



Summary :

Asprokastron was situated near the mouth of the river Dniester, on the site of an ancient Greek colony. During the Early Byzantine period it was probably controlled by the Byzantines, but later it came under the authority of various peoples of the region (Pechenegs, Rus', Cumans, Tatars). Since the end of the 13th century it was a Genoese trading post, while in the 15th century it served as the seat of the rulers of Moldavia. It was occupied by the Ottomans in 1484.

Other Names

Leucopolichnē, Maurocastrum/Moncastrum, Cetatea Albă, Akkerman

Geographical Location

Ukraine

Historical Region

Bessarabia

Administrative Dependence

Byzantine Empire, Pecheneg state, Rus' state, Cuman state, Tatar state, Bogdania (Moldavia)

1. Asprokastron from the fourth to the tenth centuries

Asprokastron (today Bilhorod-Dnistrovs'kyi, Ukraine) is situated on the right (south) bank of the Dniester, 19 km. from the river's mouth. It was founded on the site of the ancient Greek colony [Tyras or Ophioussa](#), the ruins of which lie under the mediaeval fort. In the first century A.D. Tyras had entered the Roman sphere of influence, but shortly before the middle of the third century it was occupied by the [Goths](#) and possibly destroyed or left to decay.¹ There is no precise information on the city during the Early Byzantine period, but later testimonies speak of the possible existence Christian churches in ruin. Therefore, we may assume that the region remained, if not under Byzantine authority, at least within the sphere of Byzantium's influence after the fourth century.

It is considered possible that after the seventh century Byzantine authority in the region, as well as in most areas around the northern shores of the Black Sea, was supplanted by that of the various steppe peoples. The first Byzantine source to mention Asprokastron, the *De administrando imperio* of emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus (944-959), reports that the city was abandoned and in ruins, while its new Greek name seems to be a translation of the name given to it by Turkic-speaking [Pechenegs](#) because of the white color of its fortification.² Its political affiliation is not clear, but in all probability at that time (mid-tenth century) it belonged to the Pecheneg state, although shortly afterwards a Russian chronicle includes Asprokastron (Belgorod) in the cities belonging to the Kievan [Rus'](#) state.

2. Asprokastron from the eleventh century to 1484

It is considered possible that in the eleventh century Asprokastron passed once more into the Byzantine Empire's zone of influence, perhaps after 1016, when Byzantine forces campaigned against the [Khazars](#) on the northern shore of the Black Sea. In a bishops' list preserved in a twelfth-century manuscript and dating from the time Alexios I Komnenos (1081-1118) it appears as the bishopric of "Mavrokastron, i.e. New Russia", the creation of which is dated c. 1060-1064.³ Although most researchers identify the place-name "Mavrokastron" (from which derive the Latin place-name *Maurocastrum* and Italian *Moncastrum*) with Asprokastron, in reality the former was directly opposite the latter, on the left (north) bank of the Dniester,⁴ just as Niconia in antiquity was opposite from Tyras.⁵ Nevertheless, henceforth both settlements will be treated as one.

In the thirteenth century Asprokastron passed under the control of the [Cumans](#), but by the middle of that century their state had been destroyed by the [Tatars](#) of the [Golden Horde](#), who placed the better part of the [Crimaea](#) and the northern shores of the Black Sea,



including Asprokastron, under their authority. At the same time, in the last decades of the thirteenth century [Genoese merchants](#) settle in the region: from 1290 onwards there is evidence of close contacts between Asprokastron and the Genoese merchant colony of [Caffa](#) in the Crimea.⁶

A rich source of information on fourteenth-century Asprokastron is the Life of the neomartyr John the New (patron-saint of Moldavia), who was executed by the Tatars in 1330. Apart from the Tatars, other people mentioned as living or being active in the city include Italians and Armenians (apparently merchants), Jews, as well as Greek-speakers, either local, or merchants from the Byzantine Empire or [Trebizond](#) (John hailed from the latter). Around the middle of the fourteenth century Asprokastron came under the authority of the Genoese, who turned it into an important center of entrepôt trade, mainly grain and wax.

