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## **EARLY CHRISTIAN BASILICA ARCHITECTURE BETWEEN THE MIDDLE STRYMON AND MIDDLE MESTOS (Overview review)**

*Abstract:* The study analyzes early Christian architecture between Middle Streams of the Strymon and Middle Mestos rivers (Nicopolis ad Nestum and surroundings): the plan, the architecture and the architectural decoration of the monuments from late antique provinces Macedonia (diocese of Macedonia) and Rhodope (diocese of Thrace). All those architecture are distinguished in architectural and decorative aspect but are similar in their planning structure.

Several types of basilicas are distinguished - martyrial, cemetery, monastery, urban / rural. Depending on the purpose and belonging of the basilicas, there are also several types of compositions. Several important complexes related to the development of the basilica construction and the spread of Christianity in the lands between Strymon and Mestos. To varying degrees, they are subordinate to the canon of the Thessalonica (Rome) and Constantinople worship, related to the plan and architecture of the early Christian temples and to the rules adopted at the Ecumenical and Local Councils.

*Key words:* basilica, plan, architecture decoration, furniture, liturgy.

### *Sites and bishoprics*

The Southwestern Bulgaria consists of the middle courses of the rivers Struma and Mesta, in antiquity Strymon and Nestos. This area belonged to two different provinces: Middle Strymon relates to the most northeastern part of the province Macedonia Prima, in diocese Macedonia, prefecture of Illyricum; at the same time the location of Middle Nestos is in the territory of the province Rhodope, diocese Thrace, prefecture of Orient. Both provinces were in the administrative aspect part of the Roman Empire and after its division – only of the Eastern Roman empire. However, in the church aspect most of the time Macedonia submitted to the Thessaloniki vicariate representative of the Roman Pope, while Rhodope referred to the bishop of Constantinople.

Several bishoprics existed in the studied area. In province of Macedonia: in Parthicopolis, in Heraclea Sintike, in Gareskos, now Melnik, and in the pres-

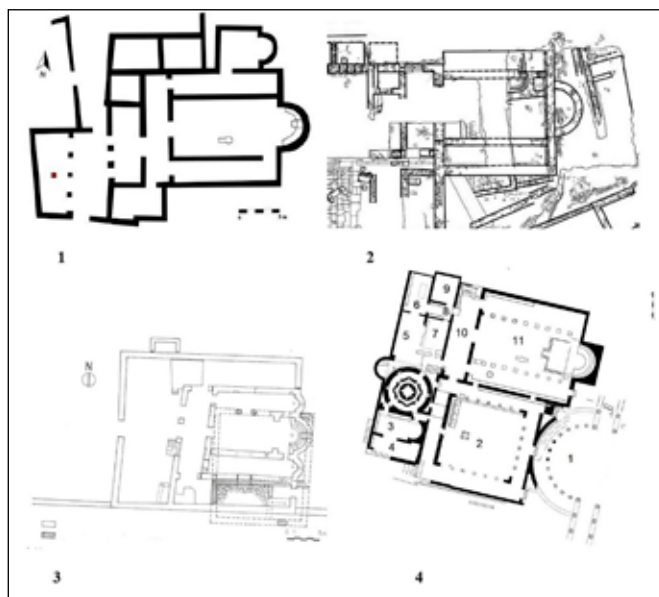


Fig. 1. Plan of the basilicas in: 2-1. Mikrevo; 2-2. Heraclea; 2-3. Garescos (Melnik); 2-4.

Parthicopolis (Sandanski), Episcopal Basilica (No. 4).

Сл. 1. План базилика у: 2-1. Микрево; 2-2. Хераклеа; 2-3. Гарескос (Мелник); 2-4. Партикополис (Сандански), епископска базилика (бр. 4).

ent-day village of Katuntsi, with unknown ancient name and Early Christian mosaic, probably from a basilica<sup>1</sup>. Still unclear is the belonging of the bishopric is the basilica at the village of Mikrevo. Although it has been already identified as the summer residence of the bishop of Parthicopolis<sup>2</sup>, still we have at disposal no certain data on the name of the site and bishopric at that village (now an early Christian settlement known by the name Gorno and Dolno Gradishte) at the right bank of Strymon. At present, this nameless settlement cannot be identified as a city or urban structure. The basilica may belong to the chorbishop of the settlement subordinate to Heraclea, or to another as yet unknown bishopric. In the eparchy of Rhodope it's the bishopric of Nicopolis ad Nestum. The Metropolitan of Trayanopolis headed the eparchy of the Rhodope, founded by the followers of the Apostle Paul and the church in Philippi, later added to the Thessaloniki church<sup>3</sup>. From the second half of 4<sup>th</sup> centuries up to the end of 6<sup>th</sup> one many Christian basilicas are witnessed in the territory of Nicopolis.

#### *Observations on the Plans and building periods*

Along the middle reaches of the Struma River: The basilica in Mikrevo has three aisles with a semicircular apse, a synthronon and an ambo in the southern part of the central nave. To the west is a fragmentary narthex with benches and a pastophory. In the northeast corner is the baptistery with a circular piscine, whose floor is covered with mosaic. The chain-plan buildings

<sup>1</sup> Б.Филов, *Пътувания из Тракия, Родопите и Македония 1912-1916*, (ред.) П. Петров, София.1993, 120.

<sup>2</sup> According to V. Petkov, head of the archaeological study of the basilica.

<sup>3</sup> Д. Цухлев, *История на българската църква*, София 1910, 84.

to the north and west of the basilica indicate the bishop's residence (**fig. 1-1**). The basilica in Katuntsi is documented only with a sketch of the mosaic floor made more than a century ago by Prof. B. Filov. The building itself is not clear in terms of plan and architectural decoration. In the southern-most part of Middle Struma, in Heraclea Sintika, a basilica was discovered, adjacent to the northeastern part of the Forum, which has been partially explored: three-nave in plan with a semicircular apse and narthex to the west (**fig. 1-2**).

The basilica in Melnik is three-aisled with a synthronon and a semicircular apse, built over a sanctuary of Artemis (**fig. 1-3**). The basilica has a narthex, with a three-part altar, with a prothesis and a diaconicon, as with Basilica 4, in Parthicopolis from the last construction period - the first half of the 6<sup>th</sup> century (**fig. 1-4**). The basilica had a low altar barrier, and in the second it was converted into a high type of chancel. In the medieval era, the church of St. Nicholas was built on top of the basilica.

In Sandanski, the ancient Parthicopolis, 10 basilicas have been fully or partially discovered so far. Six of them are in the fortified part of the city, three are outside the fortress walls and are defined as cemeteries, and one is a monastery<sup>4</sup>. Six basilicas are united around the main city street – a processional, bordered between a semicircular (circular) piazza to the north and south, towards the so-called the Rotunda (**fig. 2**).

The plan of each basilica is determined by the liturgy held in it. This axiom allows relating of the initial plans of the basilicas either to the Roman liturgical planning or to those connected with the liturgy of Constantinople. There are also examples demonstrating the changing from the first to the second type like basilica No 4 in Parthicopolis. The only example of the Roman liturgy so far is the initial planning of the Episcopal basilica (No 4) of Parthicopolis from its first building period. Two small narrow rooms are differentiated in the eastern ends of the central aisle from north and south, occupying part of its width, in immediate proximity to the bema with its chancel screens, and



Fig. 2. Ancient and early Christian cadastre of Parthicopolis. The processional street with the basilicas and the semicircular, possibly circular square.

Сл. 2. Антички и ранохришћански ситуациони план Партикополиса. Процесијска улица са базиликама и полукружним, могуће кружним тргом.

<sup>4</sup> See: S. Petrova, The Early Christian Basilicas in the Urban Planning of Parthicopolis. – *Niš and Byzantium* (ed. M. Rakocija), XIII 2015, 161-184.

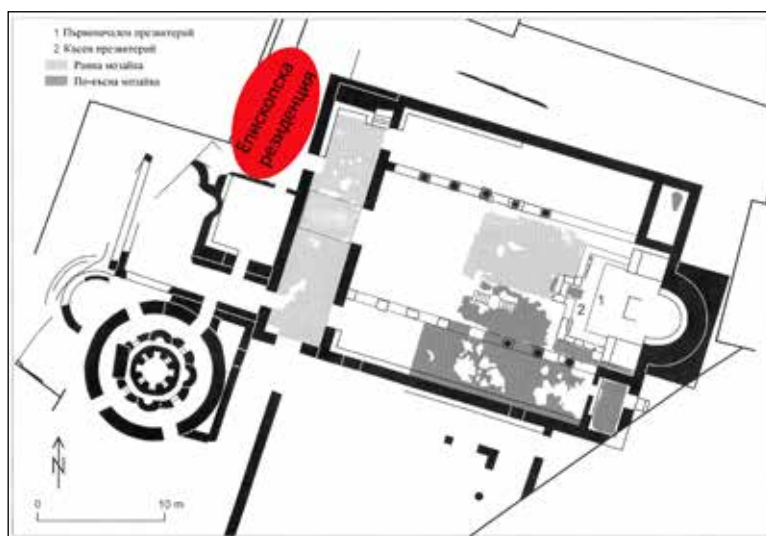


Fig. 3. Parthiopolis, Episcopal Basilica (No. 4). First and second construction period of the presbytery. Senatorium and matroneum during the first construction period.

