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Title: Rural landscapes along the Vardar Valley: two site-less surveys near Veles and Skopje, the Republic of Macedonia

Issue Date: 2014-09-24

Chapter IV: The region of Montenegro near Skopje and the second survey area

IV.1 Name and geographic location of the wider study region

Around 15 kilometers to the north of modern Skopje rises a low, but extensive mountain range, known as Montenegro near Skopje or Skopian Montenegro, to differentiate it from the later kingdom of Montenegro on the Adriatic Coast (map IV_1a and 1b). Its main ridge stretches for over 20 kilometers in a NW-SE direction, roughly parallel to the course of the Vardar. Thanks to its peculiar arched shape, it effectively encloses the plain of Skopje from the north and northeast. The mountain mass has an irregular, triangular shape. It is bounded by rivers on all four sides: the Vardar on the south, its tributaries the Lepenec and the Pčinja on the west and east, while on the north it is drained by the river Binačka, belonging to the basin of the Morava and ultimately to the Danube. Located at the watershed between the drainages of the Vardar and the Morava, Mount Montenegro presents one of the larger crossroads on the Balkan Peninsula. The main arterial road coming from the Aegean splits in two directions at the southern foot of this mountain, one leading towards the Adriatic, the other continuing north towards the Danube.

The main mountain ridge stretches asymmetrically across the southwest half of the mountain and has a gentle southeast inclination. Its southern slopes are much steeper than its eastern or northern sides. In fact the bulk of the mountain mass falls to the north and northeast from the main ridge. Consequently the southern foothills are well articulated in the relief, while to the north and east the mountain gradually merges into the surrounding valleys. Particularly well defined is the northwest half of Montenegro's southern foothills, the portion situated directly beneath the highest peak Ramno, at 1658 meters above sea level. Geographically the southern foothills of Montenegro belong to the Skopje Basin, but this particular portion stands nearly 200 meters above the basin and it is also delimited on the west and east by two lower offshoots that stretch southwards from the main mountain ridge. It thus presents a separate micro-region; in essence a small oval plateau roughly measuring 5x6 kilometers, excluding the more extensive mountainside. Seen on the map it appears as a smaller outlet of the Skopje Basin.

Interestingly in the past the name Montenegro referred exactly to this part of the mountain. The name extended to designate the entire mountain much later, probably not before the late 19th century. An ethnographic record dating from the first years of the 20th century stresses that the local people still distinguished themselves from their closest neighbours on the mountain by their clothes and their name, Montenegrins³³⁵. This micro-regional and ethno-cultural entity is also one of the oldest known administrative units in the country. As early as the mid 13th century the name Montenegro designates the land stretching from the highest peaks of the mountain on the north to the plain of Skopje on the south and between the ridges of Markov Kamen on the west and Buzalak on the east³³⁶. Thus defined it is one of the oldest administrative units in the wider area, measuring approximately 120 square kilometers.

Thanks to the rapid growth of Skopje during the last century, most of the micro-regions that comprise the Skopje Basin have either lost their integrity or came to be seen merely as peripheral parts of the city's greater area. A similar fate awaits the region of old Montenegro.

³³⁵ S. Tomić, 409-509, 1905. There is an extensive list of bibliography on this region, covering a period of over one century. Early studies are nicely summarized by J. Trifunovski, *Skopska Crna Gora-anthropogeographische Forschungen*, Skopje 1971.

³³⁶ The area is first mentioned in an edict issued by the Bulgarian king Constantine Asen in the late 1250's. V. Mošin et al. *Gramoti na manastir Sv. Gorgi-Gorg Skopski*, 181-209, eds. V. Mošin, et al, 1975.

Situated in a distant corner of the Skopje Basin and embraced by the mountain on three sides, so far it has escaped the urban development that eclipsed the micro topographic divisions in the rest of the basin. But the advances in technology and living standards have not bypassed the villages in the area. Only a small percentage of the people still inhabit the traditional houses in the old cores of the villages. Most live in modern houses surrounded by spacious yards, built outside the limits of the old settlement³³⁷. Modern roads lead to all of the villages in the area and some even have access to public transportation. Many of the local inhabitants work in Skopje or have relatives and friends in the city. But there are also movements in the opposite direction. Every year parts of agricultural land are sold and transformed into villas for the richer city dwellers. Over the past few decades, the mountain with its lush nature and a number of well preserved monastic churches dating to the early 14th century has become one of the most visited resorts in the vicinity of Skopje.

The region of Skopian Montenegro has certainly maintained close relations with Skopje by the Middle-Byzantine Period, but its administrative and economic integrity came under threat only with the rapid expansion of Skopje in the second half of the 20th century. It is a good illustration of the impact of the current settlement pattern on our reading of the landscape. Modern geography sees the area discussed as an integral part of the Skopje Basin, but in the past this was probably never the case. Indeed both geologically and administratively, the area of Montenegro belongs to the mountain bearing the same name rather than to the plain of Skopje.

Early geographic researchers of the Skopje Basin have rightly defined a separate habitation zone consisting of the settlements located in the foothills and on the lower ridges of the mountains that surround the plain of Skopje³³⁸. The region of old Montenegro ideally illustrates the main characteristics of this habitation zone. All but 2 of its 11, currently existing settlements are situated exactly along the foot of the mountain, where the mountain massif meets the plain. Clearly the aim of this settlement pattern is to provide an equal access to the mountainside and the plain at the mountain foot, for all major settlements in the area. Further to the east, along the southern foot of mount Montenegro or on the opposite side of the plain, at the northern foot of mount Vodno, there are a number of villages similarly located at the edge that separates the mountain from the plain. In all these cases the settlement territories extend over part of the mountainside and over part of the flat land in the foothills. Moreover the very topographic entities that they occupy, the ridges and the small valleys, often run across both geographic zones. This peculiar geographic positioning naturally had an important effect on the socio-economic character and the history of these settlements. They are of a different kind from the villages in the central parts of the Skopje Basin and from those situated in the mountain interior.

IV.2 Limits and geography of the wider study region

No other part of the Skopje Basin unites such contrasting types of environments as the region of Montenegro. It encompasses the steepest, southwest section of the mountain and a small ovoid plateau, gently inclined towards the inner Skopje Basin. It thus occupies an area where the plain extends furthest into the mountain massif. This is the principle factor that distinguishes the region of Montenegro from both the rest of the mountainous area and the plain of Skopje. Studied by a number of naturalists and ethnographers and existing as a separate

³³⁷ J. Trifunovski, 24-25, 1971.

³³⁸ J. Trifunovski, *Seoska Naselja Skopskog Polja*, 345-517, *Srpski Etnografski Zbornik* LXIX 1955.

administrative unit for a very long period of time, the borders of this region are well established³³⁹ (map IV_2). On the west it follows the watershed line between the river Lepenec and the streams that drain the southern slope of mount Montenegro. On the north and northeast, the border coincides with the flattened main mountain ridge. In its westernmost part to the point of its highest peak Ramno, it stretches in an east-west direction. Roughly a kilometer to the southeast of Ramno, a new ridge springs out in a southeast direction, running parallel to the longitudinal axis of the Skopje Basin. It encloses the area from the northeast.

The regional borders to the south and southeast are much vaguer. On the southeast side, immediately to the east of the village Ljubanci, there is a low mountain ridge called Buzalak. It is a low offshoot of the mountain with gentle sides, but it reaches slightly deeper into the plain, partly enclosing the southeast side of the area. Even less clear is the border on the south, towards the Skopje Basin. Earlier researchers have drawn this border somewhere between the contour lines of 390 and 400 meters above sea level. There is no other physical barrier separating the two, but a series of low hillocks after which the ground falls sharply for about fifty meters into the plain of Skopje. It is the differences in micro-relief and in the geo-pedological substrate that have set apart the small plateau at the foot of Mt. Montenegro from the rest of the Skopje Basin, rather than a particular topographic barrier.

75% of the territory of Skopian Montenegro belongs to the mountainside. The width of this mountainous belt varies from between 3 and 5 kilometers on the western and eastern flanks to nearly 10 kilometers on the north. The relief is broken up into a number of ridges separated by narrow, but very deep valleys. The widest is the northern, central part. It features a denser hydrology and rises more gently than the flanks.

It seems nearly impossible to summarize the complicated web of steep ridges and narrow valleys that make up the geography of the mountainside. The mountainous part of this region wasn't included in the intensive survey. At present it is thickly overgrown and except for the few famous monastic churches, it is rarely frequented by humans. However only a few centuries ago, to the local inhabitants the resources of the mountainside would have been as important as the small plain at its foot. Ethnographic accounts from the early 20th century reveal that during the summers, often half of the families moved to seasonal camps in the mountain to stay with their herds³⁴⁰. A number of abandoned settlements mentioned in the Early Ottoman records were probably situated somewhere in the vast mountain interior³⁴¹. Earlier extensive surveys have revealed three Late Roman forts in the area³⁴². Finally, a brief description of the local geography is necessary, because the geography of the flat land at the mountain foot is basically a continuation of the geography of the mountainside.

