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THE SEA FORTRESS AT WISLOUJSCIE NEAR GDANSK

In his book “Polonia sive de situ, populis, moribus, magistratibus et republica Regni Polonici libri duo”, published several times in the 17th century since 1632 Szymon Starowolski wrote the following:

“Gdansk – the famous Baltic port, a town, because of the abundance and variety of merchandise, partly imported by sea from the whole West and North, partly by land from the different countries of the world mostly by the Vistula river, and because of the hugeness of profits, and because of the beauty of private and public edifices, number of inhabitants and foreigners, wealth of citizens, perfectness of fortifications, plenty of cannons and other military equipment – could rival most important towns of Europe”.

The wealth and importance of the port-town (fig. 1) situated on the delta of the Vistula at the mouth of the country’s several waterways was a result of the rapid growth of international trade with the vast territories of the Polish-Lithuanian State after the treaty of Torun in 1466, which saw the defeat of the Teutonic order.

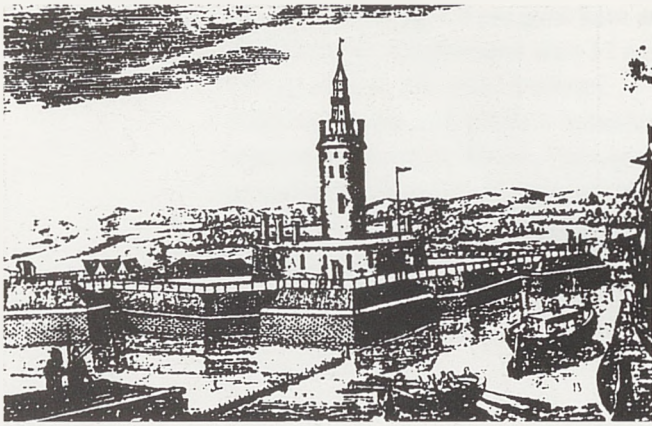
The port-town located some distance from the sandy and marshy coastline had to defend the waterway to and from the sea. Therefore, in 1482, the old wooden watch-tower dating from the mid-15th century situated at the mouth of the Vistula was replaced by a new one of brick and stone, 20 m high, circular and with several gun ports. It served also as a lighthouse and was named “The Lantern” (figg. 2-3). In 1518-1521 a wooden stronghold called Blockhaus was constructed around it, where a small military unit was constantly stationed.

In 1562, in the time of political turmoil caused by the war between Denmark and Sweden, the wooden fortification was replaced by a three-storey brick barbican called “Crown Kranz”, also circular in shape (diameter ca. 31 m), and built around the Lantern, with positions for a battery of 12 cannons on the two upper storeys.

The attempts of Poland to carry out a more independent policy in the Baltic region were not welcomed by the Gdansk citizens who proposed new efforts to fortify the Vistula’s mouth. Between 1573 and 1577 the “Crown Kranz” was surrounded by four bastions and a palisade. It was not by chance that Gdansk refused to accept a newly elected King of Poland, the bellicose

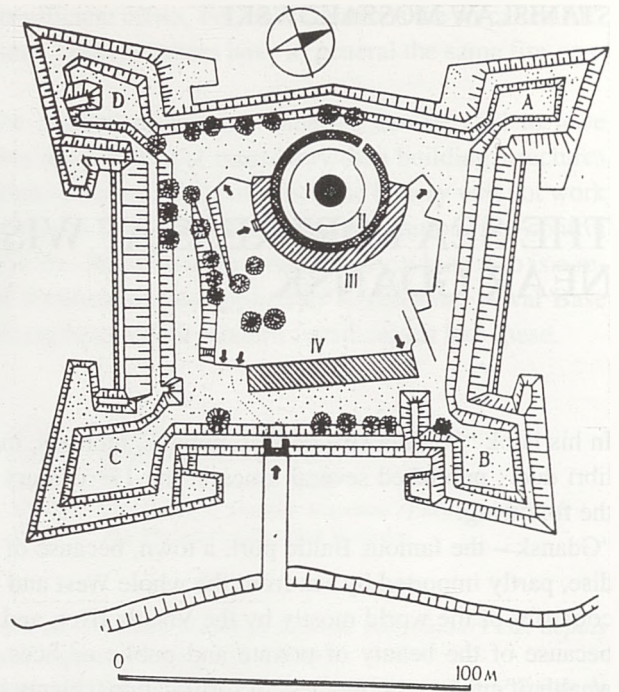


1. Gdansk and Wisloujscie around 1640. Engraving by P.D. La Pointe (from S. PUFENDORF, *De rebus a Carolo Gustavo gestis, Norimbergae, 1696*).