In the last decade of the fourteenth or the first of the fifteenth century Asprokastron was incorporated into the newly-founded state of Moldavia, even though Byzantium's influence in the region did not diminish, judging from the fact that coins minted in the city still bore Greek inscriptions («*Ἀσπροκάστρου*» = “of Asprokastron”). In 1420 the Ottomans attacked the region for the first time and laid siege to the citadel, but were driven back by the Moldavian prince Alexander. In 1437 the [Venetians](#) succeeded in establishing a trading mission in Asprokastron, the port of which was a thoroughfare for travelers on their way to Central Europe: two years later it was from there that the Byzantine emperor John VIII Palaiologos (1425-1448) and his entourage passed, returning from the council of Ferrara – Florence.

A later source of questionable credibility mentions that after [1453](#) sultan Mehmet II (1451-1481) transplanted people from Asprokastron and other areas to Constantinople, in order to bolster its population.

On 5 August 1484⁷ Asprokastron was the last coastal city in the Black Sea to be captured by the Ottomans. The Moldavian prince Stephen the Great (1457-1504), who had been using the city as his capital since 1547, was unable to defend it, since he had to face the danger of a Polish invasion. The Turks misled the citadel's inhabitants, claiming that Stephen had capitulated, and convinced them to surrender on terms. The terms were not honored and the city's defenders were executed. Stephen's attempts to retake the region were not successful and the Ottomans settled permanently at Asprokastron, which they renamed Akkerman (= white rock).

1. The last issues of Tyras' mint date from the reign of the Roman emperor Alexander Severus, who died in A.D. 235. Possibly the Goths captured the city a few years later. Cf. Minns, E. H., *Scythians and Greeks* (Cambridge 1913), pp. 447-448, who does not state clearly whether the city was destroyed. Rostovtzeff M., *Iranians and Greeks in South Russia* (Oxford 1922), pp. 216-217, claims that the city survived its capture by the Goths, but gradually declined.

2. Κωνσταντίνος Πορφυρογέννητος, *Πρὸς τὸ νῆ διον υἱ ὁ ν Ρωμανόν*, Moravcsik G. - Jenkins R. J. H. (eds.), *Constantine Porphyrogenitus, De Administrando Imperio* (Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae 1, Washington 1967) ch. 37, 58-67. The same etymology lies behind the place-name's Rumanian (Cetatea Albă), Russian (Belgorod), Ukrainian (Bilhorod) and Turkish (Akkerman) versions, while Byzantine historian Λαόνικος Χαλκοκονδύλης, *Ἀποδείξεις ἱστοριῶν δέκα*, Darkó E. (ed.), *Laonici Chalcocondylae Historiarum Demonstrationes* 1 (Budapest 1922) p. 125, 4-5 atticizes the mediaeval place-name into «Leucopolichnē».

3. Honigmann, E., “Studies in Slavic Church History”, *Byzantion* 17 (1944-1945), pp. 158-162, who is mistaken in believing that the bishopric was short-lived, whereas in reality it is mentioned by sources (now as bishopric of Asprokastron) in the following centuries: see Andreescu, Ș., *The Metropolitanate of Halicz and the Bishopric of Asprokastron. A few considerations* (Études byzantines et post-byzantines 4, Iași 2001).

4. Honigmann, E., “Studies in Slavic Church History”, *Byzantion* 17 (1944-1945), pp. 159-161. Bromberg, J., “Toponymical and Historical Miscellanies on Medieval Dobruđa, Bessarabia and Moldo-Wallachia”, *Byzantion* 13 (1938), pp. 50-68 mistakenly believes that the Italian place-name Moncastro did not derive from Mavrokastron/Maurocastro, but from a supposed corruption of Albocastro = Asprokastron.

