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CHURCH ARCHITECTURE IN SOUTHWESTERN BULGARIA IN THE LATE 9TH – EARLY 11TH CENTURY (BASED ON ARCHAEOLOGICAL DATA)

Abstract. This publication is devoted to the church architecture in Southwestern Bulgaria (now Blagoevgrad region) during the First Bulgarian Tsardom, in the period from the end of the 9th to the beginning of the 11th century. From the second half of the 9th century (specifically from 864) the territories of the region under consideration officially entered the borders of the medieval Bulgarian state, which coincided with the conversion to Christianity in Bulgaria (865). The studied region covers the valleys of the rivers of Struma (Middle Struma) and Mesta (Upper and Middle Mesta), which were part of the southwestern borders of the Bulgarian state in the Middle Ages. At present, three churches can be attributed to this period, all excavated through regular archaeological excavations. These are the Basilica of St. Nicholas in the town of Melnik, the single-nave church in the area of Shipotsko at the town of Bansko and the three-conchal church at the village of Kulata, Petrich municipality. In terms of their functional characteristics, these churches include an episcopal (or parish) church (“St. Nicholas” in Melnik), a cemetery church (the church in the area of Shipotsko near the town of Bansko) and a monastery church (the church at the village of Kulata). Characteristic for the first two is their construction on older cult sites – on an ancient sanctuary and an early Christian church (the church “St. Nicholas” in Melnik) and on an early Christian temple (the church in the area of Shipotsko, at the town of Bansko). The small number of excavated church buildings from the First Bulgarian Tsardom is also typical for the rest of the Bulgarian lands. Although the examples from the region are few, they show that almost all major architectural types are found here.

Keywords: church architecture, Southwestern Bulgaria, First Bulgarian Tsardom, cult places, basilicas, single-nave churches, cross-domed churches, three-conchal churches

Introduction

The historical vicissitudes in the Bulgarian lands impose a two-century “religious hiatus” for Christian civilization – from the end of the 7th to the middle of the 9th century – covering the time between the early Christianity of part of the Balkan provinces of Byzantium and the conversion of the Bulgarians. After the “dark ages” for Christianity in the Bulgarian lands – it returned to its beginnings in

them, but at the same time seeking synchrony with the trends of the new times. In this sense, the question of religious monuments in the Middle Ages cannot be considered separately from the pre-existing, previous state of church construction in the Bulgarian lands from the 4th to the 6th centuries¹.

The most widespread architectural type of church building in the early Christian period in the Balkans, including the Bulgarian lands, is the basilica, which is found everywhere in the territory of the Late Roman and Byzantine empires. Single nave churches were built less frequently. During this period, centric cult buildings were also built, originating from Roman funerary and memorial structures². Architectural influences came from both Rome and Constantinople, on the church architecture in the Bulgarian lands during the Late Antiquity (and later), and also from the eastern provinces³.

The first cult buildings after the conversion to Christianity in Bulgaria in 865 arose in the political and spiritual centres of the state – Pliska, Preslav, Madara, Ohrid and their vicinity. Many of them were built on the site of old pagan shrines, thus demonstrating the dominance of the new religion and preserving the energetic charge of the site. The rebuilding or construction of new churches on top of early Christian religious buildings is common. This practice is attested everywhere in the Bulgarian lands, including in the southwest. There is no evidence of any deliberate destruction of the churches found in ruins by the newly arrived Slavs and Bulgarians⁴. The preservation of the memory of the holy place, associated with a Christian temple, is also traced during the First Bulgarian Tsardom in another way. On the ruins of early Christian churches after the conversion of the Bulgarians their necropolises appeared. This is the case of the site in the area of Shipotsko in the town of Bansko. In the Middle Ages, a small church was built on the altar part of the existing early Christian church, around which a large necropolis developed, dating back to the end of the 10th–13th centuries⁵.

¹ Б. НИКОЛОВА, *Православните църкви през Българското средновековие IX–XIV век*, София 2002, р. 11.

² К. МАРКОВ, *Духовен живот в българските земи през късната античност (IV–VI в.)*, София 1995, р. 50; Н. ЧАНЕВА-ДЕЧЕВСКА, *Раннохристиянската архитектура в България IV–VI век*, София 1999, р. 33; Н. ТУЛЕШКОВ, *Архитектура на средновековния християнски и ислямски свят*, София 2007, р. 16, 31.

³ Cf. Н. ЧАНЕВА-ДЕЧЕВСКА, *Архитектурни влияния от Рим и Константинопол върху църковната архитектура по българските земи (IV–X в.)*, Rh 1–2, 2002, р. 149–157.

⁴ The opinion of S. Boyadzhiev is different; according to him most of the early Christian religious buildings were destroyed by the end of the 7th century by the invading barbarian tribes from the north. – cf. Ст. БОЯДЖИЕВ, *По въпроса за приемствеността в архитектурата на Първата българска държава*, [in:] *Архитектурата на Първата и Втората българска държава*, ed. Г. КОЖУХАРОВ, София 1975, р. 42–45.

⁵ Н. МАВРОДИНОВ, *Византийската архитектура*, София 1955, р. 17–18; Кр. МИЯТЕВ, *Архитектурата в средновековна България*, София 1965, р. 77–78; М. ХАРБОВА, *Три храма, три религии. Една земя, наричана българска*, София 1999, р. 24; Б. НИКОЛОВА, *Православните*

The subjects of this publication are the monuments of church architecture in Southwestern Bulgaria (now Blagoevgrad region) from the period of the First Bulgarian Tsardom. The territorial scope thus outlined covers the valleys of the rivers of Struma (Middle Struma) and Mesta (Upper and Middle Mesta), which were part of the southwestern borders of the Bulgarian state in the Middle Ages. The lower chronological boundary starts from the second half of the 9th century (more specifically from 864) – the time when the territories of the region studies officially joined the territory of the medieval Bulgarian state, which coincided with the official conversion to Christianity (865). The upper limit – 1018 is generally valid for the Bulgarian lands – the fall of the Bulgarian state under Byzantine rule. Three churches can be attributed to this period, all of which have been studied during regular excavations. The small number of excavated church buildings from the First Bulgarian Tsardom is also typical for the rest of the Bulgarian lands, with the exception of the capitals of Pliska, Preslav and Ohrid.

Studies on church architecture in the Bulgarian lands from the period of the First Bulgarian Tsardom define the following groups of churches – churches with a longitudinal axis (basilicas and single nave churches) and centric churches, represented mainly by cross-domed and three-conchal churches. The largest number of excavated buildings are basilical and cross-domed. Fewer single nave and conchal churches were studied during this period.

Basilicas

In the second half of the 9th century in Pliska, in Preslav and in the western parts of Bulgaria the construction of monumental churches with basilical layout gained recognition. The situation was exactly the opposite in Byzantium, where already in the time of Emperor Justinian (527–565) basilicas were replaced by domed buildings. This type of basilica was widespread throughout the country, including in the structures of the newly founded monasteries. The preference for the basilica type of church in the period of the First Bulgarian Tsardom has been attributed to a number of reasons – the spacious interior of early basilicas gathering large numbers of people, the ease of construction of such building as opposed to elaborate domed structures, the spread of this type during the early Christian period. Not without significance is the fact that in the first years after the conversion Bulgaria was under the influence of the Roman Catholic Church, whose church type was

църкви..., p. 22–25; ЕАДЕМ, *Устройство и управление на Българската православна църква (IX–XIV век)*, София 2017, p. 36; К. МЕЛАМЕД, *Раннохристиянска базилика, средновековно село, църква и некропол в Шипотско, Банско, АОР през 2008 г., 2009, p. 701–704; Г. ГРОЗДАНОВА, Селищната система в Тракия през Ранното средновековие: Проблеми на проучванията, [in:] *Тракия през Средновековието и османската епоха. Характер и динамика на селищния живот (XII–XVIII век)*, Сборник статии от научна конференция, проведена на 27–28 ноември 2014 г. в София, ed. Д. СТОЯНОВА, Ч. КИРИЛОВ, София 2020, p. 37–39.*

the monumental basilica. In the first decades after the conversion, about 25 basilicas were built in Bulgaria, varying in size and in their architectural and compositional feature⁶.

In the case of churches with a basilica layout, two groups mainly emerge – large basilicas whose architecture has similar features to Romanesque architecture or to early Christian basilicas and small basilicas influenced by modern architectural forms. Large basilicas have representative functions and are intended for the religious service of noble families and many people at solemn liturgies. In addition, many small basilicas were built in the country to serve the needs of the common population, and were used as settlement and neighbourhood temples. Both types have common features – these are the layouts with a nave and three aisles, ending with a single-partite narthex and a complex altar. The altar space ends with a single apse or with three apses. Most often it is tripartite, consisting of a central part containing the communion table and lateral ones serving as the prothesis and diaconikon. The roofing of basilicas is a wooden roof, a semi-cylindrical vault or a mixed roof. The facades are plain or have a decoration of arched blind niches. The main façade of the basilica is the western one. Its simplest form is a smooth panel, marked in the middle by a large entrance door set in a suitable architectural frame. The main building materials are rough-faced stone and brick, with less frequent use of quadri. In all types of building, white mortar was used as a solder, sometimes also clay mortar. The walls are built on the outside with more carefully selected building material, and the inside is lined or covered with wall paintings. Antique columns and details were used secondarily. Spolia are often in the architectural decoration. Usually the altar partition slabs are reused antique materials. Wood also has wide applicability. The supporting elements and structures for all types of basilicas are the same. They consist of walls, pillars, columns and pilasters, depending on the type of covering and supporting system. Thick walls indicate solid masonry and thin outer walls – a wooden covering⁷.