2. Fortress at Wisloujscie in 1617 (from I. DICKMAN, *Praecipuorum locorum et aedificiorum in urbe Dantiscana adumbatio, Dantiscum 1617*).

3. Fortress at Wisloujscie with four bastions ("Fort carré"):
 I - the watch-tower ("Lantern");
 II - the barbican ("Crown");
 III - IV the barracks.



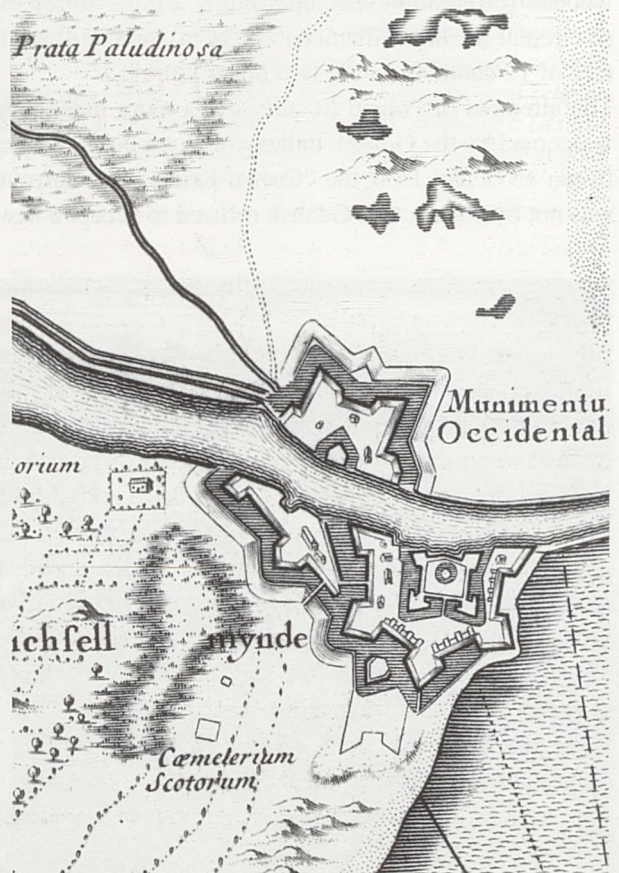
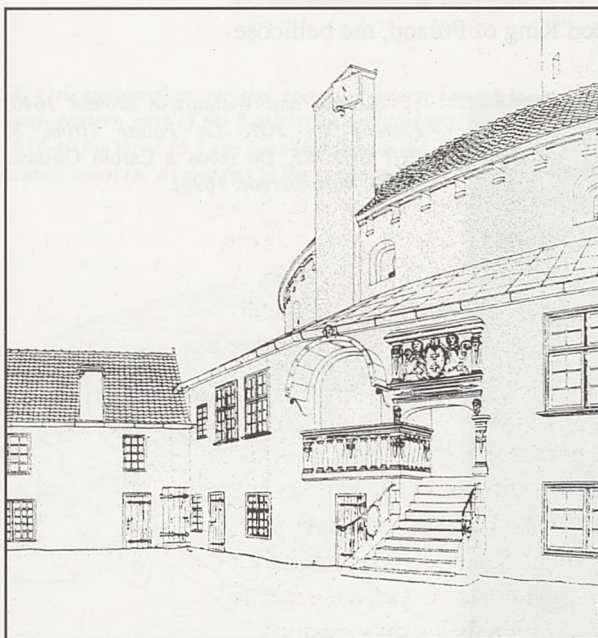
Prince of Transylvania, Stefan Batory, in 1575, and the town was besieged twice by the Polish troops between July and October 1577. During the struggles the Wisloujscie fortress suffered considerable damage.

