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A rediscovered Christian church near Varna (from the archive of Karel Škorpil in the Varna Museum of Archaeology) (Abstract)

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Recent research conducted in the archive of Karel Škorpil, now housed in Varna Archaeological Museum, led to an unexpected discovery: a Christian basilica located near Odessos (Varna), which was left unpublished and remained unknown even to specialists.

The church was excavated in the early 20th c. by Karel Škorpil, who intended to present the site in his volume "Christian Monuments in the Black Sea Country of the Balkan Peninsula", which was never published.

A detailed handmade map found in the archive shows the location of the site: very close to the

beach in the narrow triangle between two small rivers, Pasha Dere and Fatsarata, some 15 km to the south from the center of Varna. Škorpil identified the ruins with the old monastery of St. Elijah that was supposed to be somewhere in that area. In 1950, Goranka Toncheva, archaeologist from Varna Museum, excavated a second church not far to the west from Škorpil's basilica. Unaware of the earlier discovery that remained hidden in the archives, Toncheva called her newfound site "St. Elijah" too, thus causing certain confusion.

Škorpil's church is a three nave basilica with one apse (round from inside and polygonal, with

three sides, from outside), with a western narthex and a spacious hall added at a later time to the south façade. The total length of the building (east-west) was calculated to be approximately 26.40 m, with a total width of 22.50 m (15.80 m without the southern premise).

The width of the nave is 6.70 m, and that of the isles – 3 m. Colonnades (two rows of four columns and two pilasters at each end) separate the three parts. Only some fragments of marble and limestone details have survived from these structures.

The narthex occupies the whole width of the west façade, and its interior is 6 m long (east-west). The southern hall runs along the entire south façade of the building and the width inside is 6 m.

There is only one entrance in the middle of the west façade. It corresponds with an entrance along the main axis of the building that leads from the narthex to the nave. A fragment of the limestone sill with a hole for a door wing was preserved. Two more entrances lead from the narthex to the side isles. Another entrance was located on the north façade. Probably a symmetrical one existed on the south façade. There is no preserved information about how the access to the southern hall was organized.

The floor in the narthex and in the isles was covered with square bricks (0.30 x 0.32 m) laid in straight rows along the axis of the church. The

western part of the central nave was covered by larger square bricks (0.56 m) and stone slabs set in rows turned at 45° to the axis of the building. The eastern part of the central nave was occupied by the altar space but no remains were found neither of the flooring, nor of the altar screen or the holy table. Most probably, all these elements were made of marble and carried away after the destruction of the site.

The sanctuary covered the whole width of the nave (6.70 m) and protruded some 3.50 m from the east wall. The apse behind it had an inner diameter of 5.40 m and was furnished with a semi-circular synthron with two preserved steps. In the apse in front of the synthron, at one meter beneath the floor level, a square chamber was discovered (0.50 x 0.50 m). Škorpil interpreted it as a holy well but this was rather a crypt for relics. A structure of this kind could point to the place of the altar but we could expect also to have the holy table a little bit further to the west in the center of the sanctuary.

Škorpil mentions coins of Constantine I and of Arcadius and Honorius found in the surroundings of the site, but he did not attempt to specify the date of the church.

Based on the analysis of the architectural features of the church and the existing parallels, the basilica could be dated in the second half of the 5th c., and its use probably continued in the 6th c.

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