⁶ Н. МАВРОДИНОВ, *Византийската...*, София 1955, р. 59–64; Кр. Миятев, *Архитектурата...*, р. 79–80; Н. МАВРОДИНОВ, *Старобългарското изкуство. Изкуството на Първото българско царство*, София 1959, р. 92–103; Н. ЧАНЕВА-ДЕЧЕВСКА, *Основни направления в развитието на средновековната култова архитектура в България*, [in:] *Българската архитектура през вековете*, ed. А. ОБРЕТЕНОВ, Ив. ИВАНЧЕВ, Р. АНГЕЛОВА, Ст. СТАМОВ, София 1982, р. 52–79; ЕАДЕМ, *Църковната архитектура на Първата българска държава*, София 1984, р. 16–17; Н. ТУЛЕШКОВ, *Архитектура на българските манастири*, София 1989, р. 45; Б. НИКОЛОВА, *Православните църкви...*, р. 60; С. ДОНЧЕВА, *Базиликите от Първото българско царство. Архитектурен облик*, Шумен 2003, р. 7; Н. ТУЛЕШКОВ, *Архитектура на средновековния...*, р. 82–85; С. ДОНЧЕВА, *Кръстокуполните църкви в Първото българско царство. Архитектурен облик*, Велико Търново 2008, р. 20.

⁷ Сф. Н. ЧАНЕВА-ДЕЧЕВСКА, *Основни направления...*, р. 53–57; ЕАДЕМ, *Църковната архитектура на Първата...*, р. 16–66.

There is a relatively large number of Basilical type churches from the period of the First Bulgarian Tsardom on Bulgarian lands. In the region studied a representative of this architectural type is **the basilica “St. Nicholas” in the town of Melnik**. It was built in the Late Antiquity, but rebuilt in the late 9th – early 10th century. As is well known, Melnik was the main urban centre in the Middle Ages in the Middle Struma valley, which has been relatively well studied⁸. The Basilica “St. Nicholas” is located in the highest part of the eponymous plateau to the south above the town of Melnik. Today it has been fully excavated and partially restored (figs. 1–2). It is the oldest and the largest temple in the town of Melnik, which is a typical example of the common practice of restoring or building new churches on older cult sites, in this case on an ancient sanctuary and an early Christian church. The Basilica of St. Nicholas has six periods of construction, the first dating back to the Early Byzantine period (second half of the 6th century) and the second to the First Bulgarian State (late 9th – early 10th century)⁹.

The Basilica “St. Nicholas” has attracted the attention of researchers since the middle of the 19th century. In 1844 the Russian archaeologist V. Grigorovich gave the first information about the Founder of the basilica. The French diplomat and traveller P. Perdrise mentioned the monument; he visited Melnik in 1899 and 1901. He notes that the church was rebuilt in the 19th century and that its interior is covered with white paint except for the altar, where there are traces of frescoes. In 1922 the Czech art historian A. Stransky visited Melnik and found the church in ruins. He drew his attention to the frescoes preserved in the altar and appreciated their high artistic value. On the basis of its basilical plan, it connects

⁸ Cf. I. ДУЙЧЕВ, *Melnik au Moyen Age*, В 28, 1968, p. 328–412; Th. VLACHOS, *Die Geschichte der Byzantinischen Stad Melnikon*, Thessaloniki 1969; И. ДУЙЧЕВ, *Мелник през средновековието*, [in:] ИДЕМ, *Българско средновековие. Проучвания върху политическата и културна история на средновековна България*, София 1972, p. 374–412; С. ГЕОРГИЕВА, *Средновековният Мелник*, МПЧ 3, 1979, p. 5–9; Z. РЪЖАКОВ, *The City of Melnik*, ВНР 4, 1995, p. 75–90; В. НЕШЕВА, *Етапи в историческото развитие на Мелник до края на XIV в. (по археологически данни)*, [in:] *Acta musei Varnaensis*, vol. III.2, *Българските земи през средновековието (VII–XVIII в.)*. Международна конференция в чест на 70-годишнината на проф. Александър Кузев, Варна 12–14 септември 2002, Варна 2005, p. 307–322; ЕАДЕМ, *Мелник. Богозиданият град*, София 2008; M. ROROVIC, *Melnik – Geschichte und Denkmäler einer Stadt an den Ausläufern des Pirin-Gebirges*, ВО 11, 2008, p. 16–18; E. КОСТОВА, *Medieval Melnik. From the End of the Twelfth to the End of the Fourteenth Century. The Historical Vicissitudes of a Small Balkan Town*, Sofia 2013; E. КОСТОВА, *Средновековният Мелник (края на XII – края на XIV в.)*, Пловдив 2020.

⁹ The remaining construction periods of the church St. Nicholas in Melnik are beyond the chronological scope of this publication. The third and the fourth construction periods refer to the period of the Second Bulgarian State (the second decade of the 13th century – the time of Despot Alexius Slav and the late 13th – early 14th century). The fifth building period refers to the Ottoman rule (the end of the 16th–17th centuries), and the sixth – to the period of the Revival (19th century). The church functioned until 1913. – cf. М. ГЕОРГИЕВА, Д. ГЕОРГИЕВА, *Манастири от територията на Югозападна България*, МJSEA.В 2020, p. 32–33 and the literature cited therein.

the temple with the Church of Holy Forty Martyrs in Tarnovo. At the beginning of the 1930s N. Mavrodinov included the basilica “St. Nicholas” in his study of the churches and monasteries in Melnik and its surroundings. To him is attributed the promulgation of the plan and the discovery of the clerical inscription on one of the pre-altars pilasters, half-painted with white paint and unknown to science until then. Before the archaeological survey of the church, the eastern half was relatively best preserved, the eastern wall with the three apses rising immediately next to the roof, which is now missing¹⁰.



Fig. 1. The Basilica of St. Nicholas in the town of Melnik after the excavations and restoration, the end of the 20th century (after V. NEŠEVA, *Melnik...*, p. 148).

¹⁰ P. PERDRIZET, *Melnik et Rossno*, ВНС 31, 1907, p. 20–37; Н. МАВРОДИНОВ, *Църкви и манастири в Мелник и Рожен*, ГНМ 5, (1926–1931) 1933, p. 292–300, обр. 168; А. STRANSKY, *Remarques sur la peinture du moyen-âge en Bulgarie, en Grèce et en Albanie*, ИАИ 10, 1936, p. 37–41; С. ГЕОРГИЕВА, *Археологически проучвания на късносредновековната църква “Св. Никола” в Мелник*, Архе 2, 1974, p. 28–37; В. ГРИГОРОВИЧ, *Очерк за пътешествие по Европейска Турция (1844–1845) с карта на околностите на Охридското и Преспанското езеро*, София 1978; В. НЕШЕВА, *Тракийско светилище под базиликата “Св. Никола” в Мелник*, Архе 1, 2002, p. 50.

The field archaeological studies of the basilica “St. Nicholas” and its surroundings were carried out in the period 1971–1974 and 1983–1989. Initially the archaeological excavations were conducted under the direction of S. Georgieva, and since the 80s of the 20th century the leadership was taken over by V. Nesheva. The archaeological excavations have played a significant role in clarifying the construction history and chronology of the monument. The six construction periods identified in its existence show the use of an ancient cult site over a long period. After numerous reconstructions carried out at different times, the Church of St. Nicholas survived until the beginning of the 20th century¹¹.



Fig. 2. The Basilica of St. Nicholas in the town of Melnik – eastern fasad of the church with the triple window of the central apse (after V. NEŠEVA, *Melnik...*, p. 155).

The general plan of the church established as a result of the archaeological excavations reflects its latest construction period (fig. 3). The church is a three-nave, three-apsed basilica, with an almost square naos, with a pre-apsidal space with three, prominent inside and outside semi-circular apses, the middle of which is very large. The church had this layout during the period of the National Revival. The church also consists of a narthex on the west, side galleries on the north and

¹¹ С. ГЕОРГИЕВА, *Археологически проучвания...*, p. 28–37; В. НЕШЕВА, *За култа на Свети Никола в Мелник*, ИРИМР 10, 2006, p. 173.

south, a bell tower, a reservoir and a church dwelling on the west. The naos internal dimensions are on the east–west axis, without apses – 13 m (north), 13.40 m (south), on the north–south axis 13.65 m (east), 13.30 m (west). The thickness of the walls is 0.80–1 m, with 1.10 m of the eastern one. The church is divided into three aisles by two rows of two columns and by dividing walls for the altar on the east, which terminate at their western end in a plan of T-shaped pillars. Between the naves there were arcades with three openings each. The whole church is included in a single volume, rectangular in plan, measuring 30 x 25 m, which also contains the aforementioned residential building (originally a metropolitan, later a monastery one). The church reservoir is located between the north gallery of the church and the residential building, and the bell tower is in the southwest corner of the south gallery. There is a rectangular stone tomb at the south-east end of the south gallery. A small building, an ossuary, is attached to the north wall outside. The listed elements of this complex were not built at the same time, but were added during earlier periods of its history¹².

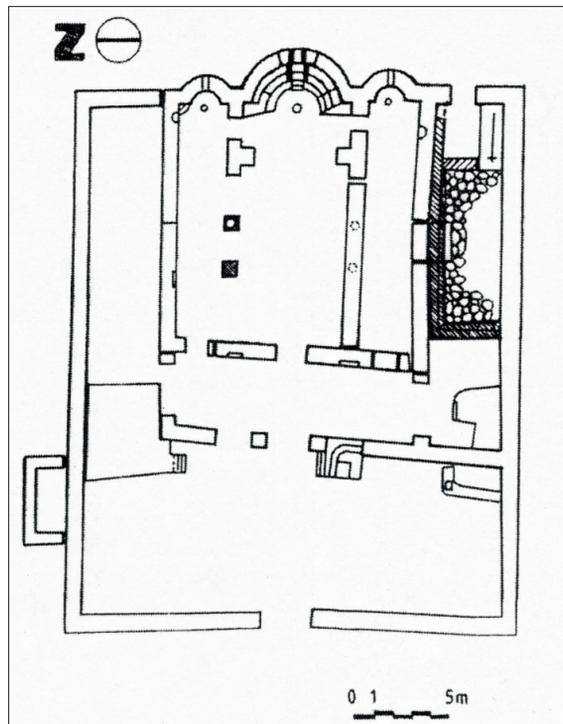


Fig. 3. The Basilica of St. Nicholas. General plan, S. Georgieva 1974 (after V. NEŠEVA, *Melnik pri car Samuil...*, p. 621, fig. 5).

¹² Кр. Миятев, *Архитектурата...*, p. 146, обр. 156, 157; С. Георгиева, *Археологически проучвания...*, p. 29; В. Нешева, *Мелник...*, p. 145–146.