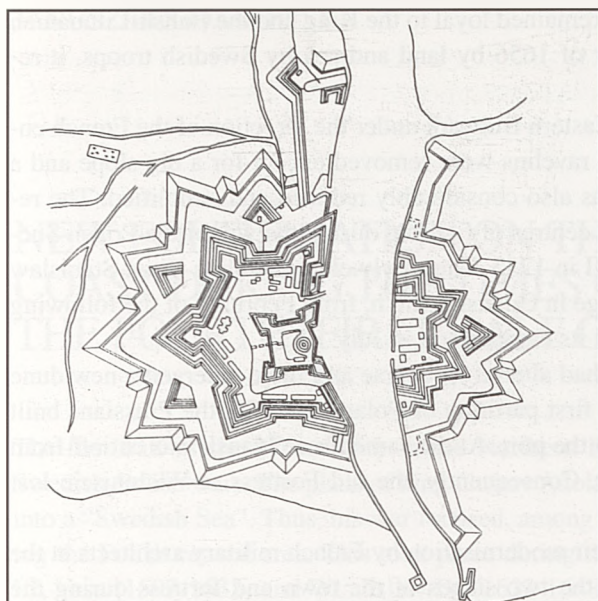
After a compromise Treaty in Marienburg (12 December 1577) the fortification was rebuilt, modernised and enlarged. A fortress with four bastions ("fort carré") in the new Italian manner was erected around the Lantern and the Crown. The Lantern obtained a superstructure and was covered with a high roof.

The planned extension, completed in 1587, was prepared by the Flemish architect Antonius van Opbergen (1543-1611), who had worked in Denmark, fortifying the castle in Kronborg near Helsingör and the castle of Fredriksborg.

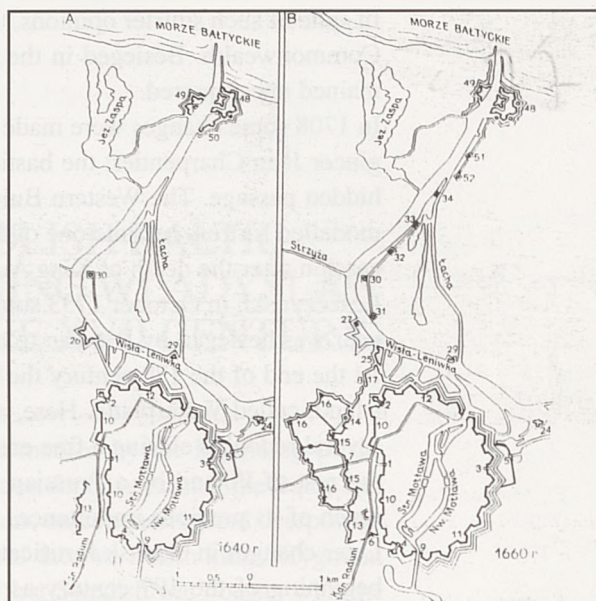
4. Entrance to the barrack in the 17th century (reconstruction after J. Stankiewicz).

5. Fortress at Wisloujscie with five bastions around "Fort carré" and the Eastern and Western Bulwarks (detail of fig. 1).





6. *Fortress at Wisloujscie. Drawing by J. Strakowski in 1673 (after J. Strankiewicz).*



7. *Gdansk and Wisloujscie defence systems at 1640 and at 1660 (after R. Massalski and J. Stankiewicz).*

A Gdansk master-builder Jan Strakowski also took an active part in the construction works. A rusticated stone gate dating from 1602, eccentrically situated in the eastern curtain with a oblique postern way led to the interior of the fortress (fig. 3). The bastions were not backed by earth ramparts, and the curtains did not have breastworks.

At the beginning of the 17th century, at the time of the Polish-Swedish wars, the Italian military engineer Geronimo Ferrero, was called upon to give his opinion of the fortress. He criticised it strongly. Thus, when in 1624-1626 the Gdansk region was embroiled in the war, a new earth-work according to the Dutch system with five bastions surrounded by a water-filled moat was added under the guidance of the Dutch architect Peter Janssen van Weert. At the same time the old barbican, the Crown, was surrounded by a ring of two-storey houses and converted into a barrack (fig. 4).

Soon afterwards the work now called the "Eastern Bulwark" was reinforced on the left bank of the Vistula by a new "Western Bulwark", which as a horn-work with two half-bastions followed the same Dutch system (fig. 5). Several other extensions of the Eastern Bulwark and constant alterations in the Western Bulwark, followed the same concepts of the Dutch system with ravelins, covered-ways and moats, continued till 1675 and were carried out mostly by Jan Strakowski's son Jerzy, the most famous Gdansk engineer of the time (fig. 6). In order to ensure a safe communication between the mouth of the Vistula and the harbour, a number of larger and smaller bulwarks were built between 1638 and 1656 (fig. 7).

