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ARCHITECTURAL FEATURES OF HOLY TRINITY CHURCH IN BERAT: THE QUESTION OF EPIROTE INFLUENCES

Known from many as the “*city of one above one window*” because of the picturesque view of the historical neighborhoods of Mangalem and Gorica. The way how their windows are constructed, it gives the impression that are placed one above another one. Berat is one of the most well-known cities in Albania, nevertheless also part of the UNESCO World Heritage List since 2008. In this city it is possible to find traces since the prehistoric era and these traces continue for every period until Post- Byzantine period. One of the most important periods when Berat became an important city was during the Despotate of Epirus. The fact that the despot Michel I Angel gave supremacy to Berat as an important center and focal points of building activities played a special significance its history.¹

It is an old fact that the year 1204 it is considered to be the beginning of the Late Byzantine phase in architecture, the year when the Latins took the capital of the Byzantine Empire, Constantinople.²

During the Palaeologoi period in architecture were created new variants of the traditional church plans. Hence, in many several distant points of the Byzantine principalities such as: in Epirus, Northern Macedonia, Thessaly, Asia Minor, appeared buildings with similar characteristics of the Late Byzantine architecture. All the credits go the talented architects that used the architectural concepts and division of Middle Byzantine churches in Constantinople.³ During the first three decades of the XIII century, are ascribed a few buildings, which are related with the reign of Michael II.⁴

¹ P. Xhufi, *Nga Paleologët tek Muzakajt: Berati dhe Vlora në shek. XII-XV*, Tiranë 2009, 26-27.

² C. Mango, *Byzantine architecture*, Milano 1985, 141

³ R. Krautheimer, *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture*, Harmondsworth and Baltimore 1965, 294

⁴ P. L. Vocotopoulos, *Church architecture in the Despotate of Epirus: The problem of influences*, Zograf 27, (Beograd 1998-1999), 79.



Fig. 1 Photo Holy Trinity church, north- west façade. Photo E. Kodheli

Сл. 1 Црква Свете Тројице, североисточна страна, фото: Е. Кодели

In the first phase are noticed remarkably similar characteristics in planning and in the articulation of the walls. Mostly, the planning of the churches continues in traditions that have been uninterrupted since the days of the Macedonians and Comnenes: quincunx plans, triconch, and tetraconch chapels, sometimes replaced with a high transverse barrel-vault, the dome customary over the central bay. But, also are created new variants on the old tradition: triple arcades are inserted between the corner piers of a domed central bay encircled by a lower ambulatory. Even though limited to the ground floor, the resulting ambulatory recalls the cross-domed churches of the times after Justinian.⁵

During the Palaeologoi the Byzantine architecture was characterized by the brick ornaments, as a bearer of the overall image of the façade.⁶ During the last decades of the 13th century master's builders paid a special attention to the exterior surfaces⁷. This phenomenon can be noticed in the Holy Trinity church in Berat. (Fig 1)

Situated in the southwest in the area of Kala (castle of Berat) the Holy Trinity church dates to the 13th century, this due to the inscription preserved in

⁵ R. Krautheimer, *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture*, Harmondsworth and-Baltimore 1965, 294.

⁶ J.S. Ćirić, *Writing in light: Same as different at the west façade of St. Sophia church in Ohrid*, International Conference: Serbian Language- Literature- Art- Art history, Faculty of Philology and Arts, Kragujevac, (Serbia 2013), 295.

⁷ J.S. Ćirić, *Brickwork of St. Nicolas church in Prilep: Reading the texture of the rhomb*, Days of Byzantium. 4th International scientific symposium. Special themac stand "The Byzantine Missionary Activity and its Legacy in Europe" (Skopje 2016), 148.



Fig. 2 Photo Holy Trinity church, north façade. Photo E. Kodheli
Сл. 2 Црква Свете Тројице, северна фасада, фото: Е. Кодели



Fig. 3 Photo Holy Trinity church, south façade.
Photo E. Kodheli
Сл. 3 Црква Свете Тројице, јужна фасада, фото: Е. Кодели

fresco technique above the architrave of the south portal of the narthex. In this inscription is mentioned Andronicus Palaeologus the governor of the province of Berat, Vlora and Spinarica beginning from 1301 and later on 1326.⁸

⁸ A. Mexsi, *Kishat bizantine të Beratit*, Monumentet 40, ed. E. Riza, A. Baçe, A. Mexsi, Gj. Karaiskaj, Gj. Frashëri, H. Nallbani, N. Ceka, P.Thomo, (Tiranë 1990), 38.