Mount Montenegro is unusually opulent with streams and freshwater springs. There are at least a dozen small streams issuing from the main mountain ridge. Needless to say these are all minor streams. Their valleys are very narrow, not wider than several meters across the bottom and with very steep sides, rising hundreds of meters above the valley floor. These minor basins are separated by an equal number of narrow and steep mountain ridges, usually with flattened tops and terminating with low, rounded peaks. They all spring from the main mountain ridge,

³³⁹ J. Trifunovski, 7, 1971.

³⁴⁰ S. Tomič, 447-450, 1905; J. Trifunovski, 50-54, 1971.

³⁴¹ J. Trifunovski, *Isčeznati naselbi na Skopska Crna Gora*, 145-149 *Godišen Zbrnik na Prirodno-Matematički Fakultet* 18, 1970.

³⁴² N. Čausidis, *Novootkrieni docnoantički tvrdini na Skopska Crna Gora*, 183-196, *Macedoniae Acta Archaeologica* 10 1989.

gradually converging towards the mountain foot. In the eastern half of the area they are mostly orientated southwest, while in the western half they spread in a southeast direction.

Local paths leading across the mountain normally follow the crests or the upper portions of these ridges. They all lead to the main mountain ridge and beyond, into the basins of the Pčinja and the Binačka. It is possible to reach the summit from the foot of the mountain by following virtually any of these mountain ridges. Roads that follow the valley floors on the other hand are usually dead-ends. They connect the villages with the monasteries situated on the valley floors and with the numerous freshwater springs dotting the sides and the floors of the valleys. Though small, the water channeled by these valleys is fast and powerful. The difference in height between their headwaters and the point where they leave the mountain is nearly 1000 meters and the distance about 7 kilometers. Dozens and dozens watermills can still be seen along the courses of almost all streams that drain this portion of the mountain.

It is difficult to point to any principle difference between the ridges and the valleys that comprise the local relief. Except for the ridges that flank the micro-region from the west and east, all exhibit not only similar proportions, but similar micro-topographies. They all rise very gently towards the main mountain ridge and at roughly the same height. Even the small rounded peaks, often marking their ends look very similar and have almost equal heights. One of the first naturalists that studied this area remarked that looked at from the flanks, the summit lines of these ridges overlap, forming a continuous arch-shaped stretch running almost parallel to the edge of the foothills³⁴³. The entire terrain on Montenegro's southwest slope basically has a terraced structure. This is difficult to see because of the complex hydrology. It is nevertheless possible to follow a series of "floors" at approximately the same heights, along the greater part of the mountain slope. This provides an important clue to the geomorphology of the mountain slope and of the entire micro-region.

Although easily accessible the mountainside offers only very small and narrow patches of flat, inhabitable land. Some of them coincide with the aforementioned terraces, at 690, 740 and 900 meters above sea level. These are mostly concentrated on the summits and the upper portions of the ridges and only rarely on the floors of the narrow valleys. The latter are usually reserved for the monasteries, while the former type of locations were mostly turned into pastures and summer camps, at least until the last couple of centuries. Some of them bear the names of abandoned villages and it is most certain that they were indeed locations of earlier settlements. In fact Brodec, the only existing village in this part of the mountain is located on one such location.

There are a few other locations in the mountainside sufficiently spacious to receive a settlement of minor size. The majority of them are not more than 2 to 3 kilometers away from the foot of the mountain. These are the summits of the ridges that rise above the modern villages and the medieval monasteries, slightly further into the mountain interior. Spacious pastures with summer camps are also mentioned along the summit of the main mountain ridge, on the top or at the foot of the highest peaks. The peak of Gnoino Ramno, a kilometer and a half to the south of the highest peak is basically a small plateau, measuring over 15 hectares of flat land. Like the rest of the mountainside, these locations were abandoned long ago. They are either covered by the regenerating forest or by a tall and very dense grass cover.

In the western end of the area, running across the mountain's western shoulder and parallel to the river Lepenec is a shallow pass, flanked by a series of low, rounded peaks. It is over 3 kilometers long and at certain points, nearly 200 meters wide. Throughout its length it rises for not more than 50 meters, opening an easy path between the plain of Skopje and the

³⁴³ P.S. Jovanović, Reljef Skopske Kotline, 62-116, *Glasnik Skopskoga Naučnoga Društva* X, Skopje 1931.

valley of the Lepenec, an alternative to the modern motorway and railway that run along the valley floor through the canyon of Kačanik. It is the main road linking the plain of Skopje and the rest of the Vardar Valley with the plain of Kosovo and the Adriatic Coast. This pass could actually represent the remnants of the old river bed of the Lepenec, presently broken up by erosion and pulled into the new drainage basin of the river.

The geography of the rugged plain in the foothills is a continuation of the geography of the mountain. The line marking the edge of the foothills runs almost parallel to the line of the main mountain ridge. It bears the shape of a deformed horse-shoe, bent at the western end (map IV_3). Measured from the low hillock Gradište near the village Brazda, to the springing point of the Buzalak Ridge, southeast of Ljuboten, it is 13.6 kilometers long. The vague southern border stretches between these two points, approximately along the line that separates the transitional hilly zone from the inner Skopje Basin. The apex of this arch is off-centered in its northwest corner, almost in the centre of the triangle formed by the villages Gornjane, Banjane and Čučer. This is also the point where the pass described in the preceding paragraph enters the plain at the foot of Mt. Montenegro. On the map it appears as a deltoid shaped recess, characteristic for areas where a river leaves a narrow canyon and enters a plain. It clearly defines the westernmost third of the plateau. Standing nearly 100 meters lower than the rest of the foothills, it presents a separate basin shared by three major streams descending from the mountain, the Kučeviški, the Banjanski and the Čučerski. The first two are larger. They are formed under the central ridge of the mountain and flow from the north, while the third is a minor ravine that drains the low hills above the villages Čučer and Gornjani. It practically issues from the end of the pass that links the foothills with the valley of the Lepenec and it is the only stream that enters the foothills from the west. Two and a half kilometers from its spring, it flows into the Banjanski Stream.

The basins of the streams Banjanski and Kučeviški are separated by the first of the seven low ridges that compose the wider study region (map IV_4). It stretches for over two kilometers running southwards, parallel to the streams. The main asphalt road connecting this region with the city of Skopje follows the summit of this ridge. It is very possible that it also follows the trace of an ancient road linking Roman Skupi with the mountain. The Kučeviški Stream flows along its eastern flank. Its valley measures between 30 to 40 meters at the bottom and 1200 meters between the watershed lines, i.e. between the first and the second ridge, counting from the west. Much wider is the basin of the Banjanski Stream, west of the first ridge. It basically drains the entire northwest corner of the region, probably inheriting the old estuary of the Lepenec. Apart from the Čučerski Stream, it also gathers the waters coming from a powerful spring at the mountain foot, located between the villages Banjani and Mirkovci. The two streams meet in the southwest corner of the foothills, at the northern foot of Gradište near Brazda. Together they enter the Lepenec River, nearly 4 kilometers to the west of their confluence. Drawn by the powerful erosive forces that pushed the course of the Lepenec to the west, these two streams extended their course carving a small canyon between the hill Gradište and the western shoulder of Mount Montenegro. The western third of the foothills of Mt. Montenegro features a gentler terrain and is probably richer in arable land than the other two thirds. Five of the eleven villages in the region belong to this part of the plateau.

Four major streams enter the foothills on the opposite, eastern end. Three of these flow from the north, converging almost at the geometric centre of the plain. From west to east, these are the Pobuški, the Turčevski and the Ljubanski Stream. Around 2 kilometers from their entrance in the foothills, the Turčevski and the Ljubanski Stream merge and are joined by the Pobuški 600 meters downstream. Coming from the slightly recessed and fragmented central

section of the mountain slope, the latter stream is larger than its tributaries on the east. The ridges that separate the streams are rather small, with gentle sides, while those that flank their three-partite basin are somewhat steeper and higher. Counting from the west these are the third and the sixth ridge in the region, spreading below the villages Pibužje and Ljubanci. As on the first ridge, the asphalt roads leading to Skopje follow their summits. The distance between neighboring streams is about 500 meters, decreasing towards their confluence. At its widest this triangular basin measures 2700 meters.

1200 meters south of the point of convergence of the three streams, a fourth enters the basin. Together they form a larger, more articulated valley floor. Before it enters the Skopje Basin, this newly formed Radiška River measures over 200 meters across the valley floor. It is covered with Quaternary sediments similar to those covering the Inner Skopje Basin.

