

The Royal Church of Veliki Preslav

Margarita Vaklinova, Irina Shtereva, Snezhana Goryanova,
Maria Manolova-Voynova, Petar Dimitrov*

The paper presents a preliminary report on the general results of the study of a partially excavated church. Its ruins are situated to the northeast of the main palace buildings, at the most representative spot in the center of the capital city.

The building is a basilica in plan, 47,5 m long and 21,10 m wide. The three naves end with oval apses, the central one protruding further east. There is one-room narthex to the west and an exonarthex, north-south oriented and consisting of almost quadrangular rooms; their superstructures were probably erected like towers in front of the facade. The proportion between the length and the width of the first building (not including the exonarthex, which was not part of the building during the first period of its existence) is 2:1. According to the present evidence the two construction periods are related also to stone slabbed streets leading to the northern entrance part of the Throne-palace to the west. The two streets were excavated at a different depth and were separated by a layer of 0,70 m thick soil.

Probably during the second construction period a stone enclosure wall was erected in front of the building. The wall has entrances from the large square east from the palaces and probably from the west, at the end of the street, connecting the antechamber of the Throne-room and the church.

The foundations of the walls are deep and cut through many layers (down to 1,90 m). The width at the plinths is 2.70-2.10 m and 2.30-1.40 m at the superstructure. The construction material - big limestone blocks - is perfectly processed. It is worth mentioning the nice masonry consisting of even layers and surfaces in *opus quadratum* technique. The layer of white mortar in between is almost invisible.

The plan of the building has some specific features: the side naves are much narrower than the central one, the proportion being 3:1; massive stylobates separate the naves with a construction of pillars which is most probably supportive; a narrow narthex that has entrances to the three naves and side entrances with propylaea (the southern

one is preserved). It is still unclear whether the central part of the exonarthex, which was built additionally, was shaped as an open portico leading to an entrance in the mid of the west wall.

The abundant decoration of the building interior is demonstrated by the fragmented decorative materials found in the debris - these are original pieces or reused materials taken from early Byzantine buildings. The floor cover is in amazingly good condition that allows a reconstruction of the pattern. The narthex and the side naves are covered with slabs of white marble. The central nave is divided into two zones with identical motifs of alternating bands of three-colored interlaced designs. They consist of marble elements arranged in *opus sectile* technique on a massive ground of pink mortar and marble slabs. The floor in the eastern part reveals the same motif but in a different rhythm on both sides of a *solea* covered with marble, which leads to the ruins of a fundament which probably belonged to a pulpit. The unearthed parts of a floor cover in *opus sectile* technique with elements shaping a circle as well as a round slab made of red stone - a center of such composition - give us reasons to believe that the floor of the building included the *omphalos* known from the Byzantine court ceremonial.

The building was erected on the ruins of an earlier one during the construction of the palace center to serve as its main church. It was probably constructed as early as the 9th century and reconstructed in the 10th century as indicated by some specific features of its 2nd construction period - the exonarthex was no longer used as part of the church while the narthex was used for burials. The building was not used after the 60's of the 11th century.

There are certain similarities in architecture and periodization with the smaller church known as „the Palace church“, situated to the south of the main buildings. The authors use data from written sources that could be related to the history of this building. So far it is the largest and the most representative early Mediaeval church building with high importance for the state and the royal court.