Both chance findings and archaeological excavations show that the church was built on a cult site. First of all, there was a Thracian sanctuary dedicated to Artemis-Bendida, and the Thracian Horseman was also worshipped there¹³. The Thracian sanctuary occupies a significant part of the area of the naos and the southern gallery of the basilica, as well as a few meters of the adjacent space to its east and south. Parts of the foundations of its walls, later incorporated into the church, have been uncovered, outlining a general plan in the shape of a rectangle (close to a square), typical of Thracian sanctuaries¹⁴. From the end of the 1st century AD the sanctuary also functioned as an Augustaeon, where the cult of the emperor was worshipped. A fragment of a marble pedestal with a partially preserved dedicatory inscription (dating from October – November 97) was found as a spolium in the construction of the church. The pedestal is believed to be part of a statue of Emperor Trajan. Probably during the Roman imperial era the sanctuary played a primary role in the religious life of the population of the valley of the river of Middle Struma. The sanctuary itself covers a significant part of the area on which the early Christian basilica was built, as well as the adjacent space to its east and south. Only parts of the foundations of its walls, incorporated into its construction, have been preserved. Numerous architectural details from both the sanctuary and the basilica built on its site in the early Byzantine period have also been preserved¹⁵.

Towards the end of the 4th century, with the establishment of Christianity in these lands, the ancient sanctuary was destroyed and burned, but continued to be venerated until the beginning of the 5th century. The holy place of the Thracians – the plateau “St. Nicholas”, in the 5th–6th century was turned into a fortress, conditioned by the political situation in Byzantium, when the valley of the river of Struma was the central artery of the Balkans, connected with the continuous invasions of Huns, Avars and Slavs. Associated with this fortress is the three-nave basilica built in the second half of the 6th century on the site of the destroyed ancient sanctuary. This was a well-known practice in early Byzantine church building, which was used to ensure the continuity of the holy place and at the same time

¹³ This can be judged by the votive and tomb reliefs used as spolia in the construction of the church.

¹⁴ The connection established by M. Harbova in relation to the shortened basilicas and pagan cult buildings is interesting, although she refers to the discovered Bulgarian shrines in Pliska. According to her, the basis of the truncated basilica is the magical sign of the shrine, subordinated to the new requirements of the Christian religion. It is for this reason that this form of the “truncated basilica”, close to a square, resembling the pagan temple was used. – М. ХАРБОВА, *Три храма, три религии...*, p. 24.

¹⁵ В. ГЕРАСИМОВА-ТОМОВА, *Каменна пластика*, [in:] *Мелник*, vol. I, ed. С. ГЕОРГИЕВА, В. НЕШЕВА, София 1989, p. 162, № 27; В. НЕШЕВА, *Тракийско светилище...*, p. 50–57, обр. 3–4; С. ПЕТРОВА, *Антични и ранновизантийски архитектурни детайли от базиликата “Св. Никола” в Мелник*, *Архе* 3, 2002, p. 58–63; В. НЕШЕВА, *Мелник...*, p. 21–24, 26–33, обр. 12 а, б, 323; ЕАДЕМ, *Мелник. Богозиданият град. Автореферат на дисертация за присъждане на научната степен “Доктор на историческите науки”*, София 2009, p. 8–9.

to symbolize the victory and triumph of the new Christian religion over paganism. The votive and tomb reliefs with images of Artemis, found on the site, are embedded in the walls of the church as spolia¹⁶. It is assumed that this representative church was planned and built as an out-of-town residence of the bishopric in the neighbouring city of Particopolis (now Sandanski) in the turbulent times of frequent devastating invasions under Justinian the Great (527–565). Both the fortress and the church existed for a short time. They were destroyed at the end of the 6th or the beginning of the 7th century, most probably in an earthquake coinciding with the Slavic-Avar invasions along the valley of the river of Struma.

The early Byzantine church consisted only of a naos and a narthex on the south, below the level of the later south gallery. These cover almost the entire area of the ancient sanctuary, the remains of which have been adapted into the new structure. The details of the narthex on the south were promulgated in the publication of the original excavator of the church, Sonya Georgieva, who interpreted it as a south gallery without relating it to the sanctuary, whose existence was then still unclear. The basilica has a tripartite altar with a direct connection between the bema and the parabemas¹⁷ and a low altar partition. The existence of a three-tiered synthronon built of antique brick and stone is assumed. To the north-west of the naos there are the documented remains of a probable baptistery. Originally, V. Nesheva attributed the early Byzantine church to the type of truncated domed basilicas with a tripartite altar, which originated and developed during the early Byzantine period as a transitional type to the cross-domed temple. She corrected this view later in her monographic work on Melnik¹⁸.

During the period of the First Bulgarian Tsardom (from the second half of the 9th century), after a long-lasting depopulation, Melnik was revived and grew into a fortress town – the most important settlement, administrative, religious and cultural centre of the Zagoria region. The complex archaeological data in the whole western part of the St. Nicholas plateau show that the main part of the early medieval settlement of Melnik was located there. It was then that the church of St. Nicholas, which occupied a central position in the rebuilt fortress, was restored. It has been reconstructed with the same architectural plan and dimensions of the previous era – three-nave, three-apsed basilica with an almost square naos, with a narthex on the south and a baptistery connected to a reservoir on the west (fig. 4).

¹⁶ It is believed that Saint Nicholas inherited Artemis's functions as the city's goddess-queen. V. Nesheva assumes that the early Byzantine church was dedicated to "St. Nicholas", by analogy with Myra (Lycia), where the cult of Artemis was spread. – cf. В. НЕШЕВА, *За култа на Свети Никола...*, p. 175–176 and the literature cited therein.

¹⁷ Other options are also assumed. – cf. ЕАДЕМ, *Мелник...*, p. 181, обр. 106/1–11, p. 324.

¹⁸ С. ГЕОРГИЕВА, *Археологически проучвания...*, p. 32–33; В. НЕШЕВА, *Мелник (Melnik) през античността и ранновизантийската епоха*, [in:] *Римски и ранновизантийски селища в България*, vol. II, ed. Р. ИВАНОВ, София 2003, p. 256; В. НЕШЕВА, *За култа на Свети Никола...*, p. 175–176; ЕАДЕМ, *Мелник...*, p. 175–186, обр. 105, p. 324; ЕАДЕМ, *Мелник. Богозиданият град...*, p. 10–11.

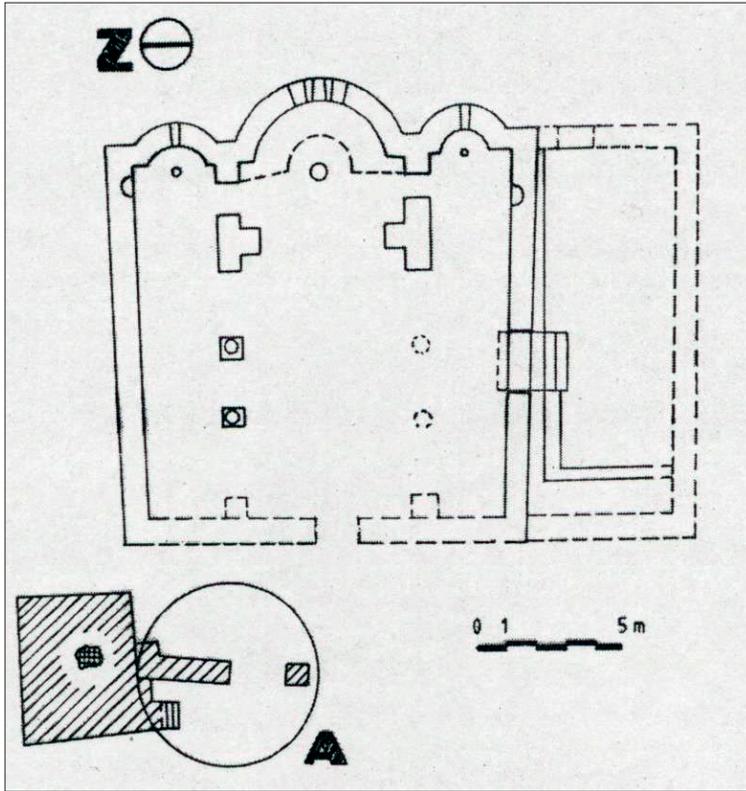


Fig. 4. The Basilica of St. Nicholas. Plan of the second construction period (after V. NEŠEVA, *Melnik pri car Samuil...*, p. 621, fig. 6).

Some changes were probably made to the eastern part of the naos – the construction of the dividing walls between the bema and the parabemas, and of the triumphal arch connecting them¹⁹. Such an arch is characteristic of early Byzantine basilicas, but can also be found in the Middle Ages. The closest analogy in this respect is the Metropolitan Church of St. Theodore Stratilat and St. Theodore Tiron in Serres and some other monuments in present-day Greece and northern Macedonia. During this construction period, the niches in the side walls of the prothesis and the diaconikon were formed. During the period of the First Bulgarian Tsardom, such niches were considered a Western influence in religious construction. The niches, as well as the quarter-spherical vault of the central apse, connect the Melnik basilica with the Pliska and some Preslav basilicas. V. Nesheva suggests that the ruined

¹⁹ One of the options for the reconstruction of the early Byzantine church assumes the construction of the dividing walls between the bema and the parabemas already in the early Byzantine period – cf. ЕАДЕМ, *Мелник...*, p. 101, обр. 106/5.

early Byzantine synthronon (of stone and brick) was rebuilt. In the church a fragment of Old Bulgarian ceramics was found dating back to the 9th–10th centuries and a fragment found among ceramics from the 13th–14th centuries in the basement of the residential (metropolitan) building. Such fragments were found to the northeast outside the basilica, where there are associated buildings with walls of wattle-and-daub plastered with clay, and in greater quantity to the south of it, where residential and farm buildings associated with the service of the church and the garrison fortress were excavated²⁰.

This period is backed with arguments by A. Prepis, who carried out a detailed architectural analysis of the church. However, he considers it the first, referring it to the second half of the 10th – the first half of the 11th century. Neli Chaneva-Dechevska supports the dating of the church by A. Prepis in the period of the First Bulgarian Tsardom. Both authors point out as a characteristic for that time the vaulted pre-altar space with the dividing walls with arched entrances in them, connected with their T-shaped western ends by a triumphal arch²¹. This characteristic is also pointed out by Krastyu Miyatev, although he does not refer the church to the period of the First Bulgarian Tsardom²².