Сл. 3. Партикополис, епископска базилика (бр. 4). Прва и друга грађевинска фаза презвитеријума. Сенаторијум и матронеум током прве фазе изградње.

between the back walls of the chancel and both colonnades<sup>5</sup>. The floors of the rooms are paved with marble plates. These rooms are identified with the so-called *senatorium* and *matroneum* (fig. 3). The function of both rooms was to “receive” and keep the donations of bread and wine brought by the faithful according to their gender. Although located next to the most sacred space, namely the bema, the ban formulated in the apostolic rules of not entering it by the laity is abided, since both rooms are not part of the altar. The canon 56 of the Council in Laodicea (363-364) provides for the bishop to enter the apse before the clergy. Because of the existence of the *senatorium* and *matroneum* in the Episcopal basilica, the entrance in the chancel should be only one and from the west. Some peculiarities are mutual for both provinces in this area, but others are typical only for one of them. On the first place is the plan in several variants of the interior, its liturgical furniture and decoration depending mainly on the used liturgy: to the influences impacted by the basilicas in Rome and by the ones in Constantinople. The basilicas are three-nave, Hellenistic type, with a semicircular apse. Only the apse of Basilica 4 is built in, given the passage of the new early Christian main street in front of it. Two of the basilicas (1 and 4) have an atrium, basilica 2 has an exonarthex, and basilica 3 has a tribellon typical of churches for Mainland and island Greece: in Thessalonica: Archeiropoietos; island of Kerkyra – Basilica of Paleopoleos.

In the first construction period - basilicas 1 and 4 have an arcade structure. Only Basilica 4 has a gallery and a second floor above the side aisles, as well as an ambo in the southern part of the central aisle. The synthronon of basilica 4 has benches extended to the west, outside the arc of the apse similar to the basilicas in Thessaly - the basilica in Phthiotis Thebes, in Epirus – basilica „B“ in Nicopolis.

<sup>5</sup> S. Petrova, The Baptistry of the Episcopal Basilica in Parthiopolis. – *Niš and Byzantium* (ed. M. Rakocija), XV, 2017, 133-152

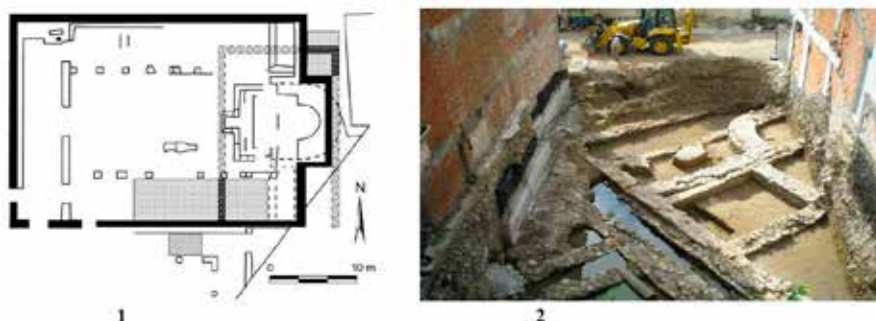


Fig. 4. Parthicopolis: 4-1. Basilica No. 4, Episcopal, built on an ancient building – a temple (?); 4-2. Basilica No. 8, partially uncovered. Built on an ancient building

Сл. 4. Партикополис: 4-1. Базилика бр. 4, епископска, саграђена на античкој згради – храму (?); 4-2. Базилика бр. 8, делимично откривена. Саграђена на античкој грађевини.

When looking for one-building period of a basilica from the studied area, this observation could matter only basilica No 1 itself of Parthicopolis, but not the complex it has been included in and the next changed in it. This basilica is the earliest one in the course of Middle Strymon. The dimensions, the proportions and the kind of the bema show a middle-sized three-aisled basilica with arcade system as in basilica No 4. But and the other basilicas usually have two or more building periods.

The naos is the first built (basilicas NoNo 2, 4 in Parthicopolis and the one in Mikrevo). Only after it was erected the narthex, and the atriums to the basilicas, as the narthex and the nave of the basilica No 1 were built at the same time; the exonarthex (of basilicas No 2 and 3, of the basilica in Mikrevo). Another observation reveals that the new basilicas have been erected on the ruins of earlier pagan buildings (basilicas No No 1, 2 and 4 in the same city; basilica No 1 from Nicopolis ad Nestum, possibly built over an earlier sanctuary<sup>6</sup>. Also basilica No 8 in Parthicopolis and the one in Heraclea also reuse and adopt earlier cult and civil buildings (fig. 4-1,2).

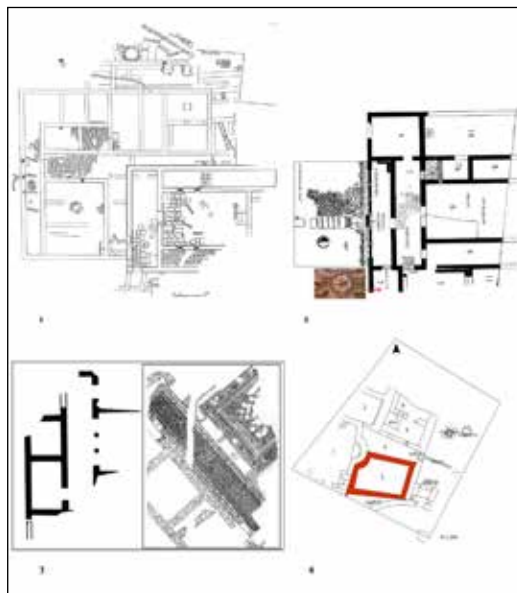


Fig. 5. Parthicopolis. Plan of Basilicas: 5-1. Basilica No. 1; 5-2. Basilica No. 2; 5-3. Basilica No. 3; 5-4. Basilica No. 7.

Сл. 5. Партикополис. План базилика: 5-1. Базилика бр. 1; 5-2. Базилика бр. 2; 5-3. Базилика бр. 3; 5-4. Базилика бр. 7.

<sup>6</sup> В. Попова, Две раннохристијански базилики в околностите на Никополис ад

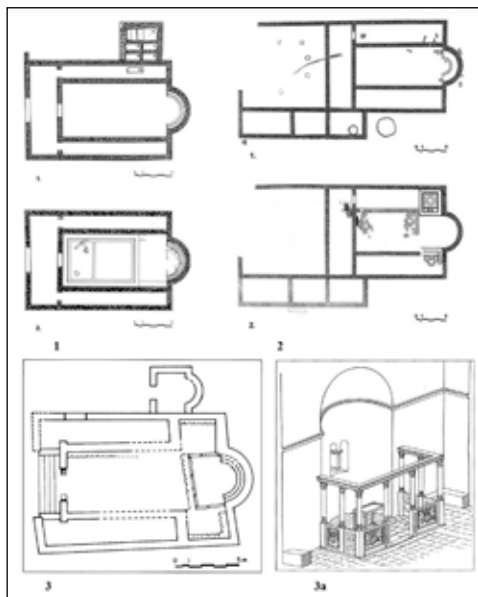


Fig. 6. Nicopolis ad Nestum. Plan of basilicas: 6-1. Basilica No. 2; 6-2. Basilica No. 1; 6-3,3a. Basilica in Oresche.

Сл. 6. Никополис ад Нестум. План базилика: 6-1. Базилика бр. 2; 6-2. Базилика бр. 1; 6-3,3а. Базилика у Орешу.

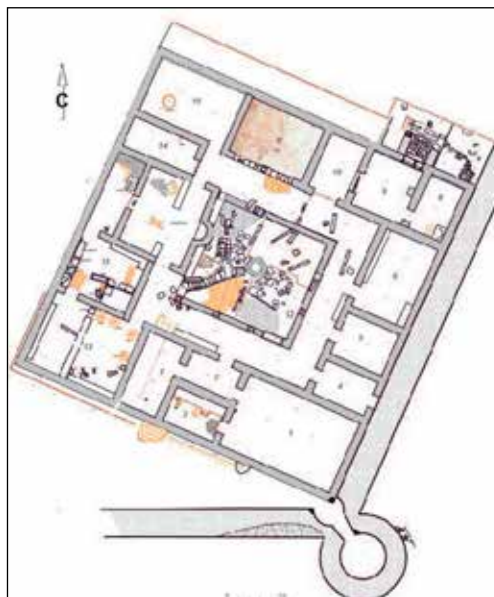


Fig. 7. Nicopolis ad Nestum. Plan of an ancient villa, Episkopaion (4th-6th century).

Сл. 7. Никополис ад Нестум. План античке виле, Епископејон (IV–VI век).

The erecting of basilicas No No 2, 3, 7 и 8, in Parthicopolis, entirely or partly excavated is related between second quarter (basilica 7) / middle of the 4<sup>th</sup> – middle of 5<sup>th</sup> century (**fig. 5**). Several important events as the earthquake in 388 in the whole area, not only in Heraclea, are established. The locality Rupite immediately of Heraclea represents the crater of a mighty volcano Kozhuh Mountain, not acting already. But the earthquakes alongside this fault, from Rupite to the north end of Kresna gorge, are constant and very dangerous, the strongest being almost of 8 degrees on the scale of Richter and happened at the beginning of last century (1904). That's why the first repairs and the second building periods can be referred in basilica No 4 to the last decades of 4<sup>th</sup> century namely with connection with the same earthquake of 388, because of the destructions of the basilica<sup>7</sup>.

Basilica No 7 and No 8 have been built in the second quarter of 4<sup>th</sup> – the end of 5<sup>th</sup> century, while basilica No 3 and No 2 – in the middle of 5<sup>th</sup> century. A building mosaic inscription from the exonarthex of basilica No 2 announces that bishop Ioannes has decorated with mosaic after inheriting the priesthood

Нестум. – *Изследвания в чест на проф. Стефан Бояджиев*, София 2011, 280.