Fig. 4 Photo Holy Trinity church, detail of scalloped bricks. Photo E. Kodheli

Сл. 4 Црква Свете Тројице, детаљ изведеног орнамента, фото: Е. Кодели

The name of the church Trinity (Triadha-in Albanian) = Trini comes from Greek and is believed that has changed when Cozmai came to prevent the return of the Ottomans. For this reason it is believed that before the name Trinity there must have been another name, which has changed over time. Another characteristic of this church is the fact that there were found 7 codexes from different periods, and somewhere there is found the inscription M.K, so Michael Comnenes, one of the most important names for the Byzantine Empire. It is believed that the 7 codexes are made during his rule.⁹

Lately, the restoration works conducted in Holy Trinity are focused more on its interior and the understatement of what the mural paintings. Ervin Panidha in one of his article provides the information that the restoration works during 1970-1972 made from the specialists of the Institute of Monuments of Culture headed from Aleksandër Meksi had as a purpose to define the typology of the Byzantine construction. Nowadays, since Berat became part of UNESCO World Heritage List became necessary the restoration works in this monument. The focus of the restoration interventions conducted from Panidha was the iconostasis of the church and its consolidation. This tells us that the church hasn't passed through many restoration interventions that are a good thing to understand the ornaments and the construction of the monument. (Fig 2)

In terms of plan structure, this church consists of naos divided from four pillars. Probably thenarthex was constructed shortly after.¹⁰The cruciform form is visible from the outer shaping especially within roof surfaces. The narthex is

⁹ E. Panidha, *Moment restaurimi në kishën "Shën Triadha" Berat*, Monumentet 50, ed. Prof. Dr. ValterShtylla, (Tiranë 2010), 167-168

¹⁰ A. Meksi, A. Baçe, E. Riza, Gj. Karaiskaj, P. Thomo, *Historia e Arkitekturës në Shqipëri*, Tiranë2016, 459



Fig. 5 Photo St. John in Theologian church, Kaneo in Ohrid. Photo Jasmina S. Ćirić
Сл. 5 Црква Светог Јована Канеа у Охриду, фото: Јасмина С. Ћирић

divided into three compartments by a system of pilasters which are slightly extracted from the wall and have blind arches over them. The supports in the alter side are two pilasters constructed by irregular stones, meanwhile, the other two supports are made by columns. The last two columns differ from one another and are taken from antique constructions.¹¹

The narthex is enlightened by three double windows, one in each façade. The shape and division of the narthex are expressed in the upper part of the narthex.¹² The exterior contour of the church is additionally stressed with frontons. Each fronton has in the middle a wide niche with a double window and arches around with smaller niches. The window and the arches of these niches are constructed with scalable bricks.¹³ The whole structure of the church is encircled with a row of bricks and the window and the niches inside it are constructed above a plinth of two rows of cloisonné technique.¹⁴ (Fig 3)

The masonry of the church consists of two rows same for the naos and the narthex added near it. The lower structure is articulated of stones and lime

¹¹ A. Meksi, *Kishat bizantine të Beratit*, Monumentet 40, ed. E. Riza, A. Baçe, A. Meksi, Gj. Karaiskaj, Gj. Frashëri, H. Nallbani, N. Ceka, P. Thomo, (Tiranë 1990), 38.

¹² A. Meksi, A. Baçe, E. Riza, *Berati, historia dhe arkitektura*, Tiranë 2011, 89.

¹³ A. Meksi, A. Baçe, E. Riza, Gj. Karaiskaj, P. Thomo, *Historia e Arkitekturës në Shqipëri*, Tiranë 2016, 460.

¹⁴ A. Meksi, A. Baçe, E. Riza, *Berati. historia dhe arkitektura*, Tiranë 2011, 89.