The area drained by the easternmost, fourth stream is almost as large as the area drained by its three tributaries on the north. It flows from the northeast, springing from the peak Pupljak at 1628 meters above sea level, the northeast corner of the region of Skopian Montenegro. Like most other streams entering the foothills it carries the name of the village built by its side, the Ljubotenski Stream. It doesn't stand apart by its size or length, but the ridges that flank this stream are several times wider and nearly 100 meters higher than their neighbours to the west. As one might expect their relief is far more developed, particularly on the sides drained by the easternmost of the streams, the Ljubotenski. The outer slopes are steeper and less fragmented.

In general the eastern part of this region is far more rugged and higher than the western. The mountain slope is also steeper, particularly above the southeast corner of the area. Two kilometers from the villages Ljuboten and Ljubanci into the mountain, the ground rises for over 1000 meters. Consequently this corner of the foothills is slightly more isolated from the main roads leading across the mountain. This is not the case with the upper part of the basin. The area drained by the Pibuški, the Turčevski and the Ljubanski Stream is lower, offering an easier access to the mountain interior. It is therefore more similar to the basin in the western half of the foothills.

These two groups of streams don't drain the entire area of the foothills. They are separated by another basin, shallow and dry on the surface in its upper part. It is the only basin fully belonging to the foothills. It begins as a shallow ravine immediately under the road between the villages Kučevište and Pibužje and spreads southwards, gradually descending into the plain of Skopje. Water flows on the surface in its lower half and only during the rainy periods. The stream is too weak to cut a fixed bed and the water dissipates over the surface or sinks into the ground, at places creating small swamps. Hence in the lower course, it bears the name Bara or swamp. It is 30 to 50 meters wide at the bottom, while the width of its entire drainage is approximately 1300 meters. Along its course leads another, recently built asphalt road establishing a direct link between Kučevište and Skopje.

This small valley plunges like a wedge between the basins draining the eastern and western half of the plain at the foot of Mt. Montenegro. It is flanked by the second and the third ridge; the former running southwards, parallel to the course of the Kučeviški, the latter southeast, following the course of the Pibuški Stream. They are similar to the other ridges that constitute the area of the foothills, measuring only 100 meters across their summits and running at heights between 460 and 540 meters above sea level. Their sides are gentle, except for the eastern slope of the third ridge drained by the Pibuški Stream. Interestingly both ridges spring from the centre of the line that defines the mountain foot. They branch out from a higher ridge that once separated the villages Kučevište and Pibužje. Today the two settlements are merged, but the old

settlement cores are positioned on the opposite sides of the foot of this ridge, Kučevište on the western, Pobužje on the eastern side.

The small, centrally positioned valley was uninhabited. Similarly to the neighboring village Radišani, a minor settlement developed only recently on the southern periphery of the area, where the valley enters the Skopje Basin. Despite the proximity to the older villages near the mountain foot and despite the fact that both settlements were mostly made up of the former inhabitants of these villages, they are considered a part of the Skopje Basin, not of Montenegro.

IV.3 Geomorphology and geology

Looking more closely at the topography in the foothills, one observes that it closely follows the relief of the mountain. The arch shape of the main mountain ridge is repeated along the mountain foot and less clearly, by a series of flattened surfaces appearing at roughly equal heights on the summits of the low ridges. These discontinuous “terraces” are better preserved in the eastern half of the area. Two appear at the heights of 580 and 540 meters and a third one, running at a height of 470 meters above sea level can be followed from west to east, across the entire plain. When connected these low summits form arches, roughly concentric to the one along the line of the mountain foot. Recall that the relief of the mountainside was similarly structured: it consists of a concentric series of flattened summits positioned at similar heights. These are the remnants of the terraces of the Central Balkan Lake that filled most basins along the Vardar Valley after the last regression of the sea, during the Upper Oligocene³⁴⁴. Finer dating of the formation and the draining of this lake is still lacking, chiefly because most of the fossils found are from endemic species. Nevertheless it was clear even to the first researchers of the Skopje Basin that it existed by the beginning of the Miocene and on certain lower sections of the Basin, it survived into the Holocene Era. This lake is the prime factor in the shape and the structure of the geography of the entire Skopje Basin, including this section of Mount Montenegro and its foothills. The wider study region was basically a small outlet of the Skopje Lake and it was among the first portions of land that emerged after it began to retreat³⁴⁵. Hence the faintly preserved structure of the local relief: the series of concentrically positioned arches mark the former levels of the Skopje Lake. The fact that they are relatively closely spaced suggests that the lake was unstable and that it drained away rather quickly. A more stable phase was reached, when the water level stayed at 600 and 620 meters above the sea, coinciding with the eastern half of the mountain foot. In fact geomorphologists were able to distinguish a relatively well preserved section of this lake terrace, running for hundreds of meters between the villages Ljuboten and Raštak, in the eastern end of the region³⁴⁶. The next more stable phase was achieved when the lake surface retreated to 390-400 meters above the sea. As mentioned earlier in the text, this is the line that separates the foothills of Mt. Montenegro from the plain of Skopje.

The reason behind this poor preservation of the old abrasive relief is the powerful erosive forces of the Vardar³⁴⁷. This is the second most important factor in the geomorphology of the basin and one that still operates today. These are the same erosive forces that have contributed to the shape of the first study area. In the case of the Skopje Basin and particularly on the southern

³⁴⁴ J. Cvijić, 91-118, 1906; M. Luković, Tektonika i geološka istorija skopskog bazena, 4-55, *Glasnik Skopskoga Naučnoga Društva* X, 1931.

³⁴⁵ P.S. Jovanović, 81-84, 1931.

³⁴⁶ P.S. Jovanović, photo 7, 1931.

³⁴⁷ P.S. Jovanović, 99, 1931.

slopes of mount Montenegro, the old lacustrine terraces were heavily disintegrated and dissected by a great number of small valleys. These streams were formed after the retreat of the lake and like the Vardar and its major tributaries the Lepenec and the Pčinja, originally they flowed directly into the Skopje Lake. When the lake retreated to the southeast corner of the Skopje Basin, a new erosion base was carved by the Vardar. In effect the lateral streams extended their courses in the areas of the headwaters, incising deeper into the relief and creating new tributaries³⁴⁸. At the same time, their courses were diverted towards the newly carved erosion base and began to flow directly into the Vardar. The streams that come down the southern slopes of Mount Montenegro are typical examples of this process.

Mount Montenegro along with the Skopje Basin is a part of a larger geo-tectonic unit called the Vardar Zone³⁴⁹. The first survey area was also a part of this zone. Its geology is particularly complex and diverse, often featuring discordant layers and signs of extreme disturbances, with older formations mounting over younger rocks. It is still one of the tectonically most active regions in the Balkan interior. The present-day geography of the studied area is also partly related to its geologic substrate.

In its southwest corner, Mount Montenegro is predominantly made up of Paleozoic metamorphic rocks brought to the surface through tectonic uplift³⁵⁰ (map IV_5). These mostly consist of different types of slates and schist, amphibolites, chlorites and muscovites, with insertions of marbles, quartzite and gneiss. The later are exploited on two locations along the mountain foot, between the villages Banjani and Kučevište and in the southwest corner of the region near the village Brazda. The transgression of the sea during the Early Mesozoic left behind an extensive area covered with a mighty layer of flysch. It spreads in a 10 kilometers wide belt across the entire mountain range: from the villages Kučevište and Pobužje in the southern foothills to the basin of the Binačka, at the opposite northern foot of the mountain. It thus occupies the northern, central part of the region of Skopian Montenegro, flanked by a series of older, metamorphic rocks on both sides. The flysch is a softer sediment and is more prone to lacustrine and fluvial erosion than the Paleozoic rocks that surround it. As a result this central section of the mountain slope is slightly recessed and gentler than the flanking sections. Consequently it features more developed relief and hydrology. During the next episodes of sea transgression and during the lacustrine phase, water will follow the line of the least resistance penetrating deep into the mountain massif through the area covered with flysch.

Little is preserved of the sediments formed during the Oligocene transgression. All that was left of this layer were a number of small and isolated patches along the northern section of the foothills, stretching between the villages Banjani and Ljubanci. They consist of sandstone, clay, conglomerates and limestone. The next phase in the geologic history of the area was the period of the Skopje Lake. Most of the area in the foothills is still covered with thick lacustrine sediments, reaching several hundreds of meters in depth. They fill the entire plain, stretching approximately to the contour line of 390-400 meters above sea level to the south. Thus the faint topographic border between the foothills of Mt. Montenegro and the Skopje Basin is further underlined by a change in the geologic substrate. This layer encircles the entire Skopje Basin, spreading along its perimeter. It roughly coincides with the transitional zone of lower mountain offshoots that separates the mountains from the plain. It has also survived on the upper portions of the isolated hillocks on the left higher bank of the Vardar. Although the lake penetrated deep

³⁴⁸ This tendency was first observed and explained by J. Cvijić, 130-131, 1906.

³⁴⁹ M. Luković, 4-15, 1931.