<sup>7</sup> S. Petrova, The cancel screens of the Episcopal basilica (No 4) in Parthicopolis / Bulgaria (preliminary observation). – *Niš and Byzantium*, (ed. M. Rakocija), XVIII 2020, 189-222.

from his predecessor, whose name begins with the letter 'O', 'C' or 'Θ'<sup>8</sup>. The name of Ioannes is among the names of the bishops from the area attending the Council of Chalcedon, but it is considered that Ioannes being busy with the erecting and decoration of basilica No 2 send instead of himself the Presbyter Cyril<sup>9</sup>.

A third building period from the end of 5<sup>th</sup> – beginning of 6<sup>th</sup> century is obvious in the Episcopal basilica of Mikrevo, in the usage of a mud solder in the annexes to the atrium. The Episcopal basilica (No 4) of Parthicopolis also demonstrates a third building period from the second quarter – middle of 6<sup>th</sup> century, when the interior the basilica has been innovated and the *prothesis* and *diaconicon* formed in the eastern parts of the north and south aisle. Also has been added the annexes of the Episcopoion, reflecting the Constantinopolitan liturgy and the new liturgical planning of the basilica.

*Along the middle reaches of the Mesta River:*

Several three-nave basilicas with a semicircular apse are known from Nicopolis ad Nestum and its surroundings (**fig. 6**). Basilica 2 has an arcade structure. By function, the basilicas are defined as cemetery – basilica 2, monastery – basilica 1, rural – Oreše, Debren and others. In Basilica 2, five tombs were discovered, one of which was a martyr's tomb, which is why it was determined as a capella memoria, a martyrium with the function of martyrdom and cemetery (**fig. 6-1**). Basilica 1, monastery, has an atrium, with a shortened plan, similar to the basilicas of Parthicopolis (**fig. 6-2**). The atrium has porticoes and a fiala. Basilica 2 has a synthronon and narthex, a martyrium to the northeast, structurally connected to the eastern part of the north nave. The presence of an atrium, unrevealed due to the presence of modern buildings, is suggested. The basilicas existed from the middle-end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century to the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> century and, like those along the Middle Struma, were destroyed at the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> century - during the Avaro-Slavic invasion. The floor of basilicas 1 and 2 was richly decorated with mosaics, with rich architectural and decorative elements – capitals, columns, bases and others.

The best preserved is the basilica near Oresche, destroyed by an earthquake, and the architectural decoration, the altar barrier etc., were found *in situ*. The plan is three-nave, Hellenistic type. According to the researcher, a small triconchal baptistery, structurally connected to the basilica, was entered from the north (**fig. 6-3, 3a**).

The earliest basilica in the middle course of Nestos is basilica No 2 in the environment of Nicopolis ad Nestum, built in the middle-second half of 4<sup>th</sup> century. Several building periods have been also established in it, connected with

<sup>8</sup> Т. Иванов, Д. Серафимова, Н. Николов, Разкопки в центъра на Сандански през 1960 г. – *Известия на Археологическия Институт*, 31, 1969, 105-209. I think it's possible that the name could also start with 'Θ'.

<sup>9</sup> The thesis was put forward for the first time by V. Popova. See: V. Popova, The Pavement Mosaics of Bishop Ioannes' Basilica in Sandanski'. – *Spartacus. Simposium rebus Spartaci gestis dedicatum 2050 a.*, Sofia, 1981, 173-181.

additions and repairs in the plan, the appearance of a *synthronon*, tombs and an atrium. The additions here and in Mikrevo are obvious because of the changes in the building techniques, the changes in the plan by closing of the most west *intercolumnius* etc., all they related in general to 5<sup>th</sup> – the first half of 6<sup>th</sup> century. In basilica No 1 has been established also additional building periods connected with the additional erecting of the *synthronon* at the end of 5<sup>th</sup> century. It is not impossible that it has replaced an earlier *synthronon*, because a different technique has been displayed and a big fugue exists between it and the apse's wall; also the wall paintings from the first period have been stepped by it. Supposedly, a wooden railing has formed the *prothesis* and *diaconicon* <sup>10</sup>, probably at the beginning of 6<sup>th</sup> century.

Several factors have influenced the established building periods. Naturally, on the first place should be taken the economic factor in the middle courses of Strymon and Nestos. The Christian communities there were constantly accumulating donations from the dignitaries and the usual Christians for the building itself and also for the decoration (liturgical objects, furniture, marble revetment, architectonic decoration, wall paintings and pavement and wall mosaics) of the Early Christian monuments. As now, a lot of money, building and decorative materials, architectonic elements etc. was necessary and the process of building a basilica or another type of Early Christian architecture was long, in years and decades, and quite exhausting. Very important is the inscription from Parthicopolis, evidence of the big donation in basilica No 4 of Antimos<sup>11</sup>. On the second place are the barbarian invasions like the one of the Goths in the second half of 4<sup>th</sup> century, of the Huns in 447 and especially in the second part of 6<sup>th</sup> – beginning of 7<sup>th</sup> century, which stooped the new building, destructed the old ones and the cities and oriented the state predominantly to the military and boundary defense and building. On the third place should be placed the transition to the liturgy of Constantinople which replaced that of the initial Roman one in Parthicopolis. The new role of Thessaloniki as a Church and artistic center was also a decisive factor for the plan of the Early Christian architecture, the kind of decoration and the changes made. This is true not only for the closely situated to Thessaloniki Parthicopolis, but even for Nicopolis ad Nestum, which is much more remote and relatively isolated in comparison to Parthicopolis.

#### *The Early Christian and Early Byzantine basilicas, residences*

The three-aisled basilica is the most often spread and dominating type among the Early Christian / Early Byzantine architecture of the studied area. The numerous basilicas here can be systemized according to several different

<sup>10</sup> В. Попова, *Op.cit.*, 2011, 284, 286.

<sup>11</sup> В. Герасимова, Два надписа от базилика № 4 в Сандански (предварително съобщение). – *Нумизматика Сфрагистика Епиграфика*, 6, София 2010 191-206; S. Petrova, *The Early Christian...*, 2015, 161-184; Sharankov, *Inscriptions from the Middle Strymon Region (4th c. BC – 4th c. AD): New Readings and Interpretations.* – *Archaeologia Bulgarica*, XXIV, 2, 2020, 110-112.



criteria. According to the function, the basilica may be episcopal (No 1, the first Episcopal, and No 4, the second Episcopal basilica in Parthicopolis; the basilica in Mikrevo; the basilica at Garescos); cemeterial (three excavated at Parthicopolis No 5, 9 and 10; and basilica No 2 in Nicopolis ad Nestum); martyrial with *capella in memoriam martyrum* (basilica No 7 in Parthicopolis<sup>12</sup> and supposedly basilica No 2 in the environment of Nicopolis ad Nestum, the latter combining probably both functions as martyrium and cemetery<sup>13</sup>); and finely monastery one (one in Parthicopolis, No 6; and probably basilica No 1 in the environment of Nicopolis). According to the kind of site, it may be a city or town basilica (Parthicopolis, Heraclea and probably Katuntsi, Mikrevo) and a village one (Oreshe, Old Debren, etc.). Additionally, the episcopal basilicas possess also episcopal residences (basilica No 1 and No 4 in Parthicopolis; the basilica at Mikrevo). A separate residence without found basilica has been excavated in Nicopolis ad Nestum, but probably the basilica will be discovered too later during the next excavations. It is possible that previously in the period of the Principate it was the residence of the praetor of the kind of *villa urbana*, transformed to Episcopaeion from the 4<sup>th</sup> century on<sup>14</sup>. This residence occupies the surface of 1024 square m (32x32m). Its first building period is in 2<sup>nd</sup> century, with entrance from the east, and serving as *villa urbana* or residence of some of the high-ranked magistrates of Nicopolis (fig. 7). It has 16 rooms, from which can be well differentiated the peristyle court and room No 11, the *triclinium*. In second period in 4<sup>th</sup> century the new changes have been caused by the erecting of part of the Late Antique fortress wall from the east sticking with a gap to the residence. Then the eastern façade of the latter stopped its existence and a new entrance appeared from the north. Namely during second period the building received the function of Episcopal residence, and the *triclinium* was covered with a polychrome mosaic from the middle of 4<sup>th</sup> century. The rooms around the peristyle court have been also re-built and received new functions. One of them is turned according to the researchers to 'oratorium', the next one No 13 – into 'baptisterium'<sup>15</sup>. The rest of rooms remain not clarified, except room No 1, called 'kichen', whose identification is not acceptable for us<sup>16</sup>. The main receiving room of the bishop is No 11 with the mosaic pavement. Coins, a balance, plumb stamps, etc. have been found in room 8, which can be considered because of these finds as the chancellery–depository of the bishop. In room 12 are found sunken pithuses, that's why it may be the storehouse for grain, etc. Concerning room No 13, it is intended rather for some craft activity than as *baptisterium*, on the base of the places of the found troughs, the drains and the

<sup>12</sup> S. Petrova, The roman Theatre of Paroicopolis/Parthicopolis and its historical fortune. – *Niš and Byzantium*, (ed M. Rakocija), XIV, 2016, 87-112

<sup>13</sup> B. Попова, *Op.cit.*, 2011, 265 ff.

<sup>14</sup> S. Petrova, Nicopolis ad Nestum / Mestum. – *Roman cites in Bulgaria*. vol. 1, (R. Ivanov, ed.), Sofia 2012, 324-326.

<sup>15</sup> M. Ваклинова, Ц. Комитова, Античен и средновековен град Никополис ад Нестум – Сграда I“. – *Археологически открития и разкопки през 2019 г.*, София, 2020, 754-758.

<sup>16</sup> S. Petrova, *Op.cit.*, 2012, 324-325.