In the earlier studies the construction of the church “St. Nicholas” is referred by most historians, archaeologists, art historians and architects to the late 12th – early 13th century. N. Mavrodinov dates the church in this period, based on its architectural type and especially the style of the frescoes. According to Mavrodinov, the church belongs to the eastern type of basilicas and refers to the Macedonian group – Serres, Arta, Kostur, and Ohrid²³. The church was dated in the late 12th – early 13th century also by Kr. Miyatev, S. Georgieva, D. Panayotova, B. Tsvetkov. According to T. Vlachos the monument was built within the period 1246–1342²⁴.

²⁰ Н. ЧАНЕВА-ДЕЧЕВСКА, *Църковната архитектура в България през XI–XIV век*, София 1988, р. 14; В. НЕШЕВА, *Мелник при цар Самуил в края на X – началото на XI век (по археологически данни)*, [in:] *Византия – Балканите – Европа. Изследвания в чест на проф. Василка Тъпкова-Заимова*, ed. В. ТЪПКОВА-ЗАИМОВА, В. ГЮЗЕЛЕВ, А. ГАРАБЕДЖАН, София 2006 (= SB 25), р. 613; В. НЕШЕВА, *Мелник...*, р. 186, 325–326.

²¹ А. ПРЕПИС, *Към проблема за датировката на средновековната катедрала “Св. Никола” в крепостта на Мелник*, [in:] *Първи международен конгрес по българистика*, София, 23 май – 3 юни 1981, Доклади, vol. I, *Българската култура и взаимодействието ѝ със световната култура. Културата на средновековна България*, ed. П. ЗАРЕВ, София 1983, р. 176–193; Н. ЧАНЕВА-ДЕЧЕВСКА, *Църковната архитектура на Първата...*, р. 55–58; В. НЕШЕВА, *Мелник...*, р. 186–187.

²² Кр. МИЯТЕВ, *Архитектурата...*, р. 146.

²³ N. Mavrodinov distinguishes two periods in the construction of the monument. To the first period he refers the church itself without the narthex and the side galleries, and to the second – the remaining buildings and the changes made to the original building. – Н. МАВРОДИНОВ, *Църкви и манастири...*, р. 292–297.

²⁴ Кр. МИЯТЕВ, *Архитектурата...*, р. 146; Д. ПАНАЙОТОВА, *Архитектура*, [in:] *История на българското изобразително изкуство*, vol. I, София 1976, р. 179; Th. VLACHOS, *Die Geschichte...*

The Metropolitan Church “St. Theodore Stratilat and St. Theodore Tiron” in Serres, which also originally existed as an early Byzantine basilica, can be pointed as the closest analogy to the Basilica of St. Nicholas in Melnik. The decorative element “wolf’s tooth” is found in both churches. In the Serres church, the prothesis and the deaconry are also formed as separate spaces, but they do not end in apses. This church also had a narthex on the west side, unlike the Melnik church, which had a narthex on the south side. As an analogy, as far as the triple window of the apse is concerned, one can point to the early medieval churches of St. Achilles in Prespa, Our Lady of Vlaherna in Arta and St. Ivan in Nessebar²⁵.

The Church “St. Nicholas” in Melnik has in general the main characteristics that apply to the other basilicas in the Bulgarian lands during this period. First of all, it is the three-nave plan and the complex three-piece altar, ending in the east with three apses. The roof of the basilica is mixed – the pre-altar space is vaulted and the rest is covered with a common double-pitched wooden roof. A part of the exterior decoration is represented by a cornice composed of two rows of brick dentils, above which a second cornice, also of dentils, follows in indentation – on the middle apse of the church. A distinctive feature of the Melnik basilica is the absence of a narthex on the west and the presence of an atrium on the south side. This can be explained by the presence of a baptisterium on the west side, which is not structurally connected to the temple, but to a reservoir.

The status of St. Nicholas church in Melnik during the period of the First Bulgarian Tsardom (the end of 9th–10th c.) is not fully clear yet. It should be noted that during this period the name of the settlement does not appear in any of the known episcopal lists. Originally, it was assumed that the settlement was the centre of a parish, and the church of St. Nicholas was the parish church. No other churches on the territory of Melnik from this time have been found so far. In her most recent research V. Nesheva concludes that the church was rebuilt at the end of the 9th century, probably as one of the seven cathedral churches of Knyaz Boris I (852–889) known from written sources, reported by Theophylact of Ohrid. As an argument in support of this she points to its important location at the end of the 9th century – on the border of Bulgaria with Byzantium. The baptistery was probably used both for the conversion of new-borns and for the still unchristianized Slavs in the area²⁶.

р. 61–68; Б. ЦВЕТКОВ, *Селищната мрежа в долината на Средна Струма през Средновековието IX–XVII век (по археологически данни)*, София 2002, р. 53–54.

²⁵ Cf. Н. МАВРОДИНОВ, *Църкви и манастири...*, р. 292–297; А. ПРЕПИС, *Към проблема за...*, р. 176–193; Н. ЧАНЕВА-ДЕЧЕВСКА, *Църковната архитектура на Първата...*, р. 55–58; ЕАДЕМ, *Църковната архитектура в България...*, р. 14; В. НЕШЕВА, *Мелник...*, р. 187–188.

²⁶ В. НЕШЕВА, *Духовният живот в Мелник през XIII–XIV в.*, [in:] *Втори международен конгрес по българистика, София, 23 май – 3 юни 1986*, vol. VI, *Доклади, Българските земи в древността, България през средновековието*, София 1987, р. 503–504; ЕАДЕМ, *Коментар към статията на Ж. Въжарова “Мелник в изследванията на руските археолози през XIX в.”*, [in:] *Мелник,*

According to Theophylact of Ohrid, Knyaz Boris *girdled his entire subject Bulgaria with seven cathedral churches*. One of these churches is considered by many authors to be the famous basilica on the island of St. Achilles on the Prespa Lake, built immediately after the conversion in 865 by Knyaz Boris I. Presumably, the number 7 is biblical, so the reference to it may be metaphorical, pointing to the strong religious devotion of the knyaz. According to B. Nikolova, if one proceeds from the rule of the church to find correspondence with the administrative division of the territory over which it receives rights, it should be expected that Bulgaria under Boris (at least after the conversion) had 10 episcopal centres corresponding to the 10 counties²⁷. In fact, at this stage, there is insufficient evidence (mostly written) to testify to the existence of Melnik during this period as an episcopal settlement.

Among the considerable number of churches in the suburbs of Melnik that have been studied so far, there is not a single one that dates back to the 9th–11th centuries²⁸. Probably the basilica “St. Nicholas” in the fortress was sufficient for the religious needs of the population in the area during this period. The same can be assumed for the period of Byzantine rule.

Single-nave churches

The single-nave churches are also compositionally organized around the horizontally placed longitudinal axis of the building. They are usually composed of a naos which ends in an apse on the east and a narthex on the west. Sometimes the narthex is missing. In terms of layout and structure, single-nave churches are simple build-

vol. II, ed. M. СТАНЧЕВА, Ст. БОЯДЖИЕВ, В. НЕШЕВА, София 1994, p. 123; ЕАДЕМ, *За култа на Свети Никола...*, p. 172–173; ЕАДЕМ, *Мелник при цар Самуил...*, p. 613–614; ЕАДЕМ, *Мелник...*, p. 188; ЕАДЕМ, *Мелник. Богозиданият град...*, p. 25. According to V. Nesheva, the restoration of the church in the late 9th century was connected with Clement's mission in these lands and was under the jurisdiction of the Clement's bishopric of Velika established by Tsar Simeon in 893. For the time of Samuil it supposedly entered the structure of the Bulgarian Patriarchate centered on Prespa and then Ohrid (probably subordinate to the nearest Metropolitanate of Strumica). V. Nesheva does not exclude the possibility that, given that Melnik emerges as a significant ecclesiastical centre – the centre of religious life in Eastern Macedonia; it was set apart as an independent diocese, which is noted in the missing parts of the inscriptions of the Patriarchal Church of St. Achilles in Prespa. – ЕАДЕМ, *Мелник при цар Самуил...*, p. 614; ЕАДЕМ, *Мелник...*, p. 188, 326.

²⁷ ТЕОФИЛАКТ, *Климент Охридски*, XXIII, 67, trans. et ed. Ал. МИЛЕВ, София 1955; В. ИВАНОВА, *Стари църкви и манастири в българските земи (IV–XII в.)*, ГНМ 4, (1922–1925) 1926, p. 552; Кр. МИЯТЕВ, *Архитектурата...*, p. 77; А. МИЛЕВ, *Гръцките жития на Климент Охридски*, София 1966, p. 133–135, бел. 155; С. МИХАЙЛОВ, *За седемте съборни храма на княз Борис*, Архе 2, 1992, p. 38–41; В. ГЮЗЕЛЕВ, *Апология на Средновековието*, София 2004, p. 42; Н. МУЦОПУЛОС, *Базиликата “Св. Ахилий” в Преспа. Един исторически паметник*, Пловдив 2007; Б. НИКОЛОВА, *Устройство и управление на Българската православна църква...*, p. 157–158; Б. ФИЛОВ, *Старобългарското изкуство*, София 2019, p. 28.

²⁸ Cf. В. НЕШЕВА, *Мелник...*, p. 281.

ings. They are covered with a cylindrical vault or have a wooden covering. The building material of which they are constructed consists mainly of crushed stone, with a mortar of mud. There were single-nave churches in Bulgarian lands as early as the early Christian period and they continued to spread throughout the Middle Ages. Observations on Bulgarian lands during the First Bulgarian Tsardom show that single-nave churches were found all over the country, but mainly in poorer settlements, fortresses, monasteries and necropolises. A number of chapels and baptisteries attached to larger churches also have a single-nave plan²⁹.

