

St. Paraskevgi (St. Petka) Church in Melnik

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The remains of St. Paraskevgi (St. Petka) Church in Melnik, which functioned until the early 20th century, were excavated in 2004 in relation to its planned reconstruction. The financial support of the excavations was provided by Mr. Zhivko Litov. The church is situated at the eastern foothills of St. Nicolas plateau, near the Holly Virgin Spileotisa (from the Cave) monastery, on a small natural hill along the road from Melnik to Nevrokop, which connected the Struma and Mesta river valleys until quite recently. The church was mentioned in the late Medieval (1570) and National Revival period (18th and 19th century) written sources. It was probably part of a small urban St. Paraskevgi monastery under the jurisdiction of the Melnik bishop and at the same time a parish center of the developing trading mourtzou neighborhood, which according to the legend was named after the name of the Byzantine strategus Mourtzouphlos who was exiled in Melnik during the reign of the Comnenus.

The church has a rectangular plan (fig. 2) with a semicircular apse; the narthex opened to the west and was paved with pebbles; it lead to exterior staircases with four steps. The south wall of the church was also used as a support due to the terrain level. The altar area was well defined (fig. 2). Two niches, one of them related to the Proskomydia and the second one serving as a deaconicon, were made in the eastern and northern walls and flanked the conch. The communion table was in the center of the apse and part of its rectangular pillar is preserved. The floor of the chancel was higher than the floor of the rest of the nave; a screen wall, from which a row of stones was only preserved, was made to separate the chancel. There were seats supported by small masonry pillars inside the church, along the nave walls and in the narthex. The entrance faced the west; it had a solid stone threshold and there was a door made with two leaves and a granite arch above.

The nave was divided into three isles by three pairs of wooden columns resting on large stone slabs. The church floor was covered with tiles (the altar area) and three consecutive floor levels were recorded in the nave, the first covered with stone and marble slabs. The church walls were plastered with white mortar. No murals were found. The vault of the apse was made of Byzantine bricks. The church was covered by a gabled roof of wooden construction, with boarding and covered by tiles. The narthex had the same cover though a simpler one.

The church was made of ashlar and river stones. Some of them are unusually large, have nicely cut front and side parts and resemble quadrae. The stones were connected with mortar but mud was also used in some cases. Wooden beams inside and outside the construction were also used.

Four architectural periods were identified according to the architectural evidence and the archaeological finds. The church had a single nave during the first three ones. It is suggested that the first building was constructed in the 6th century AD during the reign of Justinian I (527-565). At that time it had a different name. The second architectural period dates to the first half of the 13th century; it is related to the worship of St. Paraskevgi (St. Petka) of Tarnovo, which spread out over the southwestern territories (Macedonia) of the Second Bulgarian Kingdom after the victory of Ivan Asen II over Theodore Comnenus in 1230. The third architectural period is dated to the 16th or 17th century when the church was reconstructed after suffering an earthquake. The fourth architectural period is dated to the National Revival period (18th and 19th centuries) when the church was transformed into a three-nave basilica with a wooden roof (pseudobasilica). The excavations of St. Paraskevgi church contribute to the research on Melnik church architecture.