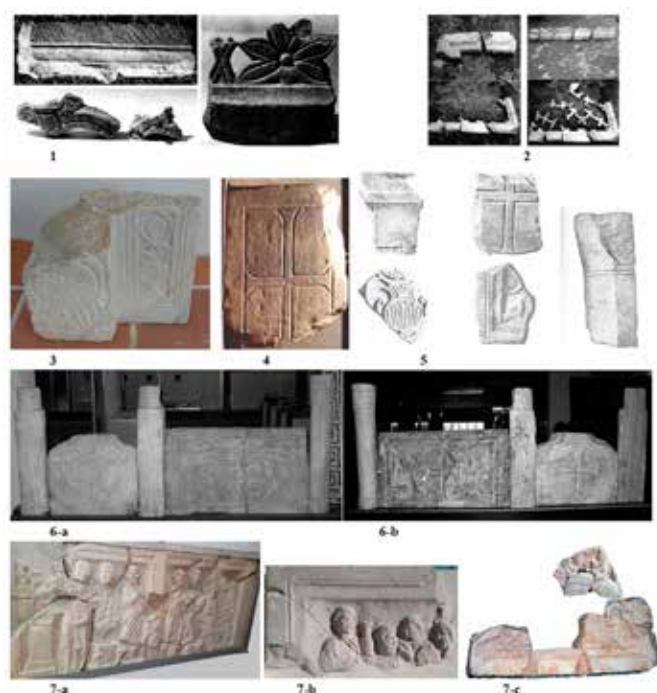


Fig. 8. Chancel screens: 8-1. Parthicopolis, Basilica No. 1; 8-2. Nicopolis, Basilica No. 2; 8-3 and 8-4. Parthicopolis, Basilica in the necropolis at Loven Dom; 8-5. Gareskos (Melnik), Basilica;

8-6 a,b. Nicopolis ad Nestum. Basilica in Oresche; 8-7 a-c. Parthicopolis, Episcopal Basilica (No. 4)

Сл. 8. Канцелне преграде: 8-1. Партикополис, базилика бр. 1; 8-2. Никополис, базилика бр. 2; 8-3 и 8-4. Партикополис, базилика у некрополи код Ловен Дома; 8-5. Гарескос (Мелник), базилика; 8-6 а,б. Никополис ад Нестум, базилика у Орешу; 8-7 а-с. Партикополис, епископска базилика (бр. 4).

presence of a basin similar to other basin in different room of the residence. This could be the process of dyeing of different materials, for instance wool dyeing, etc., having in mind the excellent conditions for the shepherd flocks in the area.

This representative residence existing almost six centuries supposes that it has been always connected with ruling of Nicopolis and is near to the Roman agora and possibly rebuilt in the Early Christian center. Its location should be expected immediately north of the excavated city *thermae* to the east, towards the Episcopal residence.

The function of the other basilicas in the middle courses of Strymon and Nestos is unknown, because only separate architectural details are found, not the plans themselves.

The prevailing basilicas possess a shortened naos. In Nicopolis ad Nestum the naos of basilica No 1 is a slightly shortened square<sup>17</sup>. Similar naos has also the basilica of Heraclea Sintike, the Episcopal basilica (No 4) of Parthicopolis and the basilica in Mikrevo. The width of the aisles is as twice less than the width of the central aisle. The same proportions (1:2:1) may be established also in basilica No 1 of Nicopolis ad Nestum. The width of the central aisle of Basilica No. 3 in Partikopolis is also twice the width of the side aisles. It is established that with some of the basilicas of the same city one of the aisle is wider: the south aisle of basilica No 7, and near the northeastern corner arched bent steps have been built made of bricks; also the south aisle of basilica No 2 in Parthicopolis. With the rest of the basilicas it was established that the width

<sup>17</sup> В. Попова, *Op.cit.*, 2011, 285 and 265.

of the aisles is three times less than that one of the naos. Such is the basilica in Heraclea Sintike, basilica No 1, No 2 and No 3 in Parthicopolis, basilica No 2 in Nicopolis ad Nestum and the basilica in Oreshe. These facts suppose that the roof of such basilicas was of the Hellenistic type, with higher naos like in basilica No 1 in Nicopolis ad Nestum<sup>18</sup>. During the first construction period the Episcopal basilica in Parthicopolis was also of the Hellenistic type.

The arcade construction made of bricks was dividing the naos from the aisles in the basilicas in Nicopolis ad Nestum, Oreshe and No 1 and No 4 in Parthicopolis. This construction is known from the Early Christian architecture from 4<sup>th</sup> century: in Rome these is San Giovanni in Laterano and the basilica of Maxentius (306-311) and Constantine I (306-337) on the Forum; the basilica on the Severian Forum in Leptis Magna and the one in Tipassa, etc.<sup>19</sup>. The basilica in Mikrevo and basilica No 4 in Parthicopolis (second building period) have a ridge roof<sup>20</sup>. It is documented that the latter possesses stairs at the north wall of the narthex leading to the gallery, beginning from the narthex and continuing over the north aisle on the second floor. It is supposed also that such a gallery has been built in basilica No 1 in Nicopolis ad Nestum<sup>21</sup>.

**The apses** of not all three-aisled basilicas<sup>22</sup> have been excavated: in some cases they were not accessible, under the central street etc.; in the other cases already they were destroyed in modern times by the new building. In some basilicas the apse is one and half-rounded. The only exception so far is the apse of the Syrian type from the second building period of basilica No 4 in Parthicopolis. It is hidden and from the interior looks like as thick rectangle. In our opinion this may be due to its later forming at the very end of 4<sup>th</sup> – beginning of 5<sup>th</sup> century of *Via Sacra* and the half-rounded piazza.

In some basilicas there is a narthex<sup>23</sup>, sometimes even an atrium, and in most cases they appear in the second building period. The basilicas at the area of Middle Nestos are not so richly indented in its plans and architecture, but they are also three-aisled and with one apse.

<sup>18</sup> В. Попова, *Ibidem*, 2011, 285-286.

<sup>19</sup> See summarized in S. Petrova, On Early Christianity and Early Christian Basilicas of Parthicopolis. – *Studia sull'Oriente Cristiano* 161, Roma 2012, 93-139; S. Petrova, The Early Christian Basilicas..., 2015, 161-184; S. Petrova & V. Petkov. Παρθικοπολις/ Парθикополиς. – *Roman cities in Bulgaria, vol. II – Thracian, Greek, Roman and Medieval cities, residences and fortresses in Bulgaria* (ed. R. Ivanov), Sofia 2015, 380 ff. and cit. lit.

<sup>20</sup> According to A. Dimitrova-Milcheva, the basilica is of Hellenistic type and has an exonarthex, which in fact the basilica does not have. See: Димитрова-Милчева, Сандански (Свети Врач) от античността до средновековието. – *Римски и ранновизантийски градове в България*, (ред. Р. Иванов), София 2002, 281.

<sup>21</sup> В. Попова, Две раннохристиянски ..., 2011, 285.

<sup>22</sup> The only but partially studied one-nave church is the one in Gorno Gradishte, near Mikrevo.

<sup>23</sup> Due to the partial study of the basilica in Heraclea Sintike, it cannot be said with certainty that the basilica had a narthex. See Л. Вагалински, Хераклея Синтика. – *Археологически открития и разкопки през 2018 г.*, София, 2019, 273, обр. 1; Л. Вагалински, Хераклея Синтика. – *Археологически открития и разкопки през 2019 г.*, София, 2020, 750, обр. 1.

**Narthex.** All the studied basilicas have a non-indented in its plan narthex with entrances to the naos and the aisles. The tribelon or the entrance to the naos flanked by two columns and without door of basilica No 3 in Parthicopolis is featuring the architecture of mainland Greece, Thessaly and Macedonia. The closest parallels for the basilicas with tribelon are coming from Thessaloniki (Archeiropoietos<sup>24</sup>, St. Demetrius and the so-called Tumba); from Philippi (basilica A); from Amphipolis (basilica 'Γ' and 'Δ'); from Thassos (the martyrion of Accacios); from Stobi (the North basilica); from Suvodol (the basilica), from Heraclea Lyncestis, etc.<sup>25</sup>; from Dacia Mediterranea – in present-day the village of Ivanyane, Sofia region and the village of Tsarkvishte (Klisekoy), Pirdop region<sup>26</sup>.

**Exonarthex.** Another peculiarity of the basilicas in the area of Middle Strymon is the presence of exonarthex. It is included in three basilicas: the Episcopal basilica of Mikrevo, the basilica of bishop Ioannes (No 2) and basilica No 3 in Parthicopolis. All three have been built around the middle of 5<sup>th</sup> century according to the archaeological data.

**Synthronon.** Several basilicas have synthrona in its apses. Two-stepped synthronon is the one in Mikrevo and basilica No 2 in the environment of Nicopolis ad Nestum, and three-stepped in the Episcopal basilica of Parthicopolis and basilica No 1 in the environment of Nicopolis ad Nestum. The latter synthronon was decorated with black-and-white opus sectile mosaic at the vertical parts of the steps made of bricks. On some other synthronons there are remnants of wall painting. The form and decoration of the synthronon of basilica No 4 in Parthicopolis is more specific, not applied in the lands of diocese Thrace and more popular in Illyricum. It ends with benches, replaced to the west outside of the arc of the apse, like in some basilicas in Thessaly and Epirus (in Phtiotis Thebes and basilica B in Nicopolis).