Charles Ogier, the secretary of the French diplomatic mission involved in a peace treaty between Poland and Sweden in 1635 reported in his diary: "The fortress at the mouth of the Vistula is absolutely excellent and the whole town of Gdansk peacefully remains under its protection, for without permission of that stronghold nothing could sail out of the Vistula to the sea or sail from the Baltic into that river. The Fortress is surrounded by several canals as well as by moats and numerous retrenchments built exactly according to the modern art of fortification. A hundred or more cannons are placed there and a thousand soldiers with their wives and children are living inside. At night they put a light on the Lantern for the convenience of sailors and from it both the sea and land are visible... In front of the fortress on the other bank of the Vistula another one has been constructed, which serves the bigger Fortress".

Notwithstanding the dangers of war, the Polish nobility, immutably hostile to the townspeople and envious of their privileges, were afraid of the growth of the Gdansk fortifications. In 1640, prince Albrecht Stanislaw Radziwill noted in his diary: "The rich and fortified towns, flattering themselves that they could shake off the yoke easily, defy the authority of the King's decrees, resist their unhesitating execution, and show no respect to them; inclined to disturbances and not eager to obey, they wield their despotic power with an incredible arrogance within their own suzerainty".

In spite of such sinister opinions, Gdansk remained loyal to the King and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Besieged in the summer of 1656 by land and sea by Swedish troops, it remained unconquered.

In 1708 some changes were made in the Eastern Bulwark under the direction of the French engineer Jean Charpentier: the bastions and ravelins were removed except for a big slope and a hidden passage. The Western Bulwark was also considerably reduced and simplified. The remodelled fortress became one of the main centres of fighting during the war of the Polish Succession after the death of King Augustus II in 1733. The newly elected Polish King, Stanislaw Leszezynski, in October 1733 sought refuge in Gdansk, which, from February of the following year was besieged by Russian troops until its capitulation in July.

At the end of the 17th century the Vistula had altered its course and there emerged a new dune island, called Vesterplatte. Here, after the first partition of Poland in 1772, the Prussians built several redoubts closing a free entrance to the port. At the same time Gdansk was cut off from the rest of Poland by a Prussian corridor. Consequently, the old Fortress at Wisloujscie lost much of its previous importance.

Later changes in Gdansk fortifications, their modernisation by French military architects at the beginning of the 19th century as well as the two sieges of the town and fortress during the Napoleonic wars (1807 and 1813) go beyond the scope of my topic.

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Gdansk (Danzig), sur l'estuaire de la Vistule, à la même distance des dunes sableuses et des plaines côtières, est née comme l'une des villes portuaires les plus riches et les mieux défendues de la Mer Baltique. D'abord sous le contrôle de l'Ordre Teutonique, à partir de 1466 elle fait partie du territoire de l'état lituanien polonais.

La richesse de la ville, nœud portuaire et commercial des échanges entre l'Europe du nord et l'Europe de l'ouest, grâce à la Vistule comme voie fluviale et à la Mer Baltique comme voie maritime, a suscité les appétits des états voisins, jusqu'à devenir le casus belli de la deuxième guerre mondiale.

Pour cette raison, Danzig a été fortifiée et protégée à plusieurs reprises. L'estuaire de la Vistule, particulièrement important, a été fortifié au début du XVI siècle; ensuite, il a fait l'objet de plusieurs interventions, avec des fortifications qui à chaque conflit devenaient plus grandes et plus modernes.

C'est ainsi que la première tour-phare de 1562 a été englobée dans un fort carré en 1577; ce fort a été ensuite protégé par une série d'ouvrages extérieurs (1543-1611), jusqu'à s'intégrer dans un système bastionné qui, à partir de 1624-1626, a été encore élargi jusqu'en 1675, pour être ensuite achevé en 1772, par les Prussiens, qui ont ajouté des ouvrages qui bloquaient l'accès au port. Modernisée par les ingénieurs militaires français, cette forteresse subit encore deux sièges pendant les guerres napoléoniennes en 1807 et 1813.