From the period of the First Bulgarian Tsardom single-nave churches have been found in Pliska, Madara, Preslav, Kostur, etc.³⁰ A representative of this type of church in the region studied is **the church in the area of Shipotsko on the territory belonging to the town of Bansko**³¹, in the valley of Upper Mesta river. The terrain on which the church is built is a terrace, intensively sloping from west to east, with an altitude of almost 1000 m. At first, a Thracian settlement was built on the terrace, which developed to the south of the excavated cult buildings. It is believed that an early Christian church was built by the middle of the 4th century. The construction is of untreated natural stone, and fine-grained granite and marble without mortar were also used. Yellow clay was used as a solder. The building was covered with locally made teguli and had glass, ornate windows (fragments found). The early Christian church has a strongly elongated naos with an apse on the east. Its dimensions are: 19 x 4.40 m. On the north side, structurally connected to the naos, is a chapel (8.80 x 5 m). The thickness of the walls is 0.80–0.90 m. At the end of the 6th century the church was burnt down, and the fire is associated with Slavic raids along the river of Mesta. It is assumed that the local Christian converts were incorporated into the bishopric of Nicopolis ad Nestum³².

In the period from the end of the 6th to the end of the 10th century a medieval village was founded and existed on this site. The building material from the early Christian church was used for the construction of the houses. At the end of the

²⁹ Н. ЧАНЕВА-ДЕЧЕВСКА, *Църковната архитектура на Първата...*, р. 66–67. It should be noted that there are different opinions in the scientific literature about the planning and design scheme of these churches. For example, N. Mavrodinov distinguishes four variants of the single-nave churches, which he studies in a wide chronological range. To this group he also refers the cross-domed churches – cf. Н. МАВРОДИНОВ, *Еднокорабната и кръстовидната църква по българските земи до края на XIV в.*, София 1931, р. 4–5.

³⁰ Н. ЧАНЕВА-ДЕЧЕВСКА, *Църковната архитектура на Първата...*, р. 67–68.

³¹ Regular archaeological excavations took place between 1991 and 1997 (with a break in 1995) under the direction of K. Melamed and A. Melamed. In 2008, excavations were resumed to clarify details and prepare the site for exhibiting. – А. МЕЛАМЕД, *Проучвания на раннохристиянската базилика и средновековна църква в местността “Шипотско”, община Банско (1992–1993)*, АОР през 1992–1993 г., 1994, р. 118; ИДЕМ, *Проучвания на средновековната църква и некропол и базилика в м. Шипотско край гр. Банско*, АОР през 1994 г., 1995, р. 152; К. МЕЛАМЕД, *Раннохристиянска базилика...*, р. 701–704.

³² К. МЕЛАМЕД, *Раннохристиянска базилика...*, р. 701–702.

10th century the village was abandoned. A small church was built on top of the altar part of the early Christian church (figs. 5–6). The same rough stones were used, but already with mortar mixed with crushed brick. The great elevation of the site was overcome by steps leading up to the naos. In terms of layout, the church is single-nave, single-apse, with a well-shaped entrance from the west, without a narthex. Its dimensions are 5.60 x 2.90 m, with walls 0.70 m thick. Surrounding the church is a large necropolis, from which 150 graves have been excavated, dating between the late 10th and 13th centuries. The graves are located on the ruins of the buildings. The explored part of the necropolis was intensively used in the 11th and 12th centuries, as evidenced by the discovery of jewellery (bronze bracelets) and coins typical of that time. The burial pits are partially enclosed with stones, which is typical for this area³³. The burials were carried out according to Christian rites, with heads oriented westward and hands folded on the chest or abdomen. An abundance of charcoal is witnessed around the head or pelvis. Bronze buttons, belt buckles, earrings, rings, bracelets, iron knives, and iron nails have been found in graves. The custom of “Charon’s obol” is encountered. The presence of a large necropolis gives reason to suppose that the church was a cemetery one. Its existence is associated with the necropolis (the late 10th–13th c.)³⁴.

Characteristic of the medieval church in m. Shipotsko at the town of Bansko is that it was also built on an early Byzantine church. These examples show that, as in the rest of Bulgaria, medieval temples were built on other cult sites constructed during the early Christian period, and in the case of the basilica of St. Nicholas in Melnik – as early as Antiquity. In the area of Shipotsko at the town of Bansko the holy place is preserved in another way – the construction of a large necropolis around the newly built in the Middle Ages small church on the ruins of the early Christian temple.

The single-nave church in the area of Shipotsko at the town of Bansko has small dimensions. In terms of planning, it is characterized by the lack of a narthex. The roof was most probably wooden gabled. As already noted, this type of church is found mainly in poorer settlements, in fortresses, in monasteries and in necropolises. In this case, it is a cemetery church serving the large necropolis around it.

³³ M. GEORGIEVA, *Burial Pits Lined with Stone Slabs along the Valley of the River of Mesta in the Roman Age*, [in:] *First international Symposium Ancient Cultures in South-East Europe and the Eastern Mediterranean. Megalithic Monuments and Cult Practices*, ed. V. MARKOV, J. GOŠEV, K. POROŽANOV, A. GOSEV, P. MAGLOVA, Blagoevgrad 2012, p. 138–152.

³⁴ К. МЕЛАМЕД, *Раннохристиянска базилика...*, p. 702–703; З. КОРКУТОВА, *Еднокорабни църкви с двускатно покритие от Югозападна България XII–XIV век (по археологически данни)*, София 2013, p. 167. The church was originally dated to the Second Bulgarian Tsardom. – А. МЕЛАМЕД, *Проучвания на раннохристиянската...*, p. 118. Archaeological observations in the area of the town of Bansko found earlier buildings in the foundations of restored old chapels, which are dated in two periods – the end of the 4th – the beginning of the 5th century and the end of the 9th – the beginning of the 10th century. – В. БАЯКОВ, *Свети места около Банско*, [in:] *170 години храм “Света Троица” в гр. Банско*, ed. Л. СТЕФАНОВ, Банско 2005, p. 3.

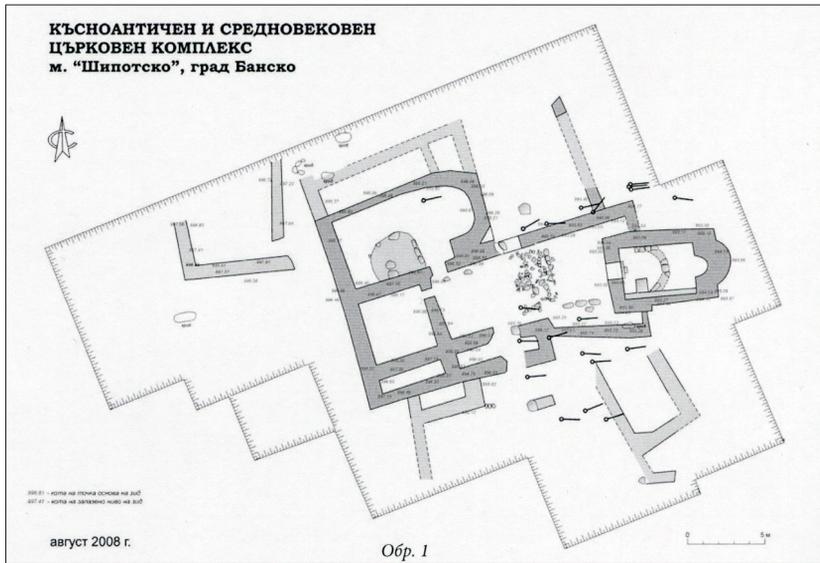


Fig. 5. The single-nave church in the area of Shipotsko near the town of Bansko – general plan (after K. MELAMED, *Rannohristijanska bazilika...*, p. 702, fig. 1).



Fig. 6. The single-nave church in the area of Shipotsko near the town of Bansko during the archaeological excavations (after K. MELAMED, *Rannohristijanska bazilika...*, p. 703, fig. 2).

Given the mention of Razlog in a charter of Basil II from 1019³⁵ – as one of the settlements dependent on the Bishop of Velbazhd, it can be assumed that the area of Upper Mesta was under the ecclesiastical authority of the Bishop of Velbazhd and was part of his diocese during this period.

Cross-domed and three-conchal churches

It has been established that centric dome churches replaced the basilica and became the dominant and official church type in the new capital of Veliki Preslav at the end of the 9th–10th c. During the reign of Simeon (893–927), Bulgarian church construction caught up with the leading centres of Byzantine architecture and followed the architectural types of the Byzantine capital. The cross-domed church, which was the official form of the Byzantine church³⁶, became the most widely used type of religious building in Bulgarian lands. It can be said that the centric type of churches occupied in Preslav such a place as the basilicas in the first Bulgarian capital of Pliska. The period of the construction of the domed churches coincides in the early medieval Bulgarian state with its greatest social, economic and cultural upsurge. In terms of construction and interior spatial design, the new type was much more sophisticated than the basilica. This temple is no longer intended to gather more people, but to show the hierarchy among worshippers. Moreover, as an architectural type, the centric church is suitable for a palace temple, as well as for a monastery church, even for a chapel and a small tomb temple. During the First Bulgarian Tsardom, cult buildings of the centric type received their widest expression in the development of the cross-domed temple. This type is most common in Veliki Preslav. The churches are characterized by a great variety in terms of their planning and façade design. The Preslav cross-domed churches are divided into several groups: the “Tsarigrad variant” (churches with four free supports and with a separate pre-apse space); the “provincial variant” (churches with two free supports without a separate pre-apse space); churches of small size of the “inscribed-cross” type³⁷. In addition to the capital Veliki Preslav, cross-domed churches were gradually built in other places in Bulgaria. In the region

³⁵ FGHB, vol. VI, София 1965, p. 42; Й. ИВАНОВ, *Български старини из Македония. Фототипно издание*, София 1970, p. 550–555; И. СНЕГАРОВ, *История на Охридската архиепископия*, vol. I, *От основаването ѝ до завладяването на Балканския полуостров от турците*, ²София 1995, p. 56.

³⁶ The development of this type of church in Byzantine architecture, cf. G. MILLET, *L'école grecque dans l'architecture byzantine*, Paris 1916, p. 55–92; R. KRAUTHHEIMER, *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture*, New Haven–London 1986; A.K. ORLANDOS, *Byzantine Architecture*, Athens 1998, p. 17–22.