5. On Niconia opposite Tyras, see Minns, E. H., *Scythians and Greeks* (Cambridge 1913), p. 14. The place-name “Mavrokastron” is mentioned also in the so-called “Toparcha Gothicus”, but, as it was proven by Ševčenko, I., “The Date and Author of the So-Called Fragments of *Toparcha Gothicus*”, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 25 (1971), pp. 115-188, the text is an early nineteenth-century forgery.



6. Browning, R., "Asprokastron", in A. Kazhdan (ed.), *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium* 1 (New York - Oxford 1991), p. 212. Since all contemporary Italian sources mention the city's name as Maurocastrum or Moncastrum, we must assume that the Genoese trading post was not situated on Asprokastron *per se*, but on Mavrokastron, on the opposite bank.

7. Browning R., "Asprokastron", in A. Kazhdan (ed.), *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium* 1 (New York - Oxford 1991), p. 212, dates the capture of Asprokastron by the Ottomans in the year 1485.

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	Minns E.H. , <i>Scythians and Greeks. A Survey of Ancient History and Archaeology on the North Coast of the Euxine from the Danube to the Caucasus</i> , Cambridge 1913
	Obolensky D. , <i>The Byzantine Commonwealth. Eastern Europe, 500-1453</i> , London 1971
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	Rostovtzeff M. , <i>Iranians and Greeks in South Russia</i> , Oxford 1922
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	Bănescu N. , "Maurocastrum – Mo(n)castrum – Cetatea Albă", <i>Academia Romane, Memoriile secțiunii istorice</i> , 22, 1939, 165-178
	Bromberg J. , "Toponymical and Historical Miscellanies on Medieval Dobrudja, Bessarabia and Moldo-Wallachia", <i>Byzantion</i> , 13, 1938, 9-71
	Browning R. , "Asprokastron", Kazhdan A. (ed.), <i>The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium</i> 1, New York – Oxford 1991, 212
	Honigmann E. , "Studies in Slavic Church History", <i>Byzantion</i> , 17, 1944-1945, 119-162
	Ševčenko I. , "The Date and Author of the So-Called Fragments of Toparcha Gothicus", <i>Dumbarton Oaks Papers</i> , 25, 1971, 115-188

Webliography :

	Akkerman Fortress Project
http://www.akkermanfortress.org.ua/satellite_face/external/main/go/sat_home	

Glossary :

	Golden Horde
Conventional designation of the state of <i>Ulus Jochi</i> or the <i>Khanate Kipchak</i> . It was a nation, that was a cross of Turks and Mongolians and lived in the west part of the Mongolian Empire. The Horde flourished from the middle of the 13th century until the end of the 14th century and built up important commercial relationships with the nations of the Mediterranean Sea, especially the Genoese.	



Sources

Κωνσταντίνος Πορφυρογέννητος, *Πρὸς τὸν ἴδιον υἱὸν Ρωμανόν*, Moravcsik G. - Jenkins R. J. H. (ed.), *Constantine Porphyrogenitus, De Administrando Imperio* (Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae 1, Washington 1967).

Δούκας, *Ιστορία*, Bekker I. (ed.), *Ducae Michaelis nepotis Historia Byzantina* (Bonn 1834).

Λαόνικος Χαλκοκονδύλης, *Αποδείξεις Ιστοριῶν δέκα*, Darkó E. (ed.), *Laonici Chalcocondylae Historiarum Demonstrationes 1* (Budapest 1922).