³⁵⁰ *Osnovna Geološka Karta S.F.R. Jugoslavije, 1:100 000, sekcija K34-55, Uroševac, Belgrade 1984.*

into the mountain masses, reaching the level of 900 meters above the sea, there are no remains of these sediments on the mountain slopes. Like the sediments left by the sea during the Oligocene, they have been completely washed away by erosion. The lake sediments in the foothills of Montenegro are mostly made of sandstone, clays and marls. Only in the eastern end of the foothills on a higher ground around the village Ljuboten, did they consist of sand and pebbles. The bulk of the agricultural land in the study region lies on this geologic base. It is an important factor in the soil formation process, greatly determining their type and fertility.

The last and current phase in the formation of the Skopje Basin is dominated by fluvial erosion. Most of the interior surface of the Skopje Plain is made of sediments brought by the rivers during the last geological phase. These sediments are limited to the lower portions of the basin and only sporadically do they appear in the transitional and mountainous zones. In the case of our study area, Holocene sediments are found only at the floors of the small valleys that run across the foothills and at the foot of the steep ridges near the village Ljuboten. Even the bottoms of the smallest valleys are filled with sediments torn from the upper sections of the mountain slope. It appears that the work of the erosive forces doesn't present a threat to the settlement houses or to the agricultural fields. An exception is the village Ljuboten, where occasional landslides have been reported. Nevertheless most of the villages in the area are positioned at least 10-20 meters above the streams.

Interestingly the largest stretch of land covered with Quaternary sediments in the study area belongs to the mountainside. It is an almost continuous belt, 800-900 meters wide and over 9 kilometers long. It stretches in a northwest-southeast direction parallel to the river Lepenec, perfectly overlapping with the low pass, which we assumed was the ancient river bed. The character and the date of these sediments flanked by a series of old metamorphic rocks provide further support for this assumption.

The wider study region has two principal characteristics; the first regards its position in the wider context of the Skopje Basin, the other the regular and symmetric character of its geography. This area is an extreme example of the so called transitional zone of the Skopje Basin³⁵¹. It unites two contrasting landscapes: the relatively gentle foothills and an extensive and rugged mountainside. This is literally a place where the plain and the mountain meet. Although the edge of the foothills is seemingly clear, it is very difficult to decide whether the small plain at the foot of Mount Montenegro belongs to the plain or to the mountain mass. Partially enclosed and far removed from the Vardar Valley, it is only technically a part of the Skopje Basin, not more than any other portion of the mountain slope submerged by the Neogene Lake. But unlike other regions at the foot of Mt. Montenegro, the geography of the study area is not dominated by larger, isolated basins, like those at the eastern foot of the mountain. Instead a number of minor, mountain streams converge towards a wider plateau, where they further converge into two larger streams before entering the inner Skopje Basin. There is no single predominant stream with a well articulated drainage basin, linking the mountain interior with the plain. The continuity in the relief is too faint and in practice, insignificant. These peculiar natural arrangements are of a cardinal importance for the local economy and settlement pattern. In the past couple of centuries, the people that inhabited this area have sought to make optimal use of the two contrasting landscapes that comprise their land.

In the wider region of the Vardar Valley, most commonly the areas of rural settlements coincide with the drainage basins of local streams. In the case of our study area this is almost impossible, because of the character of the local geography. On the mountain slopes, the basins

³⁵¹ J. Trifunovski, 360-366, 1955.

of the local streams are too steep and narrow to receive and feed even the smallest of nucleated settlements. In the foothills the valleys of these streams are only slightly wider and the watershed lines that separate them are too vague. Most modern settlements are raised tens of meters above the valley floors, closer to the watershed lines. But although insignificant as geographic entities, these streams form a surprisingly regular web, dividing both the mountain slope and the foothills into a number of roughly equal drainage basins. This hydrographic constellation served as a basis for the present day settlement pattern in the region. Despite the fact that their articulation in the relief is either too extreme or too faint, these basins divide the region into a number of units and subunits. More importantly their courses run at almost equal intervals, consequently allowing for an equal access to different resources, for all settlements located in the foothills. The majority of the local streams drain approximately equal portions of the mountain slope and they enter the area of the foothills at surprisingly regular intervals.

Nevertheless the streams of Mt. Montenegro offer little room for the development of human settlement. As physical topographic units they don't provide sufficiently large surfaces. In the conditions posed by this particular geography, larger stretches of flat, inhabitable land are to be found only along the watershed lines, at the summits of the ridges that separate the streams. In a sense this is exactly the opposite from the case of the first survey area where the settlement niches were always within the limits of a certain drainage basin. In the second study area, another type of topographic element comes to the fore. This is the flattened or gently sloping mountain ridge; the remnants of the old terraces of the Skopje Lake. These topographic features are not only the most convenient and logical locations for human settlement, but they are also carrying the bulk of the productive agricultural land and present a basis for the local and interregional road network. Parallel to the longitudinal divisions of the region drawn by its hydrography, they draw vertical, latitudinal divisions creating concentrically arranged terraces. Although heavily disintegrated and broken up into separate ridges, they have played an important role in the organization of human settlement and agricultural production in the region.

IV.4 Land-use, agricultural and mineral resources; vegetation, soils and climate

The contrast in the geography between the two principal parts of the wider study region is naturally reflected in the modern land-use and the vegetation cover. Today the mountainside is almost completely abandoned. Apart from the weekend resorts and a number of monastic complexes, there is little activity on the mountain slope. Its forests are still visited for the purposes of tree cutting and hunting, but the bulk of the old productive surface, the pastures in particular, are long since abandoned. As a result most of the mountainside is covered with forests and tall grasses. The most commonly found tree species are the elm, the oak and the wild pear³⁵².

Like the rest of the Vardar Valley zone, Mount Montenegro is poor in mineral resources. At present there are stone quarries on two or three locations along the foot of the mountain and in the western half of the region. These are the quarries mentioned earlier, located between Banjani and Kučevište and the one southwest of Brazda, in the southwest corner of the region. On both locations quartzite, marbles and limestone are exploited. In addition ethnographers that worked in the area in the early decades of the last century mention extraction of iron ore on locations deeper into the mountain interior, but without pointing to specific locations³⁵³.

³⁵² J. Trifunovski, 15-16, 1971.

³⁵³ S. Tomić, 463, 1905; N. Čausidis, 185-186, 1989, in his survey of forts in the mountain interior also notes a number of toponyms indicating ore extraction and melting.

Mount Montenegro is also very rich with freshwater springs. All major streams that drain the southwest slopes of the mountain are fed by a number of powerful springs, usually positioned on the steep valley sides. In contrast there are only a few major springs in the area of the foothills. An equally important resource is the very fertile flysch sediment covering the entire central section of the mountainous part of the study area. These two basic resources have preconditioned the mountain's riches in lush pastures. According to earlier ethnographic researchers, these mountain pastures were probably the principle resource for the entire region³⁵⁴. Until the great changes brought about during the Late Ottoman and Early Modern periods, the semi-nomadic pastoralism played an important role in the local economy. At that time the mountainside was not the mere background, but the very centre of production for the region of Skopian Montenegro. Only the current toponyms testify to the intensive exploitation of the mountainous zone in the past. Many of the ridges, at least their upper portions bear the name of the families that once grazed their flocks there.

There are only vague remarks about the organization and the character of local herding. As in many other parts of the Balkan Peninsula, it involved seasonal movement of the flocks between summer and winter pastures³⁵⁵. In the case of Skopian Montenegro, at least until the beginning of the 19th century, entire families moved with their flocks and spent the summer in specially built summer camps³⁵⁶. For the winters they returned to the foothills where the flocks stayed in pens, near the villages. It is important to note that these movements were gradual and carefully timed to avoid destruction of the cultivated surfaces and make optimal use of the pastures. The terraced terrain of the mountain meant that the pastures were distributed at different heights, featuring optimal grazing conditions during different phases of the season.

Over the course of the last couple of centuries, the herding economy almost completely disappeared from this region. The entire agricultural potential is now focused on the fields in the foothills. Here an area measuring approximately 30 square kilometers is almost completely under cultivation. Only the stretch along the line of the mountain foot, where modern settlements and villages are situated and the narrow valley floors are left uncultivated. The rest of the land in the foothills is divided into hundreds and hundreds of agricultural fields (photo IV_1). On average they measure around 2000 square meters. Larger fields are usually divided along the longitudinal axes. They mostly follow the natural configuration of the terrain, oriented perpendicularly to the sloping sides, though on some slopes there are groups of fields stretching across the contour lines. Many fields are supported with artificial terraces and are further delimited by tall hedges. For the greater part, the terrain is relatively gentle and soil erosion shouldn't be a pressing concern for the local farmers, though the lack of vegetation and the exhausted soils could potentially incite erosion. It seems that overexploitation and the lack of fresh arable land present a greater problem. In sharp contrast to the first survey area, barely 1 in 10 fields is left fallow or completely abandoned. Literally every available piece of arable land is turned into an agricultural parcel. The substantial efforts of delimiting the agricultural fields with terraces or hedges are most likely signs of demographic pressure and limited resources.