**Entrances.** A peculiarity can be observed in the valley of Strymon and in Stobi<sup>27</sup> west of the studied area, namely an entrance from the eastern part of the basilica. Such is also the entrance at the eastern part of the south aisle in the basilica on the hill Hissarluk in Pautalia<sup>28</sup> (present-day Kyustendil) and in both aisles of basilica No 2 in the locality Kailuka in Pleven<sup>29</sup>. All the three-

<sup>24</sup> К. Θ. Παπης, Η δομική αποκατάσταση της Αχειροποιήτου κατά τον 7ο αιώνα και η σημασία της για την αστική συνέχεια της Θεσσαλονίκης κατά τους 'σκοτεινούς αιώνες'. – *Ktitor*, Αφιέρωμα στον δάσκαλο Γεώργιο Βελένη Επιστημονική επιμέλεια: Ιωάννης Δ. Βαράλης - Φλώρα Καραγιάννη, 2017, 291, Εικ. 3.

<sup>25</sup> J. P. Sodini, Note sur deux variants regionaux dans les basiliques de Grèce et des Balkans : le tribèlon et l'emplacement de l'áμβονοι – *Bulletin de Correspondance Hellénique*, 99, 1975, 581-584.

<sup>26</sup> Н. Чанева-Дечевска, *Раннохристиянската архитектура в България*. София, 1999, 83 and cit.lit.

<sup>27</sup> Б. Алексова, Стоби, базиликата во Паликура, 1981 г. – *ГЗФФ* 10 (36), Скопје, 1983, 135-192.

<sup>28</sup> Й. Иванов, Кюстендилският Хисарлък и неговите старини. – *Известия на Българското археологическо дружество*, VII, 1920, 66-123.

<sup>29</sup> Entrance from the east, but in the two side naves, there is the basilica in Pleven. See: R. Pillinger, A. Lirsch, V. Popova, *Corpus der spätantiken und frühchristlichen Mo-*

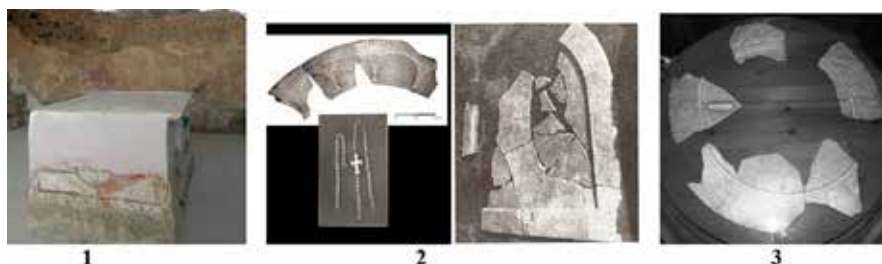


Fig. 9. Mensa sacra: 10-1. Parthicopolis, Episcopal Basilica (No. 4), skeuphylakion; 10-2. Parthicopolis, Basilica of Bishop Ioannes (No. 2); 10-3. Nicopolis, an undiscovered basilica in the northwest part of the fortress.

Сл. 9. Mensa sacra: 10-1. Партикополис, епископска базилика (бр. 4), скевофилакион; 10-2. Партикополис, базилика епископа Јована (бр. 2); 10-3. Никополис, неоткривена базилика у северозападном делу тврђаве.

aisled basilicas, except No 4 in Parthicopolis, have three entrances to the naos from the west. But the mentioned Episcopal basilica has also entrance from the east and south, reflecting the Constantinopolitan liturgy, which has replaced the previous Roman one. The presence of so many entrances answers the necessity of quick access and exit from the basilica during the liturgical actions. It can be supposed that in the Episcopal basilica of Parthicopolis the new liturgy of Constantinople has been introduced after the middle of 5<sup>th</sup> century and namely then the south entrances were closed.

**Atrium.** The atrium is also helping the quick access to the temple as place where the crowd is divided according to its belonging to Christianity and degree of devotion, letting only the true Christians to enter the aisles, the still not baptized ones allowed to attend – in the galleries. The atrium appears late in the liturgical practice of Constantinople<sup>30</sup>. In Rome the atrium is part of the plan where persons with different stage of devotion are gathering together and where they can get 'the sacred purification' from the water sources<sup>31</sup>. The atrium as part of the liturgical planning can be found in basilica No 1 and No 2 in Nicopolis ad Nestum<sup>32</sup>, in basilica No 1 and No 4 in Parthicopolis and in the basilica of Mikrevo. The best research has been done of the atrium of the Episcopal basilica of Parthicopolis (Sandanski) planned non-traditionally from the south similarly to basilica 'Г' in Amphipolis. The concrete location of the atrium in basilica No 4 is due to the general displacement of the terrain to the west and most of all to the presence of the neighboring main street *Via Sacra* from the east. The form of the atrium is almost square and paved with bricks,

*saiken Bulgariens*, I, II, Wien, 2016, Taf. 44, Abb. 123.

<sup>30</sup> С. Станев, Литургично планиране: за или против функционирањето на атрија в Константинополските цркви през VII век. – *Исследования в чест на проф. Стефан Бояджиев*, София, 2011, 313-345.

<sup>31</sup> *Historia ecclesiastica*, book. X, chapter IV, 37-40; see and И. Цоневски, *Патрология. Живот, съчинения и учение на църковните отци, учители и писатели*. София, 1986, 305; W. H. C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity*. Philadelphia, 1985, 478, 939, 941.

<sup>32</sup> В. Попова, *Две раннохристиянски ...*, 2011, 263-294.



Сл. 14.  
Партикополис.  
Мозаични натписи:  
14-1. Епископска  
базилика (бр. 4),  
нартекс; 14-2.  
Базилика епископа  
Јована (бр. 2),  
ексонартекс  
Fig. 14.  
Parthicopolis.  
Mosaic inscriptions:  
14-1. Episcopal  
Basilica (No. 4),  
narthex; 14-2.  
Basilica of Bishop  
Ioannes (No. 2),  
exonarthex.

with a solid west wall of the atrium. Many entrances are formed in it, most of them on its eastern façade. They facilitate the quick access of the Christians from the piazza and the main street for processions from the east (**fig. 2**).

While for Asia Minor, Syria and Dalmatia the atrium is exception, in North Greece (basilica A in Philippi, Amphipolis, Thessaloniki) and Rome it is part of the basilica liturgical planning. The modern houses cover the place where supposedly basilica No 2 in Parthicopolis could have also an atrium. However, on the base of the existing exonarthex and the discovered path made of *spoliae*, among them Roman tomb steles, the atrium really existed here<sup>33</sup>. *Via Sacra* and the semicircular (sigma-like) piazza east of the Episcopal basilica tangential the atrium have been built at the beginning of 5<sup>th</sup> century. The half-rounded form of the piazza suggests the possibility of mirror planning of the space west of basilica No 2 (**figs. 1-4, 2**). In this way the piazza could be entirely round, similarly to the piazza of Constantine I in Constantinople and its *Mese* and other places from the same period<sup>34</sup>. But here in front of basilica No 4 the round piazza is divided in the middle by the street for church processions. This kind of round urban piazza and planning surrounded by colonnades is a novelty of Constantine I, created for his 'New Rome' and quite different from the previous pagan forums.

### *Building Materials and Techniques*

The building materials and building techniques in the area of Middle Strymon and Middle Nestos are the usual ones for the Roman and Late Antique period. Boulders (*opus incertum*), marble; bricks used in the *opus mixtum*<sup>35</sup>; also wood, but not preserved, taken from the numerous forests in the surround-

<sup>33</sup> Т. Иванов, Д. Серафимова, Н. Николов, *Разкопки ...*, 1969, 105–209.

<sup>34</sup> S. Petrova, The semicircular piazza of Parthicopolis in the development of the Late Antique city planning. – *Niš and Byzantium*, (ed. M. Rakocija), XVI, 2018, 103-120.

<sup>35</sup> S. Petrova, *The Urban ...*, 2015, 161-184; S. Petrova, *The roman Theatre ...*, 2016, 87-112.

ing mountains. The bricks are used for forming the corners of the Episcopal basilica (No 4) and the Episcopaeion to it; the entrances, the arcades of the colonnades of the basilicas, of the portico of the half-rounded piazza, the arcades in the Episcopaeion, the corners and entrances of basilica No 2. The cities Parthicopolis and Nicopolis has not only produced what is needed for its construction of the basilicas<sup>36</sup>; but also offered products for sale in near and far places<sup>37</sup>. Both cities have their own quarries for marble and granite extraction<sup>38</sup>. The second source of material was the *spoliae*, the reused marble and other kind of stone pieces and architectonic details taken from the earlier Roman buildings. That's why for a certain period of 4<sup>th</sup> century, particularly during the Constantinian ruling, and up to the period of Theodosius I, the *spoliae* were very common phenomena in Thrace and Macedonia<sup>39</sup>.

In Southwestern Bulgaria there is also direct import of liturgical and furniture architectonic elements from the famous Late Antique centers of production in Rome, Greece and Asia Minor<sup>40</sup>. In the light of the presence of several quarries in the mountains, workshops upstream the mountain rivers and the documented re-usage of the Roman material and decorative pieces, Parthicopolis, Melnik and Mikrevo (the latter also very near to the quarries of Ilindentsi) seem to be in a very favorable position regarding the supplying with marble and other stone material for building and for architectonic decoration and furniture. Nevertheless, with the new excavations of Heraclea Sintike<sup>41</sup>, there appeared a new theory in the recent years that after the several terrible earthquakes in the city, one of them followed also by a flood, and the total destruction of the city, its marble and architectonic pieces have been taken and brought as *spoliae* to Parthicopolis. It seems, however, that no argument can support this new theory. Firstly, the excavations of Heraclea demonstrate very obviously

<sup>36</sup> For the reused architectural details in the early Christian architecture of Parthicopolis, see in detail: S. Petrova, The roman architectonic decoration reused in the Early Christian Buildings of Parthicopolis. – *PATRIMONIUM.MK*, vol. 15, 2017, 345-384.

