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EARLY CHRISTIAN BASILICA AND MEDIEVAL CEMETERY NEAR BUKHOVO (SOFIA)

Inspired by old legends and dreams, in 1880 the local people from Bukhovo (a village located near Sofia, now within the city of Sofia) excavated the remains of an old church situated in the so-called Cukloto locality. They found many human bones in the soil and collected them in several carts. The new church known as “Jeremiah”, “Holy Mary”, “Holy Virgin” and later on as “St Mary Magdalene” was erected at the same place. A small convent was established there shortly after that.

Prof. Dimitar Marinov¹ and Prof. Petar Mutaфchiev² published articles about the church in academic and popular editions. The excavations carried out by Vera Ivanova-Mavrodinova in 1931 allowed to trace out the walls and to reveal the entire plan of a very large Christian basilica³. A geodesic plan of the entire monastery was made in the 1970s.

A new project for archaeological excavations of the monastery supported by the Culture Program of Sofia Municipality was launched in 2013. It was completed in 2016 by a conservation of the unearthed remains. The results of the archaeological excavations not only confirmed the observations made during the earlier campaigns but allowed to accumulate new information.

The structure is a single apse three-nave basilica (Figs. 1, 2) consisting of a *naos*, *narthex*, an *exonarthex* to the west and two quadrangular rooms on both sides of the *exonarthex* to the north and south. There is a quadrangular

¹ Д. Маринов, *Монастир „Св. Мария*, в. Народен страж, бр.2/1930.(publication in a newspaper)

² П. Мутафчиев, *До Директора ...*, Годишник на Народния археологически музей I (София 1920), 85-86. [Note: The Report is not entitled and is addressed to the Director of the National Archaeological Museum.]; П. Мутафчиев, *Изъ нашите старопланински манастири*, СББАН, истор.-фил. кл. 15 (XXVII), (София 1931).

³ В. Иванова, *Две раннохристиянски базилики*, Годишник на Народния музей, VI (за 1932-1934 г.), (София 1936), 295-314.; V. Ivanova, *La façade romaine d'une basilique paléochrétienne*, Atti V congresso internazionale di studi byzantine, (Rome 1940), 253-256.

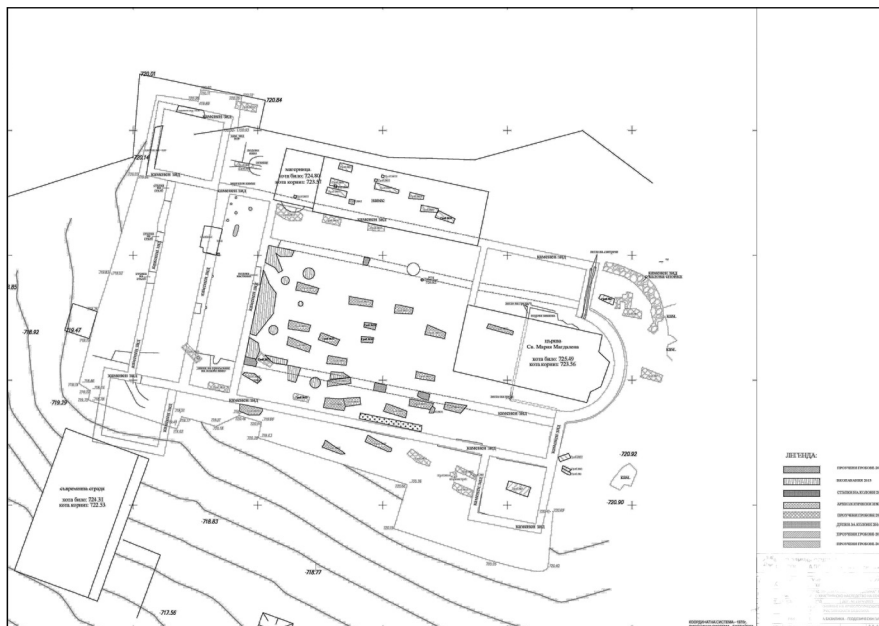


Fig. 1. The Early Christian basilica and mediaeval cemetery in St Mary Magdalene monastery at Bukhovo, general plan

Цр. 1 – Ранохришћанска базилика и средњовековна некропола у манастиру „Св. Марије Магдалине“ код Бухова, план

room abutted against the southeastern corner of the *naos*. The building was constructed from quarry rocks bounded by mortar; bricks were used occasionally, mostly at the corners.