The cultures grown in this area are typical for the transitional habitation zone of the Skopje Basin. In principle, "dry" cultures are grown on fields positioned on the summits and the upper portions of the ridges. These are the traditional cereals, wheat, barley, rye and millet and

³⁵⁴ S. Tomić, 460-461, 1905.

³⁵⁵ Following a number of papers presented at a symposium entitled "*Prirodni i socio-geografski karakteristiki na zonite na nomadsko i polu-nomadsko stočarstvo vo Makedonija*", Skopje 1981.

³⁵⁶ S. Tomić, 429-433, 1905.

the vine. “Wet” cultures, mainly maize, vegetables and fruits are cultivated on fields on the lower sections of the ridges and on the valley floors³⁵⁷. During the survey however, it was noticed that this general rule wasn’t always followed and fields with maize or onions were seen on the dry upper portions of the ridges. Closer to the mountain, orchards with walnut and chestnut trees were occasionally spotted.

The distribution of the predominant farming cultures is chiefly patterned by the access to irrigation water. In this region it is either channeled from the local streams or it is tapped from underneath the surface. Written documents dating to the middle of the 14th century reveal very elaborate rules regarding the usage of irrigation water from local streams³⁵⁸. Each village was given the right to irrigate its fields only on certain days of the week. In sharp contrast to the mountainside this part of the micro-region appears rather barren and dry. This is mainly a result of the complete transformation of the area into agricultural land. The local climate is similar to the rest of the Skopje Basin. Located in the upper part of the Vardar Valley, over 200 kilometers north of the Bay of Thessalonica, the Skopje Basin feels only faint echoes of the Mediterranean climate. Compared to the lower parts of the valley, the region of Skopje is cooler and more humid, in particular the area at the foot of Mount Montenegro³⁵⁹.

Access to water is not the sole factor in the organization of local agricultural production. Equally important are the local soil types. In this aspect the region of Montenegro has been studied as a part of the Skopje Basin³⁶⁰. There are no pedological studies focused specifically on this area, which is a pity because the variation in soil types on a relatively small piece of territory is surprising. The local farmers have developed their own nomenclature for the soils in the area, each suited for different cultures³⁶¹. A detailed soil map of the region would open a very interesting and unique insight into the agricultural knowledge and production in this region.

An early study of the soils in the lower parts of the Skopje Basin has identified four principle soil types, three of which are found in our study region³⁶². The predominant soil type was derived from the lacustrine sediments. They are called *smolnicas* (or vertisoils) and are distinguished by their intensive black color. This is the oldest and originally, the most widespread type of soil. The other two types, called *crvenica* or red soil and *ganjača* or colluvial soils are derived from the *smolnicas*. Namely the former are formed on the substrate of eroded *smolnicas* and in the surrounding landscape, *crvenicas* are normally found along steeper section and above the *smolnicas*. *Ganjačas* on the other hand are either derived from eroded material or on alluvial surfaces, protected from further flooding. Clearly in the studied region *ganjačas* on eroded material are more common. They are mostly found at the foot of the ridges and on their lower slopes.

Ideally the distribution pattern of the various soil types should consist of *ganjačas* at the foot of the ridges; *smolnicas* on the gentler slopes or on the flattened tops and the least represented *crvenicas*, usually following the *ganjačas* on the upper portions of the slopes. But whether this distribution corresponds to reality and how it affects the local agricultural production remains unclear. It is evident from historical and ethnographic sources that the region

³⁵⁷ J. Trifunovski, 360, 1955.

³⁵⁸ R. Grujić, Gusari na Svetoj Gori i Hilendarski pirg Hrusija od XII-XIV veka, 1-32, *Glasnik Skopskoga Naučnoga Društva* XIV, 1934.

³⁵⁹ P. Vujević, Klima skopskog bazena, 125-240, *Glasnik Skopskoga Naučnoga Društva* X 1931.

³⁶⁰ D.B. Todorović, Pedološka ispitivanja u skopskog bazena, 242-268, *Glasnik Skopskoga Naučnoga Društva* X 1931.

³⁶¹ S. Tomić, 454, 1905.

³⁶² D.B. Todorović, 250-265, 1931;

of Skopian Montenegro is indeed rich with *crvenicas* or red soils. One of the earliest researchers of this region remarks that most villages were situated close to, or on this very type of soils³⁶³. Perhaps this fact is hidden behind the original name of the area, in translation the Red Mountain. Only in later times did it become Montenegro, because of the similarity of the words for black and red in the Old Slavonic language. In general the soils in the area exhibit various macroscopic qualities, sometimes changing from field to field. Most have fine structure and can retain water for longer periods of time. Their colours can vary from nearly white to dark brown and black. On certain locations and especially on the top of the steeper ridges, the upper horizons have been washed away by erosion and the soil layer is stony and drier.

IV.5 Modern day settlement pattern, settlement locations and settlement territory

Today the parish of Skopian Montenegro consists of 11 villages. Most of them are medium to large size, but there are a few very small ones, which have most likely been formed by families and clans who moved out from some of the larger neighbouring villages³⁶⁴. Such are the cases of Brodec, a former summer camp of the neighbouring Kučevište and of Gornjani, formed by a dozen families who have moved away from the neighbouring Banjani. The two had less than 20 families and presently, Brodec consists only of weekend houses, with no permanent residents. On the other end of the scale are the villages Mirkovci and Kučevište. Mirkovci had over 100 houses in the early part of the 20th century, while Kučevište, the largest settlement in the region, nearly 200 houses³⁶⁵. The rest of the villages have between 50 and 100 families. The total number of inhabitants in the area, at the beginning of the 20th century, was over 8000, making it one of the most densely inhabited rural areas in the country (tab. 1).

TableIV_1: List of the villages in Skopian Montenegro and the number of houses and inhabitants at the end of the 19th century (after S. Tomić, 1905, 507-508)

Village name	Number of houses	Number of inhabitants
Mirkovci	114	1026 (num. of houses x9)
Brazda	50	450
Brodec	28	252
Ljubanci	120	1080
Gornjani	24	216
Pobužje	72	576
Kučevište	193	1737
Čučer	76	684
Banjani	79	711
Gluvo	60	540
Ljuboten	94	846
Total	910	8190

³⁶³S. Tomić, 411, 1905.

³⁶⁴J. Trifunovski, 59-62, 1971.

³⁶⁵S. Tomić, 508, 1905.

Over the past several decades these settlements have greatly changed and this has also had effects on the surrounding landscape. In its basic principles however, the settlement pattern established at least a couple of centuries ago has remained unchanged. 9 of the 11 villages are situated exactly along the line that marks the mountain foot, encircling the entire area of the foothills from west to east. Closely following the local hydrology, they are distributed into pairs and groups at roughly equal intervals. The distance between these groups is slightly over 2 kilometers, while the distance between individual villages is 1 kilometer or less. 6 of these villages are grouped into pairs, while the other 3 form a tight group in the northwest corner of the foothills. From west to east, these are: Brazda and Gluvo, Čučer, Gornjani and Banjani, Kučevište and Pobužje and the easternmost pair, Ljubanci and Ljuboten. Almost all these villages are regularly positioned at points where the mountain streams enter the foothills; basically by the very entrances to the small canyons carved by the mountain streams. The exceptions are Brazda and Gluvo, the pair in the lower southwest corner of the area, where there are no major streams coming from the low mountain shoulder. But even in these cases, the villages are positioned at the mouths of minor ravines that drain the hills above. In addition, Brazda occupies a location physically very similar to the recesses occupied by the rest of the villages. It is positioned on the southwest exit of the area, where the main stream leaves the foothills, surrounded by the hills Gradište and Vražanski Rid. Of the villages lying along the mountain foot, only Gluvo is more exposed and unprotected on its sides.

As mentioned in the introductory part, the settlement pattern in this micro-region features a remarkable regularity and evenness. Despite the varying size of these villages, they all have an equal access to the two principal groups of resources in the area: the pastures and the forests in the mountainside and the arable land in the foothills. In the hilly lands of the central part of the Balkan Peninsula, it is possible to distinguish between two very general types of geographical regions as bases for settlement patterns. These are the narrow valley floors and the basins of the old Central Balkan lakes. The second study area seems to be a representative of the latter. Here the younger, fluvial relief forms are too vaguely articulated in the relief to become territories of separate settlements, although the local hydrography is still very important for the settlements' micro locations. Instead the principle agricultural resources are either concentrated on a larger plain, with only faint inner topographic divisions or are dispersed into numerous tiny islands of flat land through an extensive mountainside. This means that a larger nucleated settlement can only develop in the foothills, large enough to accommodate several settlements of similar size or one or two larger settlements, accompanied by minor satellites. In the case of Skopian Montenegro's current settlement pattern, it is difficult to point to a higher rank settlement. True, 2 of the 11 villages are considerably larger than the rest and another two are considerably smaller, but with the exception of one of the latter, all have equal positioning in the landscape. Understandably this doesn't mean that all villages were of equal social and economic standing. It is even possible that the larger villages occupying the central section of the region have access to a more extensive mountainside. In principal however, the territories of almost all of the current villages extend over the mountainside and the foothills. This was most likely seen as the optimal arrangement for the needs of the local mixed economy of farmers and herders.

