

Akkerman Fortress Project

A new international and inter-disciplinary research project on Akkerman fortress (located on the Black Sea in Bilhorod-Dnistrovsky, Ukraine) came under the sponsorship of the BIAA in 2006. Fieldwork had begun in 1999, but inadequate funds put a limitation on what could be done. The massive fortress had a long and complex history, including 300 years under Ottoman rule, but had been surprisingly under-studied. The approach to understanding more about it was both archaeological and historical: a survey of all architecture as well as a review of Ottoman archival documents was undertaken. Archaeologically, the team focused on the barbican's relation to the fortress itself and the Ottoman 'hamam' or bathhouse, as well as on conducting a GPS survey of the entire fortress. Plans of architectural structures became clearer, as did some of the building chronology, and many artefacts were found, belonging to various periods – mostly Byzantine, Moldavian, Golden Horde, or Ottoman. A preliminary survey of the fortress' architecture was also undertaken, using the 1955 plans for reference. The walls and ditch were also photographed. The historical team compiled a variety of sources (more than had been known previously) that referred to the fortress. These documents – which often referenced specific features, naming towers and gates – were studied, and lent insight into the fortress' construction and rebuilding phases; a glossary of the Ottoman terms used in reference to the various fortifications was also begun.

In summer 2007 work continued; it had been bolstered by a British Academy sponsored workshop on Ottoman frontiers held in London the previous February. Three weeks were spent at Akkerman itself, and a variety of studies and projects were undertaken. Some of the wooden beams had caught fire, putting the feature in danger – so conservation work was attempted there. Remote sensing technology was used, and geophysical survey was undertaken; some preliminary conservation works occurred in the port yard, and the Ottoman bathhouse was also studied. GPS survey and geophysical survey were undertaken. Three construction phases between the 16th and 19th centuries were identified at the barbican; artefacts found there included a wide range of metal, stone, glass, and ceramic works, and could be dated between the 13th and 19th centuries. The concurrent study of historical documents continued; these were helpful in explaining some of the modifications as responses to the threat of aggression from the Russian empire.

2008 saw a season that was more non-invasive: it focused on continuing the archaeological survey begun in 2006 and the geophysical survey from 2007, and initiated timber and mortar sampling for lab analysis. Small finds were stored both in Kyiv and the museum in Bilhorod-Dnistrovsky; ceramics and finds were photographed and catalogued. One especially notable collection was of Ottoman tobacco pipe bowls: 1,309 pieces were found in total. Six major construction phases were proposed for the fortress, after studying some of its main elements in greater depth and continuing to search Ottoman documents for historical information. A survey complementary to the previous season's geophysical one was carried out using radar and gradiometry; the same areas were explored in order to compare results between techniques. Dendrochronological analysis was undertaken on some of the 57 slices and cores collected, and mortar samples were also analysed.

Work continued in 2009. The tower that had been involved in a fire in 2007 had been reconstructed this year in stone and concrete. Before the field season began, the historical team was successful in procuring some digital copies of plans of Akkerman from the late 18th century. The variety of approaches (historical, archaeological, dendrochronological) proved to be very helpful in understanding the fortress further, particularly its early phases and chronology. Excavation was resumed, and cultural layers dating to the 13th through 18th centuries were located. Samples were taken for petrographic and micro-structural analyses from areas like the minaret, barbican, walls, and bathhouse. The aim was to undertake a complete geodesic survey for the fortress.

Approximately 4800 photographs were taken during the season in conjunction with the photogrammetric survey, and 36 new samples were taken for dendrochronological survey.

In 2010 more successful fieldwork was undertaken on a variety of fronts. Archaeological work concentrated on exposing the ditch near the Dnister liman shore, revealing three phases of construction; also, a tower was revealed during the course of the excavation. Dendrochronology focused on examining samples from the previous seasons of work; based on the results, timbers were divided into the two categories of 'Akkerman-early', dating to the second half of the 15th century, and 'Akkerman-late', from the Late Ottoman period. More sampling was undertaken in the ditch in order to fill in some gaps in information. Finally, nine areas underwent geophysical survey, including three outside the fortress itself, and a topographic survey of the fortress grounds was undertaken with a total station – all of which allowed for the eventual construction of a 3D site model. Unfortunately, funding shortages meant the historical team could not fully participate in 2010.