The entire length of the basilica between the *apse* to the western line of the side premises is 40.84 m, the width of the *naos* is 16.85 m and 27.75 m at the additional premises to the west. The entire area of the temple is ca. 800 sq. m, which puts the building among the largest excavated Early Christian basilicas on the territory of present-day Bulgaria. The internal dimensions of the *naos* are as follows: length 25.35 m and width 15.65–15.52 m. The middle nave is 8.75–9.07 m wide, the southern nave is 2.5–2.54 m wide and the northern nave is 2.77–2.60 m wide. The proportion between the central and the side naves is 1: 3.375. Sixteen pillars (4 abutting the walls – to the east and to the west and 12 free standing ones (six on each *stylobate*)) measuring 0.96 x 0.65 m are supported by the two *stylobates*; the distance between the pillars is ca. 2.60 m. The supporting pillars are made from bricks and stones as evidenced by the imprints on the mortar.

The *apse* is semicircular inside and outside; its diameter is 7.72 m. The foundation of the wooden fence of the *bema* has been revealed and the socket in the floor shows that it has been made from beams with rectangular cross-section, each side measuring 0.15 m. The beams cross fit together (Fig. 3).



Fig. 2. The basilica at Bukhovo, aerial photo

Сл. 2 – Базилика код Бухова, фотографија из ваздуха

The *narthex* consists of a single rectangular room and is 15.60 m long and 3.29 m wide (internal dimensions).

The original floor is smoothly plastered with mortar tempered with pieces of bricks and coloured in light pink. The roof must have been typical for the early basilicas, and the building must have had glass windows as small pieces of window glass coloured in purple predominantly have been found at the exterior walls and along the *stylobates*. The western gallery (*exonarthex*) also consists of a single room 3.43–3.55 m wide. It is open to the west and the entrance is divided by three pillars made from stones and bricks measuring 0.80 x 0.65 m and ended to the north and south with short (1.20 m long) angular walls. Some specific features of the pillars' structure suggest that the western gallery has been reconstructed at least once. *Tegulae* and *imbrices* have fallen from the roof on the very thin layer of trampled soil on the gallery's floor.

In the northern third of the *exonarthex* there is a bricks step for entering the gallery and the *narthex*, whose floor level is higher. Most probably, there was another step in the southern part but it was completely destroyed during the later activities and excavation work related to the graves. Very small pieces of

Fig. 3. The foundation of the *bema*

Сл. 3 – Основа беме

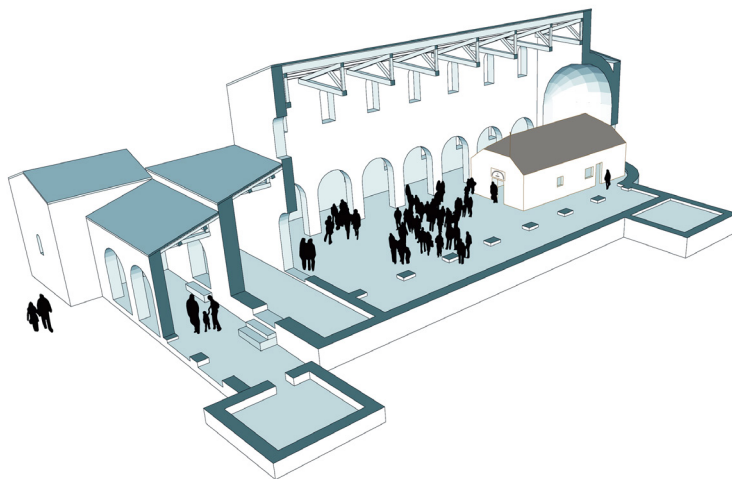


Fig. 4. Graphic reconstruction of the Early Christian basilica and its relation to the modern church (made by architect D. Georgieva and architect M. Velkov)