Quotations

The first mention to Asprokastron in Byzantine sources:

Ἰστέον, ὅτι ἔνθεν τοῦ Δανάστρεος ποταμοῦ πρὸς τὸ ἀποβλέπον μέρος τὴν Βουλγαρίαν εἰς τὰ περάματα τοῦ αὐτοῦ ποταμοῦ εἰσὶν ἔρημόκαστρα· κάστρον πρῶτον τὸ ὀνομασθὲν παρὰ τῶν Πατζινακιτῶν Ἄσπρον διὰ τὸ τοὺς λίθους αὐτοῦ φαίνεσθαι καταλεύκου, κάστρον δεύτερον τὸ Τουγγάται, κάστρον τρίτον τὸ Κρακνακάται, κάστρον τέταρτον τὸ Σαλμακάται, κάστρον πέμπτον τὸ Σακακάται, κάστρον ἕκτον <τὸ> Γιαιουκάται. Ἐν αὐτοῖς δὲ τοῖς τῶν παλαιοκάστρον κτίσμασιν εὐρίσκονται καὶ ἐκκλησιῶν γνωρίσματά τινα καὶ σταυροὶ λαξευτοὶ εἰς λίθους πωρίνους, ὅθεν καὶ τινες παράδοσιν ἔχουσιν, ὡς Ῥωμαῖοι ποτε τὰς κατοικίας εἶχον ἐκεῖσε.

Κωνσταντίνος Πορφυρογέννητος, *Πρὸς τὸν ἴδιον υἱὸν Ρωμανόν*, Moravcsik G. - Jenkins R. J. H. (ed.), *Constantine Porphyrogenitus, De Administrando Imperio* (Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae 1, Washington 1967), ch. 37. 58-67.

Asprokastron as seat of the Wallachian principality (c. 1429):

ὁ βασιλεὺς φιλοτιμήσας δὲ καὶ εἰς μίαν τῶν μεγίστων νηῶν εἰσάξας ἔστειλεν αὐτὸν ἀπὸ τοῦ Ποντικοῦ πελάγους εἰς τὸ Ἀσπρόκαστρον. ἐκεῖ δὲ οἱ τῆς Βλαχίας εὐρισκόμενοι ἄρχοντες εὐφήμησαν αὐτὸν ὡς ἡγεμόνα καὶ εἰς τὴν παπτικὴν ἡγεμονίαν ἀπεκατέστησαν, κτείναντες τὸν νόθον υἱὸν τοῦ Μύλτζα.

Δούκας, *Ιστορία*, Bekker I. (ed.), *Ducae Michaelis nepotis Historia Byzantina* (Bonn 1834), p. 202.9-14.

15th c. Byzantine historian refers to Asprokastron as capital of Moldavia:

ἡ μὲν μέλαινα Πογδανία, ἡ ἔν τῃ Λευκοπολίχνη καλουμένη τὰ βασιλεία ἔχουσα, ἀπὸ Δακῶν τῶν παρὰ τὸν Ἰστρον ἐπὶ Λιτουάνους καὶ Σαρμάτας διήκει.

Λαόνικος Χαλκοκονδύλης, *Αποδείξεις Ιστοριῶν δέκα*, Darkó E. (ed.), *Laonici Chalcocondylae Historiarum Demonstrationes 1* (Budapest 1922), p. 125.4-7.

Chronological Table

mid-third c.: Occupation of Tyras by the Goths. Possible gradual decline and abandonment of the city.

mid-tenth c.: Asprokastron is mentioned for the first time in Byzantine sources.

c. 1060-1064: Possible date of the creation of a bishopric in the region.

early thirteenth c.: Asprokastron passes under Cuman control.

mid-thirteenth c.: Asprokastron passes under the control of the Tatars of the Golden Horde.

second half of thirteenth c.: A Genoese trading port is founded in the region.



1330: Traditional date for the martyrdom of St John the New in Asprokastron.

mid-fourteenth c.: Asprokastron passes under Genoese control.

end of fourteenth or beginning of fifteenth c.: Asprokastron is annexed to the newly-founded principality of Moldavia.

1420: Unsuccessful Ottoman attempt to capture the city.

1437: A Venetian trading post is founded in the city.

1439: Byzantine emperor John VIII Palaiologos passes through the city en route to Constantinople.

after 1453: Possible transportation of part of Asprokastron's inhabitants to Constantinople by sultan Mehmet II.

1457: Asprokastron becomes the seat of the Moldavian prince Stephen the Great.

5 August 1484: The city is captured by the Ottomans.