³⁷ Cf. Н. МАВРОДИНОВ, *Еднокорабната и кръстовидната църква...*, p. 59–61; ИДЕМ, *Византийската...*, p. 59–64; Н. ЧАНЕВА-ДЕЧЕВСКА, *Основни направления...*, p. 59, 61–62; ЕАДЕМ, *Църковната архитектура на Първата...*, p. 69–70, 77–126; Н. ТУЛЕШКОВ, *Архитектура на българските...*, p. 46; С. ДОНЧЕВА, *Кръстокуполните църкви...*, p. 21–22.

studied – the river valleys of the Middle Struma and the Upper and Middle Mesta – no cross-domed church building (of the listed hereinabove) of the period of the First Bulgarian Tsardom has been found so far.

The three-conchal churches are the other main centric type, which was formed during the period of the First Bulgarian State. Apart from the semicircle of the apse on the east, they have a conch on the north and south. Their architectural type is functionally most suitable for monastic service and singing, which is why they are known as “monastery-type churches”. In the side conchas, where the left and right choirs (the kliros) stand during the service, good acoustics are created for the singers, which is why they are also called “pevniks” or “kliros”. It is believed to be a local type of monastery church, established as early as the 9th century, in the southwestern parts of the Balkan Peninsula, which later spread throughout the peninsula and became the conceptual basis for the formation of the Athonite type of catholicon. In addition to the monastic type, however, the three-conchal type is also associated with cemetery churches³⁸.

It should be noted that in Christian architecture, buildings with a conchal plan were borrowed from Roman civil architecture and appeared as early as Late Antiquity. They became widespread in various periods and territories, including the Balkan Peninsula. In the early Christian period they mainly served as baptisteries, martyriums and funerary chapels, as part of larger complexes or as stand-alone buildings. Conchises also appear as an element in rectangular church buildings, including transept basilicas³⁹.

³⁸ For these churches cf. М. ГЕОРГИЕВА, *Триконхални църкви от Югозападна България (по археологически данни)*, [in:] *Късносредновековните Балкани. Сборник в чест на доц. д-р Снежана Ракова*, ed. Е. АЗМАНОВА-РУДАРСКА, К. ЙОРДАНОВ, София 2022, p. 247 and the literature cited therein.

³⁹ Cf. А. ДЕРОКО, *Монументална и декоративна архитектура у средновековној Србији*, Београд 1953, p. 49; Кр. МИЯТЕВ, *Архитектурата...*, p. 103; А. ГРАВАР, *Martyrium. Recherches sur le culte de reliques et l'art chrétien antique*, London 1972, p. 102–112; R. КРАУТНЕЙМЕР, *Early Christian...*, p. 62, 267; Н. ТУЛЕШКОВ, *Архитектура на средновековния...*, p. 31–35; Н. ЧАНЕВА-ДЕЧЕВСКА, *Раннохристиянската архитектура...*, p. 46–49, 91; P. VEŽIĆ, *Dalmatinski trikonhosi*, AAd 1, 2011, p. 30–44; П. КУЗМАН, *Археолошки сведоштва за дејноста на Свети Климент Охридски во Охридскиот регион*, Slov 2, 2016, p. 173; S. ČURČIĆ, *Architecture in the Balkans. From Diocletian to Süleyman the Magnificent*, New Haven–London 2010, p. 153–155, 157–159, 238–243, 322–325; А. ТАНТЗИС, *The So-called “Athonite” Type of Church and Two Shrines of the Theotokos in Constantinople*, Зог 34, 2010, p. 3–11; Е. ИВАНОВ, *Християнска археология и изкуство*, vol. I, *Раннохристиянско и средновековно изкуство от Албания*, София 2013, p. 34–35; L.G. КИРУШКОВА, *The Bishop’s Basilica (Uvarov’s) of Chersonesos in the Crimea. The Modern View after a Century and a Half of Study*, ABu 21.2, 2017, p. 27–78; С.В. МАЛЬЦЕВА, *Триконхи в архитектурите Балкан IV–XII веков*, ВПСТГУ.ВИТХИ 32, 2018, p. 34–58. According to A. Jacobson, the three-conchal plan in church buildings originated in Armenian architecture by adding a conch to the longitudinal nave of the domed basilica (А.Л. ЯКОБСОН, *Очерк истории зодчества Армении V–XVII веков*, Москва 1950, p. 48). The origin of this type is to be sought in Armenia, and according to J. Strzygowski. He also sees the influence of Armenian and Georgian

The authority of St. Clement of Ohrid is stated as a reason for the proliferation of the three-conchal churches in Western Macedonia in the Middle Ages. It is known from Theophylact's life that he built two churches in Ohrid at the end of the 9th century, which were smaller than the cathedral church but more beautiful than it with their oval and rounded shape. One of them, dedicated to "St. Panteleimon", was discovered and excavated under the Imaret Mosque and appears to have a three-conchal layout plan. It probably served as a model for the church of St. Archangels in "St. Naum" Monastery on the southern shore of Ohrid Lake, built in the early 10th century. From the end of the 9th – beginning of the 10th century other three-conchal churches are known in the area. In the 10th century, the western regions of the Balkans became part of the First Bulgarian Tsardom, which explains the common trends in church construction. Byzantine influence in general was also a unifying factor in the cultural development of these territories⁴⁰. There are other monuments of this type on the territory of present day North Macedonia. Such churches were also built in Greece, Serbia and Romania⁴¹.

architecture in the formation of the Athonite monastic churches (J. STRZYGOWSKI, *Die Baukunst der Armenier und Europa*, Wien 1918, p. 766–770). Such an influence on the Athonite churches was also found by C. Mango (C. MANGO, *Architettura bizantina*, Milano 1978, p. 321). R. Krautheimer also sees eastern influence on lateral conchs (R. KRAUTHEIMER, *Early Christian...*, p. 374–375). Cf. S. МАМАЛОУКОС, *A Contribution to the Study of the "Athonite" Church Type of Byzantine Architecture*, Зор 35, 2011, p. 39–50.

⁴⁰ Cf. Д. КОЦО, *Климентовиот манастир "Св. Пантелејмон" и раскопката при "Имарет" во Охрид*, ГЗФФ.С 1, 1948, p. 129–182; ИДЕМ, *Проучавања и археолошки испитувања на црквата на манастирот "Св. Наум"*, ЗАМ.С 1957–1958, p. 56–80; Кр. МИЯТЕВ, *Архитектурата...*, p. 105, обр. 101–103; Dj. STRIČEVIĆ, *Églises triconques médiévales en Serbie et en Macédoine et la tradition de l'architecture paléobyzantine*, [in:] *Actes du XII^e Congrès international d'études byzantines Ochride 10–16 septembre 1961*, vol. I, Beograd 1963, p. 224–240; Д. КОЦО, *Триконхалните цркви во Климентовото време*, СП, 1050-godišnjina на Kliment Ohridski, Ohrid 1966, p. 91–100; ИДЕМ, *Нови податоци за историјата на Климентовиот манастир "Св. Пантелејмон" во Охрид*, ГЗФФ.С 19, 1967, p. 245–255; Н. ТУЛЕШКОВ, *Архитектура на българските...*, p. 47–48; R. KOSTOVA, *St. Kliment of Ohrid and his Monastery: Some More Archeology of the Written Evidence*, [in:] *Византия – Балканите – Европа...*, p. 593–605; И. ИЛИЕВ, *Св. Климент Охридски. Живот и дело*, Пловдив 2010, p. 224; Ц. ГРОЗДАНОВ, *Свети Наум Охридски*, Скопје 2015, p. 9–24; П. КУЗМАН, *Археолошки сведоштва...*, p. 136–178; С.В. МАЛЪЦЕВА, *Триконхи в архитектурата...*, p. 39–44. According to Nikola Mavrodinov the church "St. Panteleimon" in Ohrid is more of a five-conch church, as deep, almost circular "small apses" are carved into the eastern walls of the two semicircular conchas (Н. МАВРОДИНОВ, *Старобългарското...*, p. 175, обр. 183).

⁴¹ G. BALŞ, *L'influence du plan serbe sur le plan des églises roumaines*, [in:] *L'art byzantin chez les Slaves*, vol. I, *Les Balkans*, parts 2, Paris 1930, p. 277–294; Н. МАВРОДИНОВ, *Еднокорабната и крџстовидната црква...*, София 1931, p. 62–64; Д. БОШКОВИЌ, *Архитектура средњег века*, Београд 1957, p. 130–131; Dj. STRIČEVIĆ, *Églises triconques...*, p. 224–240; Н. МАВРОДИНОВ, *Старобългарското искусство XI–XIII век*, София 1966, p. 8–10; Н. ЧАНЕВА-ДЕЧЕВСКА, *По вџпроса за средновековните триконхални цркви от манастирски тип на Балканите*, МПК 1, 1971, p. 10–15; ЕАДЕМ, *Црковната архитектура на Първата...*, p. 162; Ђ. ЈАНКОВИЌ, *Српско поморје од 7. до 10. Столећа*, Београд 2007, p. 144–146; E. DIMITROVA, *The Church of the Holy Virgin*

Three-conchal cult buildings are also documented in a wide chronological range on the eastern Adriatic coast, in Dalmatia⁴².

With a few exceptions, the majority of the known three-conchal churches in Bulgaria are found in the western parts of the country. The origins and distribution of certain groups of them (as well as parallels of individual monuments) are sought in the penetration of various influences in the field of church construction – Moravian, Caucasian (Armenian and Georgian), and Athonite. The influence of the local architectural tradition is not to be underestimated either, as the individual constituent elements of the three-conchal churches are close to the local forms⁴³.

The three-conchal domed churches dating back to the period of the First Bulgarian Tsardom follow the architectural trend characteristic of the era Caucasian to create small buildings organized around their vertical axis. Their architecture is subordinated to the dome space, as in all centric buildings. The side conchas of the churches are high, and on the outside they usually have a semi-circular or triangular outline. The nave walls are usually plain, without niches. The altar is mostly single-spaced, with altar apses generally of the same size as the side conchas and of a semi-cylindrical shape. The naoses are covered with cylindrical vaults; no arches are used to reinforce the vault. The upper parts of the facades are finished with triangular frontons. Most often the churches have spacious narthexes on the west. Most of the churches are built of stone and have thick outer walls. Brick was used mainly for decorative purposes. Mixed masonry is rare. In their functional characteristic (as noted), the three-conchal churches were mainly used as monastery temples, as they were best suited for the monastic service and singing. In addition to monastic, however, the three-conchal type is also found in cemetery churches⁴⁴.