Fig. 6 Photo Vlacherna church in Arta. Photo Varvara Papadopoulou

Сл. 6 Црква Влахерна у Арти, фото: Варвара Пападопулу

mortar, having in some places pieces of bricks placed one above other between the stones.¹⁵ The upper structure is articulated of the cloisonné technique with a row of bricks placed horizontally and two bricks placed vertically between the stones. The cloisonné technique starts at the same height as in the axis of the naos and the narthex.¹⁶

In the context of the picturesque decoration cloisonné occupies the main place, however maybe for economic issues, it is not used in all the height. The frontons also provide the impression of monumentality in the eyes of the visitor.¹⁷ In the lower part are used tile pieces to revitalize this part, giving greater importance the niches above the door. In the upper structure prevails the brick's usage, especially in the frontons. The narthex façade is built in a symmetric way highlighting more the fronton's niche, which ended above with a few bricks rows placed above the arch.¹⁸

Exactly the fronton's element differentiates this church from the other churches in Berat. Most probably that Holy Trinity is constructed later than

¹⁵ A. Meksi, *Arkitektura e kishave të Shqipërisë*, Tiranë 2004, 219.

¹⁶ A. Meksi, *Tri kishat bizantine të Beratit*, Monumentet 4, ed. G. Strazimiri, (Tiranë 1972), 63.

¹⁷ E. Kodheli, *Byzantine churches in Berat and their architectural characteristics*, ed. V. Putnik Prica, ARTUM 5, (Belgrade 2017), 9.

¹⁸ A. Meksi, *Arkitektura e kishave të Shqipërisë*, Tiranë 2004, 219.

Saint Mary Vlacherna because both belong to the cross in square with the dome with two pilasters in the east side and two columns in the west side, but its higher level of construction seems that the master's builders have gained more experience in realization of the cloisonné technique. (Fig. 4)

About similarities of Holy Trinity with other churches in the region, it is possible to find common features with other churches in Ohrid and in Arta, not only because of the shape of its grounds but also its overall exterior shape. These similarities can be explained with the fact that both Berat and Ohrid used to be part of the Despotate of Epirus, whose center was Arta. So, it looks like the guidelines on how the churches in Berat and Ohrid should have been constructed have come from Arta.¹⁹

Geometric brickwork ornaments can be seen both in Holy Trinity and in the facades of the St. Sofia church in Ohrid. Both churches are characterized by the horizontal brickwork ornaments and the zigzag lines. The architecture of the west façade in St. Sofia is an expression of artistic concepts by which detail has independent value within the whole.²⁰

St. Nicholas church in Prilep attracts visitor's attention, just like does Holy Trinity in Berat. The exteriority of St. Nicholas is covered in brick ornaments, with tightly patterned lists this church as an expression of certain understanding of form, shape, and meaning.²¹

Even in this church as in Holy Trinity, we can notice the zigzag detail in the upper structure. Another common point between St. Nicholas and Holy Trinity is the optical tension that is created by the ornamental details. In the St. Nicholas these ornaments give the illusion of three-dimensional efflux impacted with the polychromatic effect of brick and mortar.²²

In the Holy Trinity, this optical tension is created by the elements of exterior decoration of the walls such as the wide and spatial windows of the frontons, circled by scalable arches of bricks. The frontons end up with a sharp arch, while the drum with a corrugated frame over the columns.²³ Having in mind all the above mentioned it is possible to say that Holy Trinity represents one of the most important monuments of Byzantine architecture in nowadays Albania not only for its exterior but also for its interior where prevails the vertical axis and the feeling of the endless space and these combined with the columns, arches, windows and the lighting help for such a perception.²⁴

Similarities in architecture features can be found within the structure of St. John Theologian (Kaneo) in Ohrid. (Fig. 5) At both churches, the most deco-

¹⁹ A. Meksi, A. Baçe, E. Riza, *Berati, historia dhe arkitektura*, Tiranë 2011, 24.