This settlement pattern partly rests on the fluvial relief forms, despite their poor articulation and insignificance in terms of size. Not only because all settlements in the area are situated by one of the local streams. We saw that their valleys offer very little space. These streams are rather more important dividing both the foothills and the mountain slope into series of smaller units and subunits discussed earlier in the text. In the mountainside, where the

resources are scattered they diverge; in the foothills, where resources are concentrated they converge. This characteristic of the local geography is reflected in the peculiar pairing of villages and their unusually close spacing in general. Ideally following the watershed lines, each of the settlements would have a territory triangular in shape, with the top pointed towards the centre of the foothills (map IV_6). In reality however the little evidence that we have speaks against strict divisions of the land between settlements³⁶⁶. Even in the mountainside where there are physically separate basins, they were divided into larger sections simultaneously or alternately used by a pair or group of villages. In the foothills these physical divisions are so minimized that it is impossible to divide its territory into separate basins, each belonging to a separate settlement. Instead the area of the foothills is divided into a number of larger basins, drained by one or more streams and occupied by a pair of settlements. All of this indicates that the settlements in this region form a strongly integrated union. The geography of their region and perhaps their economy and social organization has forced them into sharing a larger stretch of compact land. This tendency is more pronounced in the lower western part of the foothills, where five settlements basically share the same basin.

The regularity of the local settlement pattern is broken by the location of the second largest settlement in the area, Mirkovci. Unlike the rest of the nine villages situated in the foothills, Mirkovci is positioned 1.5 kilometers south of the line marking the mountain foot, at the end of the ridge that separates the basins of the Kučeviški and the Banjanski Stream. Its houses are distributed in two groups, with the centre of the settlement positioned almost exactly at 500 meters above the sea. Mirkovci is the most centrally positioned settlement in this region and the only natural crossroad. Here the main road coming from Skopje splits into a branch leading north, to Kučevište and another, towards the trio of villages in the northwest corner of the foothills. Surprisingly enough however, in the past couple of centuries Mirkovci never really achieved a status higher than its neighbors. Moreover after World War II a new regional seat was established on a neutral location, only half a kilometer to the southwest of Mirkovci³⁶⁷. It is the seat of the municipal government and the main crossroad for the western part of the region. In addition a separate asphalt road was built 1.7 kilometers to the east, establishing a direct link between Kučevište and Skopje.

At the other end of Mirkovci's ridge near the mountain foot, there is at present a stone quarry. It was only opened in the 1960's and thus, cannot be responsible for this disruption of the local settlement pattern. Mirkovci was occupying its present-day location by the early 19th century, at the latest. It seems however that neighbouring Banjani changed its location³⁶⁸. In the early part of the last century its inhabitants remembered that the "old village" was situated a kilometer to the east, very close to the modern quarry. If we look at the western part of the foothills as a separate basin, than the location of Mirkovci doesn't defy the logic behind the settlement pattern in the area (map IV_4). Positioned on the southeast corner of the small basin of the Banjanski Stream, it actually complements the other groups of settlements that occupy the northwest and southwest corners of the basin.

In the eastern part of the foothills, the string of settlements along the mountain foot is again broken between Pobužje and Ljubanci. Mid-way between these two villages, Turčevski

³⁶⁶ S. Tomić, 429-430, 1905; on the basis of local oral traditions, the author also talks about earlier (pre-Ottoman?) land divisions. Far more direct and reliable testimonies are to be found in the 14th century imperial edicts, translated and analyzed in V. Mošin et al. 1975.

³⁶⁷ J. Trifunovski, 33, 1971.

³⁶⁸ S. Tomić, 423, 1905.

Stream enters the foothills. It is about the same size as the neighboring streams, yet the recess at its entrance in the foothills is uninhabited. However there is a mention of a settlement called Turčev Dol in the Ottoman census of 1467-1468³⁶⁹. It was initially decided to survey this empty settlement niche, but unfortunately we found a large portion of this locality occupied by modern villas, surrounded by enclosed yards. These were mostly built by former inhabitants of Pobužje, who had moved to Skopje in the past few decades. The recent phase of settlement displacement in the area has consumed most of the land along the mountain foot. As a result, it is impossible to survey the zone in which most settlements in the area were traditionally located.

The other village that defies the distribution of settlements in the region is situated almost 3 kilometers to the north-northeast of Pobužje, by one of the tributaries of the Pobuški Stream. At present it doesn't have permanent inhabitants; the old village houses were abandoned or transformed into weekend resorts. This is Brodec, the only remaining establishment situated in the mountainside. As mentioned before, this village was a former summer camp of Kučevište, although it is closer to Pobužje than to its mother settlement. Its case warns against assumptions that the settlement territory simply followed the natural limits of the closest topographic entity. Brodec doesn't belong to the same drainage basin as its mother settlement, Kučevište.

If we analyze the character of these settlements' micro-locations, we'd notice that 10 of the 11 villages are situated on the foot or the lower sections of the ridges that surround the area of the foothills. Only Mirkovci is situated on the summit of the ridge, on the watershed line. The heights of these surfaces closely correspond to the levels of the receding Skopje Lake. The lowest pair of villages is Brazda and Gluvo at 390 meters above the sea, in the southwest corner of the area. Recall that this level marked the border between Skopian Montenegro and the inner part of the Skopje Basin. Čučer, Banjani and Mirkovci are positioned just above the contour line of 500 meters above sea level. Finally, the villages in the central and eastern parts of the foothills, Kučevište, Pobužje, Ljubanci and Ljuboten and the small village Gornjani in the northwest corner of the region are all situated at a height of about 600 meters above sea level. We saw that this line marks the most stable phase of the Skopje Lake and its terrace is consequently wider and better preserved³⁷⁰. Even the small outpost Brodec, situated 3 kilometers into the mountainside is positioned at a height corresponding to one of the lacustrine terraces, perhaps the highest one located at nearly 900 meters above the sea.

Thus although barely visible in the present-day relief, these old terraces are the chief substrate on which the settlement pattern in the area is based. Broken up into numerous low ridges, the remnants of these terraces represent potential settlement locations. In the topography of the present, they can appear either at the foot or on the top of the mountain ridges. We saw that by far the most favorite type of locations for human settlement in this area was the mountain foot, where the small streams exit the mountainside. The example of Mirkovci however, shows that there are other types of inhabitable locations, primarily the flattened summits of the low ridges in the foothills. Moreover some of these locations bear the names of abandoned villages, mentioned in the ethnographic studies and in the early Ottoman censuses. These locations are far more spacious and closer to the arable surfaces. But at the same time they are more exposed, consume larger portions of the productive surfaces and are less conveniently positioned regarding the seasonal movements of flocks, crucial for the pastoralist economy that sustained this region in the past.

³⁶⁹ M. Sokolovski, 478, 1971.

³⁷⁰ P.S. Jovanović, 82, 1930.

This settlement pattern appears incredibly stable and highly integrated. It mostly consists of medium to large size settlements with a long history, reaching back to the Late Byzantine Period. A more radical displacement of one of these settlements could hardly happen without causing shifts in the location and related changes for the rest of the settlements in the area. One has to remember however that the stability and the optimality of this scheme maybe originated only in the past two or three centuries. Although a number of the currently existing villages are mentioned in the written sources dating to as early as the 13th and the 14th centuries, it is far from certain that they occupied the same locations or if they were of the same size and character. In these same documents there are also mentions of other settlements, the locations of which are completely forgotten. This fact along with the modern examples of alternative settlement locations indicates that the modern settlement pattern is but a stage of a long and probably very complex history of human habitation. In fact over the past few decades the local settlement pattern has experienced relatively radical changes. Looking at an updated map or a satellite image of the area, one will hardly recognize the location of the traditional settlement cores.