<sup>37</sup> The chancel screen of Oresche - the slab with the peacocks, commented below in the text on the types of altar barriers. In addition, see: С. Петрова, Архитектурната украса на раннохристиянските базилики в околностите на Никопол на Места. – сб. *Добруджа*, 32, 2017, 244; S. Petrova, Features of the Early Christian Architectural Decoration in Parthicopolis and Nicopolis ad Nestum. – *Niš and Byzantium*, (ed.M. Rakocija), XXII, 2024, 93-130.

<sup>38</sup> S. Petrova, Quarries and Workshops in the Territory of Parthicopolis (1st – 6th c. AD). – *Sandanski and its Territory during Prehistory, Antiquity and Middle Ages: Current Trend in Archaeological Research. Proceedings of an International Conference at Sandanski, September 17 – 20, 2015. Papers of the American Research Center in Sofia*, vol. 3, Veliko Tarnovo, 2017, 152-169.

<sup>39</sup> S. Petrova, *The roman architectonic decoration...*, 2017, 345-384; И. Досева, Ранновизантийските капители от Созопол: традиция и многообразие. – *Проблеми на изкуството*, № 2, 2010, 3-11; И. Досева, Сполиите в Боянската черква: строителен материал или реликви. – *Проблеми на изкуството*, № 1, 2007, 7-12; S. Petrova *The roman Theatre...*, 2017, 87-112; S. Petrova, *Features...*, 2024, 93-130.

<sup>40</sup> S. Petrova, *The roman Theatre...*, 2017, 360; S. Petrova, The cancel screens..., 2020, 189-222.

<sup>41</sup> Л. Вагалинскир, *Хераклея...*, 2020, 749-754.

that the columns, capitals, cornices etc. have remained in situ allowing a partly or complete in some places reconstruction of the whole building. Secondly, Parthicopolis does not need to move the material and elements from Heraclea, since the former one has at disposal its own quarries, workshops and a lot of Roman spoliae in situ. It was not necessary in such case to bring them from the distanced Heraclea crossing the deeper in Antiquity Strymon, but only from 50-100 m from the Roman buildings of Parthicopolis itself or, after the end of 4<sup>th</sup> – beginning of 5<sup>th</sup> century, to order the extracting, carving and sculpting from Ilindentsi, or from Petrovo, or from the workshops upstream the mountain rivers, or from the famous import centers such as Thassos, Docimian or even Thessalian workshops etc. Thirdly, especially difficult was the situation in 6<sup>th</sup> century because of the barbarian invasions and frequent earthquakes, causing great destructions. During such difficult from every aspect periods, nobody could build, even with *spoliae*, and some new habitants from the group of Avars, Gots, Slavs etc. are witnessed in Parthicopolis, with entirely new and miserable kind of building, material, technique and pottery at the beginning of 7<sup>th</sup> century, when Parthicopolis stopped its existence and the new archaeological culture of the Slavs, particularly of a Slavonic house, appeared only in the 9<sup>th</sup> century<sup>42</sup>.

Identical was the situation in Nicopols ad Nestum, with also several own marble and stone quarries. But different here is the fact of lack of mass *spolia*, only in part of the columns, the Roman Dorian capital, reused in basilica No 2, also in the partly preserved pilaster Roman-Corinthian capital from basilica No 1 with unclear archeological context<sup>43</sup>. The early Christian architectural elements: Dorian and Ionian imposts, slabs and elements for the altar barriers were produced in local, owned by Nicopolis workshops<sup>44</sup>, and imports were found from the Parthicopolis workshops – Petrovo quarry, and some of the models were copied from the production of Thessaly ateliers.

The construction in Parthicopolis and Garescos was done with river boulders of mortar, and the architectural decoration was made of marble and granite. In Nicopolis the construction is also with mortar and river boulders, but the architectural decoration – columns and other elements are made only of marble. All basilicas, residences, squares, atriums, along the middle course of the Struma and Mesta, were covered with tiles. Only the roof of the basilica in Oresche is made of slab stones.

Liturgical and other interior planning and furnishing:

**Chancel screens.** The apse with altar, the bema with the chancel screens, the ambo and the solea, the entrances, the furniture and the decoration in the area of Middle Strymon and Middle Nestos are planned according to the liturgy

<sup>42</sup> I. Topalilov & V. Petkov, 'New Data on the Bishop's Complex at Parthicopolis', in *Sandanski and its Territory during Prehistory, Antiquity and Middle Ages: Current Trend in Archaeological Research. Proceedings of an International Conference at Sandanski, September 17 – 20, 2015. Papers of the American Research Center in Sofia*, 3, Veliko Tarnovo, 2017, 255-259.

<sup>43</sup> В. Попова, *Две раннохристиянски...*, 2011, 280-288.

<sup>44</sup> С. Петрова, *Архитектурната украса...*, 2017, 244; S. Petrova, *Features...*, 2024, 118 ff.



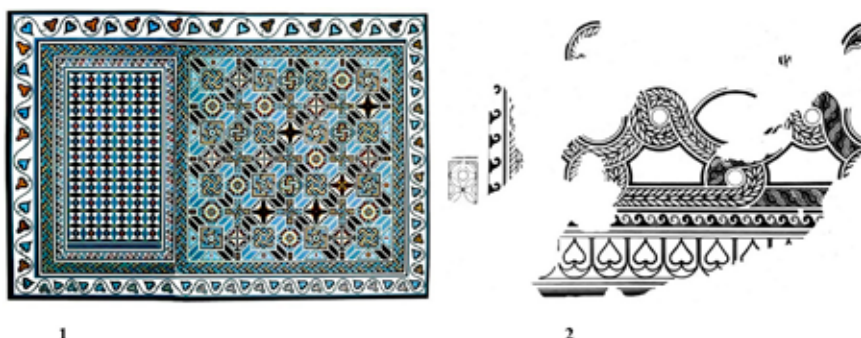


Fig. 15. Nicopolis ad Nestum: 15-1. Mosaic from the nave of Basilica No. 2; 15-2. Mosaic from the nave of Basilica No. 1.

Сл. 15. Никополис ад Нестум: 15-1. Мозаик из наоса базилике бр. 2; 15-2. Мозаик из наоса базилике бр. 1.

of Rome or Constantinople<sup>45</sup>. Among them the altar with the chancel screens are the most important elements, followed by the appeared at the end of 4<sup>th</sup> – beginning of 5<sup>th</sup> century ambo and solea.

To the present moment, there exists only one hypothesis relating to the basilica in Strumsko<sup>46</sup> that its chancel screens was wooden<sup>47</sup>, maybe also for the railing of the *prothesis* and *diaconicon* in basilica No 2 in the environment of Nicopolis ad Nestum and in some churches and basilicas where no rests of marble chancel screens have been found.

Many parts and fragments of open-work or of solid chancel screens have been excavated in the studied area. They feature two main kinds of screens: of low and high one. The chancel screen of basilica No 1 and No 4 from the first building period, the cemetery basilica at the locality Loven dom, all in Parthicopolis, and basilica No 2 in the environment of Nicopolis ad Nestum belong to the low type. To the high type can be related the screens from basilica No 4 from the second building period, basilica No 1 in Nicopolis ad Nestum and the basilica in Garescos. Although according to Violeta Nesheva the basilica had a low chancel screen, however, the discovered colonnette with a stylized end-capital belongs to the second level and points that the chancel had a high screen. The low chancel from the first building period of the basilica No 1 of Parthicopolis has *transennas* decorated with scales and with open-work four-leaf rosettes (fig. 8-1). The transept of the chancel screen and of Basilica No. 2 in Nicopolis is openwork - a fish scale, marked with several variations<sup>48</sup> (fig.

<sup>45</sup> The chancel screens have been promulgated and analyzed. See: С. Петрова, *Архитектурната украса...*, 2017, 333-352; S. Petrova, *Features...*, 2024, 118-127.

<sup>46</sup> Strumsko, a district of the city of Blagoevgrad. The basilica discovered here has not been made public until now. It is known that it was three-nave with towers to the west and presumably a wooden chancel screens.

<sup>47</sup> Н. Чанева-Дечевска, *Раннохристиянската...*, 1999, basilica in Strumsko and cit. lit.

<sup>48</sup> See: В. Попова, *Две раннохристиянски...*, 2011, 263-294; S. Petrova, *Features...*, 2024, 118, Pl. XII and text.

8-2). In the cemetery basilica in the locality Loven dom the plate is solid carved together with the colonnette made of the local grey large-grained marble from the deposit Mura in Ilindentsi. Another plate coming also from this basilica is decorated from both sides by a high Latin cross (fig. 8-3, 8-4). The motifs on the *transenna* fragments from locality Loven dom and Garescos are very rich: cantharos with vine branches, crosses, etc. (fig. 8-5). No doubt that the most interesting are two of the chancel screens: the one from the Episcopal basilica of Parthicopolis and the one from the basilica in Oreshe in the environment of Nicopolis ad Nestum (fig. 8-6a,b). The low chancel screens of the Episcopal basilica in Parthicopolis occupies in the first building period the whole width of the naos and has only one central entrance from west. From north and south the chancel is limited by the two rooms of the *senatorium* and the *matroneum*. Two plates with reliefs made of fine-grained fine imported marble flank the west side<sup>49</sup>. The solea is added during the second building period in front of the entrance. This has resulted to the enlargement of the dimensions of the *presbyterium* from the south, north and west, formed by big marble plates as border alongside the mosaic in *opus sectile*, which was paving the *presbyterium* (fig. 8-7a-c). These changes respectively also in the chancel screens caused the addition of new plates from north and south as well as of new plates for forming the *solea*. The new plates are made of local coarse-grained light-grey marble, again in the spirit of the images and iconography from first building period. Not paying attention to the differences in the two kinds of marble, the artistic treatment and style, some archaeologists consider the screens as *spolia*, namely with the iconography of re-used Early Christian sarcophagus<sup>50</sup>. The place of finding the fragments of the chancel screens close to the apse of the Episcopal basilica and the fact of existing of two different kinds and structure of marble, with similar iconography, but different treatment allows to determine these screens not as *spoliae* of sarcophagus, but of chancel screens. This supposition is supported also by some monuments from Constantinople and the west provinces, for instance Ravenna, etc.<sup>51</sup>. In the second period the screens from the low type in the Episcopal basilica have been transformed to the high one. The spheres with which the small columns of the chancel screen ended have been reworked in schematic bases over which have been placed the *colonnettes* of the high chancel.