Сл. 4 – Идејна графичка реконструкција ранохришћанске базилике и однос са савременом црквом (аутори арх. Д. Георгијева и арх. М. Велков)

wall plaster coloured in dark red, ochre, green, blue, white, violet-brown (black probably) have been discovered under a layer of soil next to the preserved step. The preserved pieces of painted wall plaster do not allow to reconstruct the wall paintings.

There are two quadrangular chambers abutted against both sides of the *exonarthex*, each measuring 4.70 x 4.70 m. The *tegulae* from the roofs, which must have collapsed on the rock, indicate that these single-floor premises have had economic functions. Remains of an *atrium*, enclosure or a passage to other premises or buildings have not been found around the church (Fig. 4)⁴.



Fig. 5. The Late Antique burial in the *martirium*
Сл. 5 – Гроб из касне антике у просторији мартиријума

The quadrangular chamber abutting against the south-eastern corner of the *naos* is important for defining the function of the architectural assemblage. A burial situated in the center of the chamber has been discovered (Fig. 5). The burial pit seems hastily cut into the rock. Part of the skeleton was destroyed by rodents in a later period. The buried person appears to be an adult male aged 40-45 years⁵. A coin of

⁴ The graphic reconstruction is made by the architects D. Georgieva and M. Velkov, University of Architecture, Civil Engineering and Geodesy (UACEG).

⁵ The human bones are studied by V. Russeva, Institute of Experimental Morphology, Pathology and Anthropology with Museum (IEMPAM-BAS).

Fig. 6. Architectural remains of an earlier building/temple

Сл. 6 – Остаци градње раније зграде/храма



Emperor Constantius Gallus (351-354) has been found below its right heel⁶, which categorically proves funeral functions of the premise. Additionally, the coin found in the closed archaeological complex indicates that the basilica was constructed after the mid 4th century.

A fragment of a wall made from stones bound together with clay has been unearthed next to the northeastern corner of the *naos*. Similarly to the apse of the basilica, it is arch-shaped and curved to the south (Fig. 6). It can be suggested that the discovered pieces of walls are the remains of an earlier temple. This is supported by several coin finds yielded by this area: a coin of Emperor Claudius II Gothicus (268-270) and coins of Emperors Caracalla (198-217) and Severus Alexander (222-235). It can be suggested that the remains of a person related to or even an eminent member or leader of the local Christian community were laid in the grave pit in the special premise (*martirium*?). It is not possible to identify this person at this stage of research. The latest coin related to the functioning of the basilica was issued during the reign of Emperor Phocas (602-610). The building was probably destroyed or abandoned in the early 7th century similarly to many of the Late Antique assemblages in Serdica and its vicinity.

Apart from the burial inside the especially constructed chamber, the recent archaeological campaigns have brought to light additional 56 burials – inside and around the basilica (Fig. 7). The small number of grave goods yielded



Fig. 7. Burials from the mediaeval cemetery (the 13th century)

Сл. 7 – Грбови средњовековне некрополе (13. век)

⁶ The coins are studied by B. Bozhkova and K. Dochev, National Institute of Archaeology with Museum (NIAM-BAS).