There is another element that has survived in the present-day landscape and deserves a separate mention. These are the well known seven larger monasteries and the numerous smaller chapels or isolated crosses, situated at the perimeters of the villages' inner territories³⁷¹. To these we may also add a number of small groves, rare islands of uncultivated land usually reserved for the flocks and with restricted access³⁷². Naturally only the names of the larger establishment are preserved, the oldest dating to at least the end of the 13th and the first decades of the 14th century. The locations and the ancient origins of some of these monasteries and churches suggest that the basis for the settlement pattern that has survived to this day could be at least seven centuries old. Not merely because some of the central village churches date to the Late Middle Ages. The distribution pattern of these monasteries fits into the distribution pattern of settlements strikingly well. This becomes much more evident if we look at the locations of the numerous minor chapels, sacred crosses and groves. They form a fairly regular web, consisting of triangles and polygons surrounding the settlements. Only some of the major monasteries, St. Elijah near Banjane, the Holy Archangels near Kučevište and the Holy Virgin near Pobužje are located at a slightly greater distance, in any case not further than 3 kilometers from the nearest settlement. The rest of the sacred locations and monasteries are usually within a radius of 1 or 2 kilometers from the village centre. Good examples are the villages Kučevište and Mirkovci, the largest two in the region. They are literally surrounded on all sides by small chapels, sacred locations and even smaller monastic convents, such as the female convent of St Elijah, south of Mirkovci and again, a small female convent dedicated to St. Paraskeva, south of Kučevište (map IV_7). These humble establishments date to the Late Ottoman or the Early Modern Periods, but were allegedly built on earlier foundations or on ancient sacred land. Similarly the narrower territory of the smaller village Pobužje is marked by a small grove and an isolated cross, positioned on the summits of the ridges and less than a kilometer south of the village. These features are obviously closely related to the nearby settlement and it's very likely that they are indicative of a settlement's status and wealth.

³⁷¹ J. Trifunovski, Manastirski konaci u Skopskoj Crnoj Gori, 113-124 *Glasnik Etnografskog Instituta* XXIX 1980.

³⁷² S. Tomić, 431-432, 1905; J. Trifunovski, Les arbres culturelles dans la region de Skopska Crna Gora, 129-137, *Bulletin de l'institut ethnographique de l'Academie Serbe* XXIV, 1975; for an analogous role of trees in the ancient world, S.E. Alcock, R. Osborne, eds. *Placing the Gods. Sanctuaries and sacred space in ancient Greece*, Oxford 1994; J. McNerney, Sacred land and the margins of the community, 33-59; eds. R. Rosen, I. Sluiter, *City, countryside, and the spatial organization of value in Classical Antiquity*, Leiden-Boston, 2006.

If we analyze the topography of these sacred locations it becomes evident that they occupy alternative or minor settlement locations. The four larger monasteries north of the villages Banjane, Kučevišće, Pobužje and Ljubanci are all situated at the ends of the narrow canyons, deep into the mountainside. Their locations resemble the locations of the villages situated in the foothills: both occupy the banks of the mountain streams, where the valleys widen, entering a lower section of their courses. Thus the villages were positioned at the points where the streams leave the mountainside and enter the foothills, while the monasteries were further upstream, where the streams cross from the upper to the lower sections of the mountainside, roughly at 650 meters above sea level. Simply put they occupy the opposite ends of the same narrow canyons; the locations of the monasteries being a smaller version of the same type of settlement loci occupied by the modern villages. In both cases the installations are positioned on a theatrically shaped terrain, a real physical niche. Indeed one of the monasteries in the region, the one dedicated to the Holy Warrior St. Nikita occupies an empty settlement locus in the northwest corner of the foothills. Like all other settlements in the region, it is situated at the mountain foot, where a small nameless stream enters the foothills, forming a recess identical to those occupied by the rest of the villages. Only much later when even the memory of the past wealth and glory of this monastery completely faded did a couple of clans move from the village Banjani to the left bank of the nameless stream, opposite the monastery. Although far from the foot of the mountain, the female convent of St. Elijah near Mirkovci occupies an analogous location. It was founded on the right bank of the Kučeviški Stream, where the small river enters the low southwest corner of the area.

If we turn specifically to the locations of minor complexes, isolated chapels and crosses, we notice that although bound to a different type of topographic features, most of them are nevertheless situated on the alternative type of settlement loci, i.e. the summits of the low ridges that dissect the foothills. Their locations are analogous to the location of Mirkovci, at the ends of the ridges' gentler sections. Thus again they occupy transitional points in the micro-relief, where the steadily declining terrain is interrupted by sharper escarps. Examples are the chapel of St. Athanasius, 700 meters south of Kučevišće and the chapel of the Holy Warrior St. Mercurius, a kilometer to the north of Mirkovci. In both cases the chapels are situated on the same ridge as the villages. Furthermore a great number of these churches or isolated crosses, regardless of the type of their micro-locations are on the same terraces as the majority of local settlements. In other words they too are possibly located on the remains of old lacustrine terraces. The chapels of St. Mercurius and St. Paraskeva are for example on the contour line of 500 meters above sea level, the monastery of St. Nikita at 600 meters above sea level, the monastery of the Holy Virgin north of Gornjane, at 900 meters above sea level and so forth.

So far these observations can only be transformed into a tentative hypothesis. In the first study region, we saw that the corners of the wider settlement territory were clearly marked either by forts or small chapels and monasteries. Are we also dealing with the same sort of frontier landmarks in the second study area, with the important difference that here, most of these landmarks are still active and not merely the remnants of some past landscape? The described distribution of monastic churches and chapels at the foot of Mt. Montenegro could also be closely related to the distribution of settlements, at least during the last big phase of the history of human habitation in the region. In this case the sanctuaries are marking the settlements' "inner" territories, their immediate surroundings or the territory within roughly one kilometer from the settlements' cores. If we assume that the sanctuaries postdated the settlements, it would imply that by the time of their foundation, the founder settlements must have been firmly established

and sufficiently wealthy. But as will be shown later in the text, nothing justifies such an assumption. In some cases at least, the sanctuary predated the nearby settlement or the settlement moved, while the sanctuaries continued to exist or were renewed by another settlement. In any case, in this study region it is obvious that there is an important relation between settlements and sacred locations. It is very probable that in the conditions of faint topographic divisions of the terrain, high population density and limited resources, sacred locations were a key element in the local landscape. They marked the limits of the settlements' immediate surroundings, justifying and reinforcing the drawn divisions and at the same time providing neutral meeting points, where people from all the surrounding villages would gather on the day of the patron saint. In addition the larger monasteries situated on the narrow valley floors, deep into the mountain interior could represent places of potential refugia for the inhabitants of the villages in the foothills. It was emphasized that the natural niches they occupy are but minor, sheltered version of the niches of the present day settlements.

Limited to a territory of one square kilometer, the principle target of the survey was one of the empty or potential settlement loci in the foothills. In the mountainside it is impossible to conduct a survey of such a scale and intensity as in the first study area. Here the largest compact piece of accessible terrain doesn't exceed 20 or 30000 square meters. These locations are now mostly covered with dense and tall vegetation or are under forest. But choice is limited even in the foothills. The half a kilometer wide belt stretching along the entire perimeter along the foot of the mountain is almost completely consumed by modern housing, infilling the space between the old settlement cores. In addition we wanted to avoid surveying parts of the immediate surroundings of the modern settlements and the large quantities of recently deposited material usually covering the nearest fields. Therefore our focus shifted towards the central parts of the foothills, roughly in the area between the second and the sixth ridge, the points of Krst and Orlovec on the map (map IV_4). This is the geometric centre of the foothills, lying at an almost equal distance from Pobužje, Kučevište and Mirkovci. The southern half of this area, towards the inner Skopje Basin features worse visibility conditions and there is hardly any location that looks like the typical settlement foci in this region. Much more promising were the flattened summits and the gentle sides of the ridges in the central part of this plain. These locations are basically identical to the location of present-day Mirkovci. We wanted to survey at least two of these ridges, with a particular focus on the 500 meters contour line, the height on which most of the villages in the western part of the foothills are situated. There were two principle aims in sight: to check if there are traces of a more dispersed settlement pattern in the past and to try and date the beginnings of the latest settlement pattern in this region, on the basis of the offsite finds. But ultimately we wanted to determine the quantity, the character and the distribution of surface finds in a landscape different from the one in the first survey area and situated in a different geopolitical context.

IV.6 The survey area, limits and description

One of the more difficult problems of this field survey and in principle of any archaeological field research is drawing the spatial limits of the survey area. In the first survey this appeared as a lesser problem because here the survey area roughly coincides with a given geographic entity, the valley of Sopot. But even in the Sopot survey, we couldn't evade the question of what the survey area actually represents. Weren't we simply following the limits

imposed by the currently existing settlement pattern and land use, both in our reading of the physical geography and in interpreting the survey results? Basically this is an ever-present problem: even when completely surveying what appears as a perfectly enclosed geographic entity, one has made the assumption that it represents an integral settlement area, rather than just a smaller fragment of a larger unit. Or alternatively, that the limits of the assumed settlement areas follow the limits of hydrographic rather than of orographic entities.