Eleoussa at Veljusa. The Most Significant Values of the Cultural and Natural Heritage, Skopje 2016, p. 11; N. STANKOVIĆ, *An Unusual Triconchal Church in the Vicinity of Svrlijig ("Manastirište Svete Petke Rusalne")*: Original Form, Architectural Analogies, and Potential Date of Construction, [in:] *Niš i Vizantija: Sedamnaesti međunarodni naučni skup, Niš, 3–5 jun 2018. Zbornik radova*, vol. XVII, ed. M. RAKOCIJA, Ниш 2019, p. 215–243.

⁴² P. VEŽIĆ, *Dalmatinski...*, p. 27–66. The author traces the development of these cult buildings from Late Antiquity to the Romanesque period (12th century), distinguishing five groups based on their form, function and time of origin. The first three proliferated during the Early Christian period; the fourth group is represented by “pre-Romanesque polyconchos”, mainly centric but also longitudinal buildings (8th–10th century); the fifth, “Romanesque trefoils” (12th century). However, the three-conchal churches typical of the territory of Greece, Bulgaria and Serbia in the Middle Ages are not recorded here.

⁴³ Cf. M. ГЕОРГИЕВА, *Триконхални църкви...*, p. 248–250 and the literature cited therein.

⁴⁴ H. ЧАНЕВА-ДЕЧЕВСКА, *Триконхалните църкви от IX–XIV в. по българските земи*, Архе 4, 1970, p. 8–21; ЕАДЕМ, *Църковната архитектура на Първата...*, p. 160–161.

The three-conchal temples in the region under consideration during the period of the First Bulgarian Tsardom are represented by **the church at the village of Kulata, Blagoevgrad region**⁴⁵, in the valley of the Middle Struma river. Probably the temple is named “St. Athanasius”, judging by one of the names of the area. In the past, the place was perceived as a cult place by the local population, known as “church” and “old monastery”. An early Byzantine and later Slavic settlement existed in this area. The church is the only one in Bulgaria – a three-conchal domed church with an inscribed cross built into a rectangular enclosure (fig. 7). The special feature here is that the side conchas remain within the thickness of the walls and do not appear on the facades. The arms of the inscribed cross are terminated to the east and west by deep semi-cylindrical arches and to the north and south by conchas⁴⁶. According to the discoverer of the monument prof. Atanas Milchev, three-conchal church at the village of Kulata was built on the basis of the cross-domed church. According to N. Chaneva-Dechevska in its plan scheme and construction this church represents a transition between the group of the single-nave and the four-pillar church⁴⁷.

Despite the legends about an old monastery, no traces of buildings have been preserved due to the specificity of the terrain – a slope from north to south, which makes the covering of the ruins with alluvial soil quite likely. Around and within the outline of the church, at various depths, graves have been uncovered, mainly from the period of the 17th–19th centuries. The layout plan of the building is clearly delineated at a depth of 1.20–1.40 m from the present day terrain. The cultural layer breaks completely in the northern part of the church at a depth of 1.95 m and at 1.62 m in the southern part⁴⁸.

Nikolay Tuleshkov defines the church at the village of Kulata, region of Blagoevgrad, as a monastery church. He notes that in the monasteries appeared also multi-enthroned churches, in the planning scheme of which the ideas of the early Christian cult construction were no longer used, but the principles of the cross-dome type with rooms in the inter-arm spaces. As the earliest example, he points to the church at village of Kulata, built according to him between the 10th and 11th centuries⁴⁹.

⁴⁵ The church was discovered under accidental circumstances, when the construction for a new school in the village began. Archaeological excavations were carried out in 1958. – Ат. Милчев, *Археологически разкопки и проучвания в долината на Средна Струма. Открита кръстовидно-куполна триконхална църква в околностите на с. Кулата*, ГСУ.ФИФ 53 (1959), 1960, р. 402.

⁴⁶ М. Георгиева, Д. Георгиева, *Манастири от...*, р. 37–38.

⁴⁷ Ат. Милчев, *Археологически разкопки...*, р. 447; Н. Чанева-Дечевска, *Църковната архитектура на Първата...*, р. 152–153, фиг. 103.

⁴⁸ Ат. Милчев, *Археологически разкопки...*, р. 404, обр. 21а.

⁴⁹ Н. Тулешков, *Архитектура на българските...*, р. 63; ИДЕМ, *Архитектура на средновековния...*, р. 88.

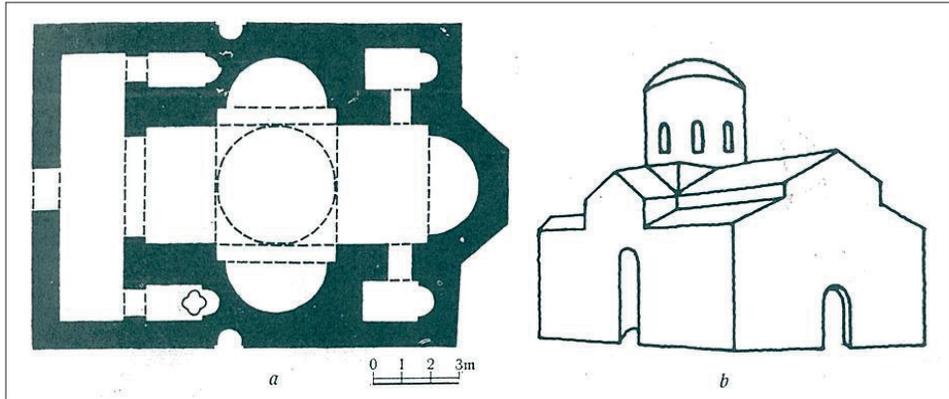


Fig. 7. The three-conchal church in the village of Kulata – plan and reconstruction (after N. ČANEVA-DEČEVSKA, *Čarkovnata arhitektura na Pärvata...*, p. 153, fig. p. 103a, b).

From the outside the church is a rectangle 16.55 m long with the apse and 11.40 m wide. It is orientated with a slight deviation to the south-east, which makes it possible to establish that the construction of the building was started in the late autumn. The outer outline of the church in the eastern part ends with a deep three-walled apse (3.60 m diameter, 1.95 m deep). The preapse shape forms a rectangle (4.20 x 3.25 m), which is in direct relation to two symmetrical rooms on the north and south, which serve as the prothesis and diaconikon (2.10 x 1.57 m). The inner space forms a square in its centre with 4.20 m sides, the cover of which is probably a dome with a cylindrical tambour, which transfers its weight to the vaults on the east and west and the front arches of the conchas on the north and south by means of pendentives. The covering of the pre-apse space flanking the east side of the cross, and its opposite arm on the west, was probably accomplished by semi-cylindrical vaults⁵⁰.

The church has a narthex on its west side, shaped as a rectangle (9.50 x 2.35 m), the roof of which is also vaulted. Apart from the naos, the narthex has an immediate connection the two symmetrical rooms on the north and south, which are similar in shape and size to the prothesis and deaconry. Particularly striking is the south room with apse (2 x 1.35 m), which contains a four-sided baptismal font (piscina) oriented along the cardinal directions. The font had an initial depth of 1.32 m. Its size and depth make it possible to believe that it was used for baptisms of the elderly, and the room itself is a baptistery of the church. The baptistery and the four-leaved font appear to be an integral part of the general plan of the church. Symmetrical to the baptistery on the north side of the church there is a rectangular room

⁵⁰ Ат. Милчев, *Археологически разкопки...*, p. 409, 411.

with an apse (2 m long, 1.35 m wide). Inside the room, at a depth of 1.10 m from the floor, a human skull (probably transported from elsewhere), and a clay bowl with an image of a griffin on the bottom and an iron cross were found. On the basis of the bowl, the burial has been dated to the 13th century, which gives the researcher reason to assume that until the 13th century, this room served as a chapel and then as a tomb. The entrance to the church (1.60 m wide) – from the west – is located along the axis of the building. Only the stone threshold, a large stone block made of coarse-grained marble, remains. The threshold is also a step through which one enters the narthex of the church. The thickness of the outer walls of the church ranges from 0.78 to 0.95 m, reaching up to 1.10 m at the conchas. Greater thickness characterises the arrays occupying the four corners of the square formed in the inner space, reaching up to 1.30 m in places, indicating their structural functions.

The church is built of well-shaped bigor stones, cemented with white mortar. At the south-west corner of the building, quadri of white limestone were used, which were used secondarily. Above the plinth the walls are constructed of well treated travertine stones with infill of small river stones, and bricks were partly used for alignment. The vaults are made exclusively of brick. Marble slabs of different sizes and shapes were used to cover the floor in different parts of the church. Presumably the floor of the narthex was covered with bricks. Basic mortar bedding was found in the narthex, naos, pre-apse and intra-apse spaces and also in the four side rooms. The purpose of the mortar bedding is to isolate moisture from the ground, which is also established for the churches in Preslav. In the south-east corner at the apse, fragments of water pipes were found, indicating the presence of residential quarters around the church. It is likely that they were also connected to the baptistery.

The north and south walls of the church are dissected on the outside by deep niches. It is in this part that the walls are the thinnest. The roof of the church is made of roof tiles. From the preserved fragments it is evident that they were made of fairly well refined clay with even firing, with a red ceramic colour. The preserved fragments are curved, semi-cylindrical in shape and resemble Roman imbrices. Similar roof tiles in form and technique are attested in early Byzantine construction, and also at Pliska, Preslav, Madara⁵¹.

The exterior walls of the church are not plastered, as the worked bigor stone gives it a smooth surface and good appearance. The interior of the church is covered with one or two layers of plaster. No traces of frescoes are attested on the first layer. The painting was done when the second layer was laid, on which fragments of frescoes were found. The plinth is monochrome with a predominant red-ceramic colour. Most of the fresco fragments are preserved in the inner apsidal and pre-apse space of the church. Based on the preserved frescoes, it is assumed that the frescoed belts were separated by two horizontal lines filled with

⁵¹ *Ibidem*, p. 411–416, 421–424.

rhombuses. The interior of the church above the plinth was probably painted with whole compositions, individual figures and floral motifs. Unfortunately, only individual fragments of these have survived. The extremely fragmentary nature of the frescoes found does not allow the church itself to be dated on the basis of them⁵².