<sup>49</sup> For more details see: S. Petrova, *The cancel screens...*, 2020, 189-222.

<sup>50</sup> А. Димитрова-Милчева, *Сандански (Свети Врач)...*, 2002, 282; A. Dimitrova-Milčeva & V. Petkov, *Basilika Nr. 4 (Bischofsbasilika) in der Stadt Sandanski (Sv. Vrač) Vorbericht*. – *Folia Archaeologica Balcanica*, 1. In *Honorem Verae Bitrakova-Grozdanova*, Skopje, 2006, 403-424; A. Pülz, *Some Considerations on the Relief Panels from the Bishop's Basilica (Basilika Nr. 4) in Sandanski, Bulgaria*. – *Sandanski and its Territory during Prehistory, Antiquity and Middle Ages: Current Trend in Archaeological Research. Proceedings of an International Conference at Sandanski, September 17 – 20, 2015. Papers of the American Research Center in Sofia*, 3, Veliko Tarnovo, 2017, 231, and 239, fig. 2; И. Досева, *Антична остотека и раннохристиянски саркофаг: Отвъд предвидената функция*. – *Од езичество към християнство*, Скопје-София, 2018, 214-216.

<sup>51</sup> S. Petrova, *The cancel screens...*, 2020, 189-222.

The screens with scenes on the *plutei* from both building periods of basilica No 4 are unique. They represent subjects from the Old and the New Testament in the Roman iconography and style: the Sacrifice of Isaac, the Eucharist (**fig. 8-7c**), The Supper at Simon the Leper<sup>52</sup>, etc. It is established that the screens of the low chancel are made by Italian workshops under the influence of Rome or in Rome itself. The plates from the second building periods are made by local workshops in the area of Middle Strymon, keeping the iconography and the manner of treatment, obviously repeating some of the subjects from the first period. On the west side of the chancel at both sides of the entrance are placed the two main scenes present in both building periods. The scene with the Eucharist with bread is from the north side of the entrance, and from the south side – the Eucharist with vine (**figs. 8-7a, 8-7b**). Both scenes together represent the Liturgy of Eucharist, the main Sacrament of the Early Christian church.

The second entirely preserved scene in situ descends from the basilica in Oreshe from the environment of Nicopolis ad Nestum<sup>53</sup>. The chancel screen is found together with other elements of the decoration: capitals, columns and bases covered with typical elements such as peacocks, Latin cross etc., belonging to the type of the high chancel (**fig. 8-6a,b**). Differently from the screens of the Episcopal basilica in Parthicopolis, the screens from Oreshe are two-sided. From the inside of the altar, crosses are represented. It is accepted that this very widely spread scheme has been distributed through Constantinople, when the cross is represented over a disc<sup>54</sup>. The cross on the screen from Oreshe is projecting in relief over the disc with both screens. Such protruding should be considered as a characteristic peculiarity in the lands submitted in the church aspect to the Roman church. We can observe such decoration in the southwestern part of Thrace and Macedonia, predominantly in the Small basilica in Heraclea Lyncestis<sup>55</sup>; in the Episcopal basilica of Stobi<sup>56</sup>; in basilica 'B' in Orman in Dardania<sup>57</sup>; in the basilicas in New Epirus and Studenchishte of New Epirus<sup>58</sup> etc., all of them relating mainly to 5<sup>th</sup> century. The face screen is decorated with two peacocks with a chalice<sup>59</sup>, between them. The vine branches are growing up with leafs and grapes. The Early Christian symbol of the fish is represented

<sup>52</sup> *Ibidem*, 2020, 211, fig. 17 a, b.

<sup>53</sup> С. Петрова, *Архитектурната ...*, 2017, 241, Табло V, Табло VI, 22 а, б.

<sup>54</sup> И. Досева, Конструкция и декорация на ранновизантийските олтарни прегради в контекста на църковния интериор (според паметниците от територията на съвременна България през IV–VI в.). – *Проблеми на изкуството*, 3, 2005, 26 и бел. 104.

<sup>55</sup> В. Лилчиќ, *Македонскиот камен за боговите, христијаните и за животот по животот*, Скопје, II, 2003, 723.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibidem*, 1119.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibidem*, 654–657 (discovered accidentally on the surface).

<sup>58</sup> В. Битракова, *Старохристијански споменици во Охридско*. Охрид, 1975, 1-109, сл. 1-48.

<sup>59</sup> Described in the publication as a crater. See: A. Milčeva, Eine frühchristliche Basilika aus dem Dorf Oreše im Gebiet von Nikopolis ad Nestum (Westrhodopen, Bulgarien)', in (R. Harreiter et al., eds.), *Acta XIV Congressus internationalis archeologiae christianae (Wien 19-26.9.1999)*, I. Cita del Vaticano – Wien, 2006, 531.

a top a chalice<sup>60</sup>. The second screen is covered with one of the basic decorative schemes – the relief composition with the cross in the triumphal wreath<sup>61</sup>. The composition is built on the principle of the axial symmetry, accenting on the idea of the everlasting life in the Paradise. It is accepted that this iconography is inspired by Psalm 42 accepted already officially after 313, singing about the deer which quenches its thirst with the running water<sup>62</sup>. Other chancel screens from still unknown basilicas come from Parthicopolis and Nicopolis from the Middle course of Nestos<sup>63</sup>. They are decorated mainly with crosses in the center of the profiled marble plates, in rectangular frame or in plastically formed circle, which we identify as local production; from the quarries belonging to the two cities with quarries, namely north of Parthicopolis and southwest of Nicopolis in the Middle course of Nestos<sup>64</sup>.

Traces of the supposed railings have been found in the *intercolumniums* of the Episcopal basilica of Parthicopolis. These are holes in the columns for installing such screens possibly wooden, having in mind the lack of any marble ones. In one *intercolumnium* of basilica No 2 in the environment of Nicopolis ad Nestum is found a thin small wall. Supposedly, the basilica in Mikrevo had the same screens in the *intercolumniums* of the colonnade on a *stylobate* similar to the one in the Episcopal basilica in Parthicopolis.

**Mensae sacrae/ Communion Tables.** Mensa sacra is the most important and obligatory furniture in the liturgy of the Eucharist and its focus. The bread and the wine of Eucharist are placed on it during the ritual transforming mystically into the body and blood of Christ. It originates in the domestic rituals in the Early Christians private houses in the first three centuries. Since the time of Constantine I, the *mensa sacra* occupies the central part of the newly created Christian church. It's symbolic is very rich and constantly enriching with the growth and complexity of the Early Christian liturgy and rituals. It is the table for the communion of the Last Supper, the Altar of God, the Sepulchre, etc. It becomes the center of the new ritual in the liturgical development transforming itself into the *proskomidia* / the Liturgy of preparation before the Great Entrance. The only entirely preserved *mensa sacra* is excavated in one of the western rooms of the Episcopal residence of basilica No 4 in Parthicopolis, in the so-called *martyrion*<sup>65</sup>, which in our opinion is the *skeuphylakion* beginning

<sup>60</sup> For more details on the decoration, see В. Попова, *Две раннохристиянски...*, 2011, 269-272; С. Петрова, *Архитектурната украса...*, 2017, 240 и сл.

<sup>61</sup> И. Досева, *Конструкция...*, 2005, 25 и цит. лит.

<sup>62</sup> V. Popova, Fons Vitae in Late Antique monuments from Bulgaria. – *STUDIA ACADEMICA ŠUMENENSIA* (= *Transition from late paganism early Christianity in the architecture and in the Balkans*, 3), 2016, 154–188.

<sup>63</sup> See in more detail С. Петрова, *Архитектурната украса...*, 2017, 233-252.

<sup>64</sup> For quarries see: S. Petrova, *Quarries...*, 2017, 152-169 (Parthicopolis); С. Петрова, *Архитектурната...*, 2017, 244-246 (Nicopolis); S. Petrova, Roman tombstones from Nicopolis ad Nestum/Mestum and its territory. – *Nova antička Duklja*, VIII, 2017, 91-124 (Nicopolis).

<sup>65</sup> В. Петков, Археологически разкопки на Епископска базилика в гр. Сандански, обект Мартириум. – *Археологически открития и разкопки през 2012 г.*, София, 2013, 307-309.

of 5<sup>th</sup> century. (**fig. 9-1**). Traces of the bases of a similar *mensa*, probably supported by four columns, are found on the floor in the apse of the same basilica. Fragments of two sigma-form tables have been excavated in basilica No 2 (of bishop Ioannes) in the same city (**fig. 9-2**). The first one has a plain profiled border and Latin cross with enlarging ends, and the second one has also profiled border and half-rounded 'cups' from the inside the border<sup>66</sup>.