In the case of the second survey the problem becomes far more acute and obvious. We have chosen to focus the survey on a minor part of a larger geographic and administrative unit, with a surprisingly high level of integration. The foothills of Mt. Montenegro measure over 30 square kilometers, while the scope of the survey was limited to approximately 1 square kilometer. Moreover unlike the valley of Sopot where the survey limits were largely determined by visibility conditions and access, the foothills of Mt. Montenegro offer equal ground conditions over a relatively large territory. Even after deciding to narrow the choice to the central part of the foothills, the area stretching between the second and the sixth ridge, we were still left with a territory of over 7 square kilometers, featuring equal ground conditions and very faint inner topographic divisions. In a way we tried to follow the approach applied in deciding on the limits of the first survey area; that is to identify the types of topographic units occupied by current or known past settlements and limit the survey to one of these actual or potential settlement loci and their immediate surroundings³⁷³. But while in the first region it was easier to identify wider settlement chambers rather than settlement loci, in the second study region, the opposite was the case. Here we immediately observed two basic types of settlement loci: the recesses created by the local streams, usually at the points where they exit the narrow canyons at the foot of the surrounding ridges and the flattened summits of the ridges, along the watershed lines. These types of locations are too small and it was necessary to expand the survey area, including more than one potential settlement micro-location and/or, finding elements in the landscape that mark the narrower or wider territories of local settlements.

As already suggested during the description of the geography and the modern settlement pattern in the wider study region, in the absence of pronounced natural landmarks or inner topographic divisions, the inner territories of local settlements could have been delimited by the erection of sacral monuments. This secondary element in the studied landscape at least helped us determine the northern boundary of the survey area, the one facing the currently existing settlements and thus avoid surveying their immediate surroundings.

The other criterion taken into account was the character of the micro-topography, the spaciousness and the compactness of the topographic units. Of the five ridges running across the vacant centre of the foothills, the most spacious and gentlest was the terrain between the second and the third ridge, counting from west to east. In between these two ridges, the smallest central basin of the foothills gradually emerges. Its shape becomes more articulate 1.5 kilometers south of the foot of the ridge that separates the villages Kučevište and Pobužje. Acknowledging the fact that the majority of the settlement loci in the area appear at specific altitudes, we decided to focus on the upper section of this small valley, on the area between the contour lines of 450 and 540 meters above sea level. We saw that a number of villages and sacred locations were located at this altitude.

Guided by these broad criteria, the limits of the surveyed area run as follows: to the north, the boundary line was drawn between the small female convent of St. Paraskeva on the west and a small grove, roughly coinciding with point 540 on the map (map IV_8). The western and

³⁷³ E. Neustupný, , 45-61, ed. E. Neustupný, 1998; J. Bintliff, 505-545, ed. G. Barker, 1999.

eastern boundaries were the summits of the second and the third ridge; finally the vaguest, southern boundary stretches just below the contour line of 450 meters above sea level, at a point where the two ridges are slightly drawn towards each other. The survey area is thus situated at an equal distance of around 1.7 kilometers from the three nearest villages, Kučevište and Pobužje on the north and Mirkovci on the west.

Drawn on a map the surveyed territory bears the shape of an almost regular square. Its east-west axis measures 1.2 kilometers at its widest, while the north-south axis is only 100 meters shorter. In total it occupies an area of over 1.1 square kilometers and is slightly larger than the first survey area. In reality the limits chosen enclose a theatrically shaped terrain (photo IV_2). The northern boundary is longer and nearly 100 meters higher than the southern along the valley floor; while along the ridges' summits, the difference in altitude between the northern and southern end of the eastern ridge is less than 70 meters. The ground slopes very gently and evenly, even across the slopes of the ridges, i.e. the valley sides. The eastern ridge holds the highest point in the survey area, but in its southern half, it is lower than the almost flat summit of the western ridge. Both measure slightly over 100 meters across their summits, but the slope on the eastern side is almost twice as wide as the opposite western slope. The former roughly measures over 600 meters, the latter around 330. As a result of this circumstance the eastern slope is much gentler than the western, where along certain sections the ground is stabilized by tall terrace walls. The valley floor is roughly marked by the Skopje-Kučevište road, barely measuring a dozen meters in width. It runs asymmetrically across the survey area, in a northwest-southeast direction. Therefore the western slope gradually widens from north to south, while the eastern slope retains its width, as the main mass of the ridge spreads parallel to the valley floor and the asphalt road.

It is obviously difficult to clearly separate the relief elements that comprise the survey area. In this respect too, it is almost completely the opposite from the area of Sopot. For the latter, it was possible and even necessary to define a dozen separate subunits, usually coinciding with certain micro-topographic entities. Although larger, the second survey area technically consists of only five topographic elements: the flattened summits of the two ridges, the valley floor and its western and eastern slopes. But these are not separate surfaces as was the case in Sopot. It is impossible to draw the boundary between the valley floor and the slopes for instance, neither on topographic grounds nor on the basis of land use or ground visibility. However in the context of the surrounding landscape, they are not totally irrelevant. Three of these subunits could present potential settlement loci: the flattened tops of the two ridges and the valley floor, particularly at the point where it leaves the survey area. We saw in the neighbouring valleys in the foothills of Mt. Montenegro that these types of locations were either occupied by a sacral monument or were inhabited, as was the case with the village Mirkovci situated on the top of the neighbouring ridge. Even in this almost featureless compact landscape not all locations are of the same value.

In relation to the current settlement pattern and land-use, the position of the second survey area is again, the opposite of the first. For the first survey area, we followed the limits of an existing settlement and its territory; the second survey area is on the other hand positioned away from the narrower territories of modern settlements, on the periphery of their hinterlands. The lack of natural, topographic fragmentation is further underlined by modern land use. Like most of the foothills, the survey area is parcelled into hundreds of agricultural fields. Their size usually varies between 2 and 4000 square meters and they are often surrounded by hedges and terraces. A network of small, dirt roads gives access to the fields in the various parts of the area.

On the steeper western slope, they also play the role of large support terraces. Looking at this landscape, one gets the impression of highly ordered, almost planned agricultural divisions. It is interesting to note however that although the survey area stretches over the hinterlands of two villages, Kučevište and Pobužje, there is no clear boundary separating the territories of the two settlements. This could be a result of the very close connections between the two villages, which in the past few decades are rapidly merging into a larger agglomeration.

As in the broader surroundings, only less than 1 in 10 fields is left fallow or abandoned. Cereals and vines are grown along the summits and the upper sections of the ridges, corn and vegetables on the valley floor and on the lower sections. Larger concentrations of uncultivated land appear in the southwest quarter and in the opposite northeast corner of the survey area. The rest of the surveyed land is a monotonous maze of fields of roughly equal size and shape. It is only interrupted by a few enclosed fields. Wild vegetation appears only on the abandoned parcels and on one location on the valley floor, overgrown with tall reeds. Compared to the surroundings of Sopot, ground visibility conditions and accessibility are much better. We were thus finally able to survey an almost continuous stretch of land and follow the distribution of surface finds across fields and across various zones of the survey area. The ground visibility factor was also enhanced by the lack of large amounts of modern debris. In this case waste was usually deposited in the ditches by the road, rarely on abandoned fields. On the cultivated fields modern rubbish appeared only in smaller quantities.

There remains the problem of the changing visibility conditions, even in the course of a single agricultural season. It is unfortunate that these variations are most acute during the period of the best ground visibility, in the months between August and November. This is the period when most of the fields are ploughed and prepared for sowing. Between the end of March and late August, the bulk of the cultivated territory is covered with dense and tall vegetation and low ground visibility doesn't allow systematic survey. However despite the fact that ground visibility is optimal in the second half of the year, the consecutive deep ploughing and harrowing of the fields can result in very dynamic conditions in the topsoil.

The second survey area hasn't suffered major disturbances in the surface layer caused by natural or human induced factors. Except for certain sections on the western slope, the terrain is very gentle. Extreme erosion episodes are very unlikely in such conditions, although the intensive artificial terracing of the terrain is rather baffling. Perhaps the over-exhausted soils are vulnerable even though the potential for erosion is fairly limited. Sedimentation seems as a greater potential problem, though according to the available geologic maps there are no significant concentrations of Holocene sediments on the surveyed terrain or in the wider study region. Because erosion was a much more potent factor in the first survey area, direct comparison of the overall quantity of surface finds between the two could be misleading.

Being an inseparable part of a larger micro-regional entity, the second survey area lacks the integrity of the basin of Sopot. We'll see that this circumstance will greatly influence the local history of settlement and land-use. It will also carry important implications on our reading of the survey results, which become comprehensible only in the light of the developments in the wider study region.

Geographically the second survey area along with the entire region of Skopjan Montenegro is considered an integral part of the Skopje Basin. Although earlier we stressed that its geographic position on the very edge of the basin and far away from the main rivers is somewhat ambiguous, this micro-region shares the same geo-strategic qualities as most other

parts of the Skopje Basin. They are close to two very important interregional corridors and to one of the most important cities of the Central Balkans, but they aren't as exposed as the valley of Sopot. Compared to the villages in the hilly region of the Middle Vardar, the settlements of the Skopje Basin are much larger and certainly far more receptive of the influences emanating from the central settlement in the plain. Unlike the first study area, situated near ethnic, political and administrative borders throughout most of its history, the second study area was in general always belonging to the central parts of territorial entities, whether political or administrative. As will be shown in the chapters that follow, the developments in the inner Skopje Basin often had a profound impact on the local settlement pattern.