²⁰ J. S. Ćirić, *Writing in light: Same as different at the west façade of St. Sophia church in Ohrid*, International. Conference: Serbian Language- Literature- Art- Art history, Faculty of Philology and Arts, Kragujevac, (Serbia 2013), 299

²¹ J. S. Ćirić, *Brickwork of St. Nicolas church in Prilep: Reading the texture of the rhomb*, Days of Byzantium. 4 th. International scientific symposium. Special themac stand "The Byzantine Missionary Activity and its Legacy in Europe" (Skopje 2016), 150.

²² *Ibid.*, 150.

²³ A. Meksi, A. Baçe, E. Riza, Gj. Karaiskaj, P. Thomo, *Historia e Arkitekturës në Shqipëri*, Tiranë 2016, 460-461.

²⁴ A. Meksi, A. Baçe, E. Riza, *Berati, Historia dhe arkitektura*, Tiranë 2011, 90.

rative part is one of the upper structure. The Kaneo church has as peculiarity the appearance of the broad niches and the fact that most decorative façade is the east one.²⁵ The same thing could be said even for the Holy Trinity since in the middle of it is the three-sided apse with the window where is preserved the limestone skeleton decorated with plant motifs.²⁶

Of great importance for understanding the Holy Trinity church is the architecture of the Arta region in Greece. In Arta, which was the center of the Despotate of Epirus are preserved lots of monuments that testify the activities of Comnenes-Doukas family and their intentions to make the city an important center in order to show their power and prestige. This activity was even more increased during the rule of Michael II.²⁷

Worth of mentioning as a comparison is certainly Vlacherna in Arta in the middle of XIII century, constructed above the ruins of an earlier church of IX-X century.²⁸ (Fig. 6) In the building are added later three domes, one on each aisle, and also a calotte on the north aisle. Comparing it with the Holy Trinity it can be easily noticed the same scalable brick ornaments on the double windows of the dome.²⁹

Having in mind that Arta, Berat and Ohrid region used to belong to the Despotate of Epirus where during the Late Byzantine period were created new trends, even in architecture it is understandable why churches within these centers have similarity not only in planning but also, in the construction of the walls and their decorations. Another common point in the historical background of the Holy Trinity church and the Ohrid churches is the fact that was constructed during the Palaeologian period. It can be noticed that the same elements and motifs of brick and mortar are used in the church in Berat and in churches of St. Nicholas, St. Sofia to attract the attention of the beholder's eye. What connects Berat church with the one in Arta is the fact that Berat was an important city for the despot of Epirus. What differs these churches is the size. Most probably the churches in Arta are dimensionally prestigious in comparison with the one in Berat because of financial issues and the matter of the importance of the Despotate. It is obvious that since Arta was the capital of the Despotate is there where the most important and huge constructions would take place. Except that even in the churches in other regions of the Despotate can be seen the same characteristics in the typology, construction technique and, ornaments.

²⁵ S. Korunovski, *The architecture of St. John Kaneo and its chronological stylistic correlation with some Ohrid churches*, Medieval Art, (Skopje 2005), 17.

²⁶ A. Meksi, A. Baçe, E. Riza, Gj. Karaiskaj, P. Thomo, *Historia e Arkitekturës në Shqipëri*, Tiranë 2016, 460-461.

²⁷ V. Papadopoulou, *Byzantine Arta and its Monuments*, (Athens 2007), 14.

²⁸ *Ibid* 72.

²⁹ *Ibid*.

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АРХИТЕКТОНСКЕ ОДЛИКЕ ЦРКВЕ СВЕТЕ ТРОЈИЦЕ У БЕРАТУ: ПИТАЊЕ
ЕПИРСКИХ УТИЦАЈА

Рад има за циљ указивање на архитектонске одлике и важност орнамената изведених опеком на цркви Свете Тројице у Берату (Албанија). Имајући у виду да црква потиче из 13. столећа као и да натпис помиње Андроника Палеолога могуће је успоставити аналогije са црквом Светог Николе и црквом Свете Софије у Охриду. Уобичајене карактеристике и сличности указују на сличне орнаменте на фасади као и употребу малтера између опека које као да показују правац посматрања сваком вернику. Текст такође има за циљ упоређивање цркве Влахерна у Арти са бератском црквом која је такође припадала ареалу Епира.