Fig. 8. A pair of silver temple pendants (*naushnitsi*) yielded by burial № 5 of the mediaeval cemetery

Сл. 8 – Пар сребрних наушница из гроба бр. 5 средњовековне некрополе



Fig. 9. Bronze and glass bracelets yielded by the mediaeval cemetery

Сл. 9 – Бронзане и стаклене нарукнице из средњовековне некрополе



Fig. 10. Gilded silver appliques, which were elements of a diadem yielded by the mediaeval cemetery

Сл. 10 – Позлаћене сребрне апликације дијадеме из средњовековне некрополе

by the grave pits, mostly personal jewelry such as *naushnitsi* (temple pendants – special crescent-shaped or circular female head ornaments attached to a scarf or a textile band and hanging beside the ears) (Fig. 8), earrings, twisted bronze wire or glass bracelets (Fig. 9), gilded silver appliques, which were elements of a diadem, several clipped cup-shaped coins (Latin imitations as well as coins issued during the reign of the Bulgarian Tsar Constantine-Assen (1257-1277)) found in the hands of the deceased and the grave stone which were lost allow to date back the latest period of the functioning of this large cemetery to the 13th – most probably the early 18th century. The buried individuals are of different sex and age, varying from children aged 2 years to adults aged 60-65 years. The bones provide evidence of different types of pathologies but no severe physical disability. The cemetery can be defined as civil and Christian. It can be concluded that it was used by the population of a nearby settlement, probably at the location of present-day Bukhovo. However, remains of the mythical mediaeval monastery have not been found, which provokes huge excitement among local people.

The basilica near the town of Bukhovo is one of the largest Early Christian temples ever excavated in present-day Bulgaria. The period when it was erect-

ed, the specific features of the plan and its construction make it similar to many of the early churches functioning in the Late Antique Serdica region. It was erected on a hill dominating the entire area and demonstrated the power and the influence of the newly established religion. The special funeral chamber is an indication of strong respect for distinguished followers of Christianity.

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РАНОХРИШЋАНСКА БАЗИЛИКА И СРЕДЊОВЕКОВНА НЕКРОПОЛА
КОД БУХОВА (СОФИЈА)

У периоду 2013.-2016. завршено је проучавање и остварена конзервација ранохришћанске базилике у близини града Бухова, око 30 километара од центра Софије, познате још с краја 19. века. Објекат се налази у манастиру са малом активном црквом „Св. Марије Магдалине“ и једна је од највећих по површини које су откривене до сада на територији Бугарске.

Базилика (цртеж 1 и сл. 2 и 4) је тробродна, једноапсидна са наосом, нартексом, галеријом са западне стране са две квадратне просторије које је фланкирају са севера и југа, као и са квадратном просторијом поред југоисточног угла наоса. Грађена је од ломљеног камена са кречним малтером и местимично са опеком. Укупна дужина зграде је 40,84 м, ширина њеног наоса је 16,85 м, а на западном делу - 27,75 м. Однос између централног и бочних бродова је 1:3,375. На два стилобата размештени су правоугаони ступци зидани од камена и опеке на међусобном одстојању 2,60 м. Апсида је полукружна са спољашње и унутрашње стране, пречника отвора 7,72 м. Откривена је основа за дрвену ограду беме, код које су правоугаоне греде спојене помоћу крстасте спојнице (сл. 3). Припрага је једноделна правоугаоног облика.

Оригинални ниво пода је у потпуности од глатког кречног малтера који због мешања са крупно дробљеном опеком има врло светлу ружичасту нијансу. Кров од тегула био је по свој прилици типичан за ране базилике. Зграда је била застакљена. Западна галерија (егзонартекс) такође представља једноделни једноспратни простор. Квадратне просторије које фланкирају егзонартекс имале су помоћне функције. Између нивоа галерије и приправе налази се степеник од опеке.

Пронађени су врло мали делови зидног сликарства тамноцрвене, окер, зелене, плаве, беле, браон-љубичасте боје.

Просторија на југоисточном углу базилике има улогу мартиријума. У гробу који је тамо откривен пронађен је примерак новца кованице цара Констанција Гала (351.-354.) што датује изградњу храма после средине 4. века (сл. 5). Почетком 7. века базилика је срушена или запуштена. На североисточном углу наоса очуван је део каменог зида са везивом од блата, вероватно ранијег храма (сл. 6). Током последњих ископавања у унутрашњости базилике и око ње истражено је 56 гробова средњовековне градске некрополе чије је коришћење започето око друге четвртине 13. века (сл. 7-10).