Most of the finds found inside and outside the temple refer to the 12th, 13th, 14th centuries. The church was burnt down and probably destroyed towards the end of the 14th century. Cultural stratum shuffling was found mainly in the places where graves were found, the earliest of which belong to the 6th century and the latest to the 19th century.

In the graves excavated at different depths, inside and outside the church, burials were made according to the Christian rite, oriented east-west (with the head to the west). On the basis of the finds they have been dated by the researcher into three periods. The first period comprises graves (simple burial pits 1–1.10 m deep, referring to the 17th–19th centuries, when there are no more traces on the surface of the ruined church. They are characterized by a poor funerary inventory, consisting mainly of the personal belongings of the buried persons – rings, buttons, buckles. The ancient custom of “Charon’s obol” is encountered. The second period includes graves built, according to the researcher, around the 15th century. They were found inside and outside the church, at a depth of 1.56–1.65 m from the present day ground level. During the excavation of the pits in the embankment, the mortar floor of the church was destroyed in many places. Here the layout of the graves is more complex – after the pits were dug, they were lined by poorly shaped stone slabs (14 graves), but they contained no funerary goods, so their dating is uncertain. In four of the graves (identified as children’s graves), secondary bricks from the ruins of the church were used, indicating that the remains of the church are still visible on the site. The third group of graves (4 ordinary burial pits) were uncovered outside the church. Two of them (graves 2 and 3) contain funerary inventory that dates them to the 12th century. Grave No. 1 predates the construction of the church and is dated to the 5th–6th centuries, and grave No. 4 to the 8th–9th centuries⁵³.

The construction of the church at the village of Kulata is attributed by its explorer to the 10th century⁵⁴, as it existed during the First and Second Bulgarian Tsardoms, after which it was destroyed. Most probably the church was monastic when it was built. On the one hand, this is indicated by its plan-construction scheme (a three-conchal domed church), which is extremely characteristic of monastic temples. On the

⁵² *Ibidem*, p. 418–419.

⁵³ *Ibidem*, p. 424–425, 440–447.

⁵⁴ The construction of the church at the village of Kulata, Blagoevgrad region is referred by researchers in the broad chronological range from the 9th to the 12th century. – cf. Кр. Миятев, *Архитектурата...*, p. 196; Н. ЧАНЕВА-ДЕЧЕВСКА, *Църковната архитектура на Първата...*, p. 153; Н. ТУЛЕШКОВ, *Архитектура на българските...*, p. 63; Б. ЦВЕТКОВ, *Селищната мрежа...*, p. 81; В. ДИМОВА, *Църквите в България през XIII–IV век*, София 2008, p. 86.

other hand, one of the area names is “the monastery”. There is a belief among the local population that a monastery used to exist on this site, which was burnt down during the Ottoman rule⁵⁵. During the Ottoman rule, the site was turned into a necropolis, which can be judged by the documented graves inside and outside the church. However, it is unclear exactly when this occurred, due to the impossibility of accurately dating the graves without burial inventory. According to Metodi Zlatkov, in the second half of the 17th–18th centuries the road guard tower was built in the area, around which in the 18th century settlers settled and carried out their burials in the area of St. Athanasius. According to Zlatkov, these people settled around the tower to seek safety in the turbulent 18th century⁵⁶.

The church at the village of Kulata is original itself and does not quite find exact parallels. In spite of some constructive differences, it most closely resembles Church No. 1 in the area of Kale at the village of Krupishte (present-day North Macedonia) (fig. 8), dated in the 9th–10th centuries⁵⁷. On the north and south sides of this church conchas are also formed, inscribed in the rectangular body and in its inter-arm spaces two pairs of symmetrical rooms were found.

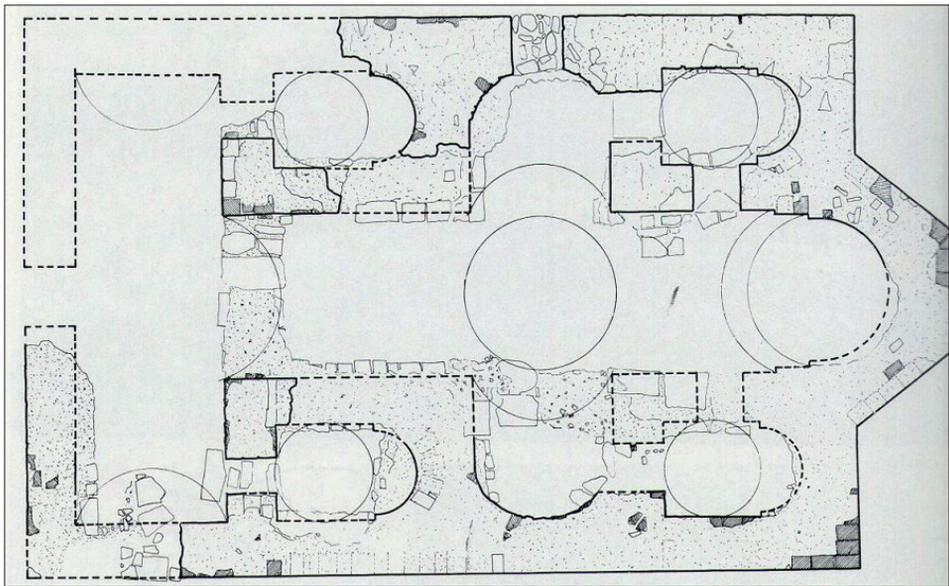


Fig. 8. Church No. 1 in the area of Kale near the village of Krupishte, in the present day North Macedonia – plan (after B. ALEKSOVA, *Episkopijata na...*, p. 274, fig. 98).

⁵⁵ М. ГЕОРГИЕВА, *Триконхални църкви...*, p. 252.

⁵⁶ М. ЗЛАТКОВ, *Селищната система на Мелнишко през XI–XVII. Автореферат на дисертационен труд за присъждане на образователна и научна степен “доктор”,* София 2021, p. 28–29.

⁵⁷ Around the church there is a necropolis from the same time. – Б. АЛЕКSOVA, *Епископията на Брегалница*, Прилеп 1989, p. 81–85, 274, обр. 98, 99, 313; И. МИКУЛЧИК, *Средновековни градови и тврдини во Македонија*, Скопје 1996, p. 346, сл. 172.

The closest parallels of the built-in three-conchal churches can be found on the territory of present-day North Macedonia, Greece and Serbia. Apart from the mentioned church in the area of Kale near the village of Krupishte, such churches are known in the area of Vineni near the Little Prespa Lake and also in the village of Zlesti and the village of Zglavenitsa near Ohrid. In Southern Greece, similar churches are in Aulis, Boeotia, and especially the church of St. Dimitri Varasovas near the village of Vasiliki opposite Patras⁵⁸. A representative of this group from the territory of Serbia is the church of St. Petka Rusalna near the town of Svrlijig in Eastern Serbia⁵⁹.

The three-conchal church at the village of Kulata was built in a period when the valley of the Middle Struma river was officially included in the borders of the Bulgarian state, making it an original monument of medieval Bulgarian culture.

The three-conchal churches from the territory of Southwestern Bulgaria (today's Blagoevgrad region) show a stable presence in the studied area throughout the entire period of the Middle Ages. This is quite natural considering that this area was part of the southwestern Bulgarian lands during the Middle Ages, where the first three-conchal churches were built. With the formation of the great cult centre of Mount Athos, the influence of its architecture especially on the late medieval temples could not be excluded. On the other hand, it should be noted that the so-called "Athonite" type of church (in which the central dome is supported by four columns) is not recorded here, but the simpler variants of the three-conchal temples⁶⁰.

Conclusion

Three monuments of the church architecture in the studied region belong to the period of the First Bulgarian Tsardom – "St. Nicholas" basilica in the town of Melnik, the single-nave church in the area of Shipotsko, at the town of Bansko and the three-conchal church at the village of Kulata. In terms of their functional characteristics, these churches include an episcopal (or parish) church, a cemetery church and a monastery church. Despite the impossibility at this stage to establish with certainty the status of the basilica "St. Nicholas" in Melnik, the church certainly occupied an extremely important place in the Middle Struma valley during

⁵⁸ Н. ЧАНЕВА-ДЕЧЕВСКА, *Триконхалните църкви...*, p. 14; ЕАДЕМ, *Църковната архитектура на Първата...*, p. 153–155.

⁵⁹ Н. СТАНКОВИЋ, *Остаци цркве необичне основе код Сврљига (Манастириште Свете Петке Русалне)*, ГСАД 35, 2019, p. 153–179; N. STANKOVIĆ, *An Unusual Triconchal Church...*, p. 215–243.

⁶⁰ There are various hypotheses related to the development of the "Athonite" type of churches, cf. A.K. ORLANDOS, *Byzantine...*, p. 22–24; P. ОУСТЕРХАУТ, *Византийские строители*, Киев–Москва 2005, p. 103–105; S. МАМАЛОУКОС, *A Contribution to the Study...*, p. 39–50; С.В. МАЛЫЦЕВА, *Триконхи в архитектуре...*, p. 44–51; N.N. PATRICIOS, *The Athonite Type of Byzantine Church*, JISA 42, 2022, p. 24–27; Н. ЧАНЕВА-ДЕЧЕВСКА, *Триконхалните църкви...*, p. 8–21.

the period of the First Bulgarian Tsardom. It is the oldest temple in the area during this period and is a typical example of the construction of church buildings on older cult sites, in this case on an ancient sanctuary and early Christian church.

The small single-nave church in the area of Shipotsko at town of Bansko, in the valley of Mesta river is also an example of the continuity in the absorption of the sacred cult practices. The medieval church was built on the ruins of an early Christian temple. Also in the Middle Ages a necropolis developed around it, which is also an indication of the absorption of sacred territory.

The church at the village of Kulata was most likely a monastery church. Despite the lack of architectural remains that would prove the existence of a monastery complex in a definite way, the existence of such a monastery in the valley of the Middle Struma certainly cannot be excluded. The spatial layout of the church, its monumentality and representativeness, and last but not least the preserved legends about the existence of a monastery on this site, point to this possibility.

Although the examples from the studied region are few, they show that almost all the main architectural types of church buildings, typical for the rest of the Bulgarian lands and the Balkan Peninsula during this period, are found here.

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