly contemporary fortifications.¹⁰⁰ It is very probable that the Romans simply followed an older border that separated the land of the later Macedonian dynasts and the tribal territory of the Dardanians.

For a brief period of time in the early 14th century, this border was reactivated, separating the expanding Medieval Serbian Kingdom and the Byzantine Empire¹⁰¹. After the Ottoman conquest by the middle of the 15th century, this natural barrier became the administrative border between the regions of Skopje and Veles. All villages south of this line, until the present-day remained under the administrative authority of Veles, those to the north fall under the jurisdiction of Skopje.

The surveyed area is thus part of a zone that is peripheral in a multitude of aspects. It lies at the end of a geographic, geological and climatic zone and during long periods in the past, it had a political, administrative, ethnic and linguistic border passing by in its immediate vicinity. But how important is this circumstance as a factor in the history of its settlements? In what ways does the proximity of a regional frontier or a major interregional road play their roles in the local settlement dynamics? These are the major theoretical difficulties facing the present study. In essence, it is necessary to locate parameters in the local settlement pattern that somehow reflect the role of regional and supra-regional landscape phenomena. In other words we need to establish concrete relations between the historical dynamic on regional or supra-regional and local levels. One still has only a vague idea of what the nearness of an arterial road brings to a settlement. We saw in the case of Sopot that the modern highway brought little advantage to the village. On the contrary, it only took away its share in the regional and interregional road network. After the building of the modern highway, the village and its local roads remained a bypassed, forgotten corridor. Lying on the fringes of major administrative entities in the last century also made life only more difficult for the local peasant; the closest markets or hospital are ten kilometers away in Veles. The village remained trapped and un-integrated in the highly centralized, modern network of settlements and roads.

Nonetheless it has to be emphasized that without an arterial road closely following the Vardar Valley, the village and its territory have all the chances to become one of the most isolated corners in the wider region of the Middle Vardar. This is the case with the two neighbouring villages, Vetersko on the north and Novačani on the south. Both occupy locations from where it is either impossible or very difficult to reach the floor of the Vardar Valley and to travel beyond. Their only connections to the outside world are the local dirt roads that link them to the line of the highway, branches that are essentially dead-ends in the regional communication network. These villages are situated on the fringe of the Neogene Basin, along the foot of the impenetrable ridges of the Taor Gorge, where communication across or along the Vardar Valley is possible only at certain points. Yet despite this advantage the village of Sopot differs little from its neighbours, whether in terms of settlement size or life-style and economy. Nothing indicates that Sopot and its immediate surroundings were traversed by one of the most important roads in the wider region of the Central Balkans.

⁹⁹ I. Mikulčić, 100, 1982; the same theses are later repeated in I. Mikulčić, *Spätantike und frühbyzantinische Befestigungen in Nordmakedonien*, Munich 2002. Earlier this was suggested by the historian F. Papazoglu, 87-96, 1988, and N. Vulić, 1-5, 1928.

¹⁰⁰ I. Mikulčić, 22, 2002.

¹⁰¹ T. Tomoski, *Ovče Polje vo Sredniot Vek*, 243-265, *Godišen Zbornik na Filozofskiot Fakultet* 30, 1978.

The difficulty of finding parameters in the surface archaeological record concretely related to the wider geo-strategic value of certain micro-regions rests in the very nature of the problem. To securely determine relations between the realms of the main historical narratives for the wider region and the developments inferred from the surface archaeological record in one of its miniature parts, it is necessary to have a far greater amount of comparable data than the one obtained during this small-scale research. This was briefly discussed in the “Method and Theory” chapter: the only path to understanding the impact of wider, interregional on local developments is through the comparative examination of the results of a number of standardized regional studies¹⁰². Only thus would it be possible to locate certain patterns in the size, character and distribution of archaeological sites in relation to the developments and events inferred from other types of sources. This is the only means by which we can hope to archaeologically recognize the impact of wider social and historical phenomena, such as main arterial roads or provincial borders on local developments. In that sense a major problem for this and similar studies is the absence of comparative material from the region of the Vardar Valley. Subjects such as major roads or political frontiers have hardly been treated as research problems in archaeology in general, outside the highly specialized field of the archaeology of the Roman army. For the region in question there are numerous studies on the historical geography of the country, written by both historians and archaeologists, but apart from supporting purely historical theses, there was very little advance in the gathering and use of archaeological evidence related to this type of issues.

In the conclusion to the next chapter we will attempt to synthesize the archaeological evidence available from surrounding micro-regions and observe the local developments in the first survey area within the broader regional context. But addressing the issue of the possible impact of the supra-regional phenomena (roads, borders, colonies) on the history of human settlement in the basin of Sopot remains beyond the reach of this study. Apart from the absence of comparative data, one could say that the definition of this supra-regional phenomenon is itself problematic. Last but not least, while trying to determine the date of the surface material gathered we quickly became aware that finer dating was going to be impossible. We had to work with very broad chronological periods, which obviously won't allow us to relate the local history of settlement with major historical events and processes.

¹⁰² P. Attema, 18-26, 2002; S.E. Alcock, J.F. Cherry, eds. 2004.