Fragments of a round *mensa* decorated with pagan scenes and images of gods from the Hellenic pantheon are found in the northwestern fortified part of Nicopolis ad Nestum (**fig. 9-3**). They are identified as a production of a workshop under the influence of the masters of Thessaloniki, dated at the end of 3<sup>rd</sup> – beginning of 4<sup>th</sup> century<sup>67</sup>. Small fragments of a second very fine, profiled rectangular *mensa sacra* were found in Basilica 2, Nicopolis. From them it can be seen that the table was made of fine marble with a hint of ivory, brilliantly polished and 1.5 cm thick<sup>68</sup>.

**Ambo.** The appearance of the ambo in the Early Christian temple has been determined by canon 15 of the Council in Laodicea ad Lycum<sup>69</sup> held in 363-364. According to the written sources, the earliest ambo probably together with the solea belonged to the old St. Sofia in Constantinople from 4<sup>th</sup> century. Probably the other early churches also possessed *amboes*. But the earliest archaeological evidence is the church at Topkapı Palace from the first half of 5<sup>th</sup> century<sup>70</sup>. The ambo present in basilicas of Middle Strymon: in the basilica in Mikrevo and the Episcopal basilica (No 4) in Parthicopolis<sup>71</sup>, in both situated at the south part of the naos, not centrally. Such is also the position of the ambo in basilica A of Philippi and the Episcopal basilica of Philippopolis<sup>72</sup>. The ambo in Mikrevo is made of stones, while in Parthicopolis – of bricks, covered with marble revetment from the outside (**fig. 10**). The ambo has been introduced as part of the liturgical planning and furniture of both basilicas in the first decades of 5<sup>th</sup> century<sup>73</sup>, analogical to the appearance of the pulpits in diocese Illyricum<sup>74</sup>. The pulpits are different in its plan and form: in Mikrevo it is one-armed with a raised solid round platform; in Parthicopolis it is two-armed with raised octagonal platform. According to the location of the pulpits, they are associated with the Constantinople liturgical planning.

<sup>66</sup> Т. Иванов, Д. Серафимова, Н. Николов, Разкопки ..., 1969, 105-209.

<sup>67</sup> М. Чичикова, *Mensa sacra...*, 1972p 245-258.

<sup>68</sup> В. Попова, *Две раннохристиянски...*, 2011, 272.

<sup>69</sup> Canon 15: No one else should sing in church except singers who are counted in the clergy and who go up to the pulpit and sing according to a book.

<sup>70</sup> T. F. Mathews, *Early Churches of Constantinople: Architecture and Liturgy*. University Park and London, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1971, 13, 19, 36, 37-38, fig. 17-18.

<sup>71</sup> The basilica at the Youth Home in Pautalia, but the pulpit is different in structure and plan from the pulpits in Parthicopolis and Mikrevo.

<sup>72</sup> Personal observations of the author.

<sup>73</sup> И. Досева, *Ранновизантийските амбони...*, 2011, 139-160; I. Dosseva, *Byzantine Ambos on the Territory of Present-Day Bulgaria: Models and Adaptations*. – *Medieval Bulgarian Art and Letters in a Byzantine Context* 1. Art, 2017, 50-68.

<sup>74</sup> J. P. Sodini, *Op.cit.*, 1975, 585.

**Liturgical vessels.** The evidences and finds of liturgical vessels in the studied area are few so far. Several kinds of vessels for sacred water for purification made of granite are found in the naos of basilica No 1 and the Episcopal residence to it in Parthicopolis. Smaller marble and silver vessels for washing the hands of the bishop and the priests before the liturgy and the other rituals are also well known in the practice of the Early Christianity. During the excavations in many basilicas have been found parts of a bronze chandelier, of chains with crosses from polycandelons and other details of church utensils (**fig. 11**); an entirely preserved iron polycandelon *in situ*<sup>75</sup> in the kitchen of the complex of basilica No 4, Episcopal. Numerous are the finds of glass sanctuary lamps of different form<sup>76</sup>.

**Benches.** Several basilicas in Parthicopolis and the one in Mikrevo have benches as part of the liturgical planning and furniture<sup>77</sup>. According to the archaeological data, they appear at the beginning of 5<sup>th</sup> century, for instance in the bench of the northern half-round piazza, built at the same time with its wall-catenary, and also the ones in the *skeuphylakion* of the same basilica No 4. In the basilicas and residences the benches are sticking to the walls, as in the north and south aisle of basilica, etc.

Benches are to be found in the atrium and exonarthex of the basilica in Mikrevo; in the Episcopal basilica and in basilica No 2 of Parthicopois (**figs. 1-4; 5-2**). They are made of river boulders and plastered at the inside. It is also interesting that the benches of the half-rounded piazza are plastered and covered with wall paintings at the front side. The width of the benches is 45 cm but the height may vary from 35 up to 50 cm. From the territory of Nicopolis ad Nestum benches are found only in the basilica of Oreshe. The benches have double function in dependence of its place. They are the place of short rest for the aged and ill Christians, the pregnant women and the children during the liturgy and the other rituals. The parallels show similar benches in Greece and generally in the Church of Constantinopolis from the 5<sup>th</sup> century on.

#### *Wall Paintings and mosaics*

**Wall Paintings.** Two main techniques have been applied in the wall paintings in the course of Middle Strymon and Middle Nestos. In *al secco* are the

<sup>75</sup> I. Topalilov & V. Petkov, 'New Data on the Bishop's Complex at Parthicopolis', in *Sandanski and its Territory during Prehistory, Antiquity and Middle Ages: Current Trend in Archaeological Research. – Proceedings of an International Conference at Sandanski, September 17 – 20, 2015. Papers of the American Research Center in Sofia*, 3, Veliko Tarnovo, 2017, 264, fig. 13.

<sup>76</sup> V. Popova, 'Late Antique Glass Workshop in Parthicopolis', in *Sandanski and its Territory during Prehistory, Antiquity and Middle Ages: Current Trend in Archaeological Research. – Proceedings of an International Conference at Sandanski, September 17 – 20, 2015. Papers of the American Research Center in Sofia*, vol. 3, Veliko Tarnovo 2017, 267-284.

<sup>77</sup> More about the benches see: S. Petrova, 'The Benches in the Furniture and the liturgical Planning of the Early Christian Basilicas of the Valley of Middle Struma. – *STUDIA ACADEMICA ŠUMENENSIA*. Christian Liturgy on the Late Antique Balkans, vol. 9, Shumen University Press 2022, 197-214.

paintings in some basilicas, residences, the double Rotunda, the benches of the half-round piazza and the south side of the street for processions in Parthicopolis, in Mikrevo and basilica No 1 and 2 in the environment of Nicopolis ad Nestum. In the rest of examples the more frequently used technique is *al fresco* like the Episcopal basilica of Mikrevo<sup>78</sup>, in the naos and the north aisle of basilica No 1, the *porticus* and the first Episcopal residence at the same basilica and basilica No 3, all in Parthicopolis<sup>79</sup>, the basilica in Heraclea. The paintings everywhere are polychrome, with very dense colors, among them the dominating Pompeian red, ochre, brown and yellow, while green and blue are much rarer. In the Episcopal basilica No 4 two layers of wall paintings can be observed, answering to its two building periods<sup>80</sup>.

**The walls.** Generally, there are three main schemes of decoration on the walls. The first one is the so-called incrustation style, imitating the stone, mainly marble revetment of the walls, the structure color of the surface, the spots and veins. They represent the notion of the structure of the Christian universe divided vertically in several spheres, from God on the Heavens with the Paradise to the sub-heavenly spheres with the sky, stars and the Lune, the sphere of the land and the one of the Underworld with the demons. The wall is divided mainly in three parts, beginning with the plinthus/socle and the demonic creatures there, the middle division meaning the land with the human creatures, animals, birds, fishes and plants and the early Christian symbols placed from the second sphere up to the ceiling or vault, connecting the real world with the world of God. Horizontally, the wall is divided into many big and small panels. The second decorative scheme in other panels, shows dispersed branches, blossoming flowers and small geometric repeating units with different fillings. The smaller vertical surfaces are also covered with wall paintings, such the steps of the synthronon of basilica No 4, the baptistery and the outer wall of the baptistery's piscina, the benches at the half-round piazza.

The next style in the Late Antique style appears in the Tetrarchy at Diocletian and is called 'pseudo-column style', known from several places of basilica No 1, 2 and 4, in the skeuphylakion of basilica No 4 and the waiting room of this annex, between the two small niches on the north wall. Here the separate panels are united by the representations of columns and pilasters on stylobate and bases, and crown by capitals. The wall paintings of basilica No 1 and No 4 most of all can be compared to the decoration of the basilicas in Macedonia Prima and Salutaris, Thrace and Dacia Mediterranea, generally with the Balkan provinces of Eastern Illyricum. The tendency in 5th – 6th century is the geometric figure to become larger and the treatment more general than detailed in comparison to the decoration of basilica No 1 from 4th century.

In the basilica No 2 paintings and the tomb ones of Nicopolis ad Nestum prevail the incrustation-style and some small floral motifs. In the same style

<sup>78</sup> R. Pillinger, V. Popova, B. Zimmermann, *Corpus der spätantiken und frühchristlichen Wandmalereien Bulgariens*, Wien, 1999, 92-93, Taf. 78, Abb. 207, 208, Taf. 79, Abb. 209, 210.

<sup>79</sup> D. Stojanova-Serafimova, *Die Frühchristliche Basilika in der Ul. Partizanska. – Mitteilungen zur Christlichen Archäologie*, No 6, Wien 2000, 9-15.

<sup>80</sup> R. Pillinger, V. Popova B. Zimmermann, *Op.cit.*, 1999, 88-92.

are the paintings of the bishop's tomb No 5 in the north aisle. The vertical steps of the synthronon are also covered with paintings with the same decoration. Remnants of the three-zone scheme with panels covered with monochrome colour or parallel veins and spots of the imitated stone revetment are obvious both in basilica No 1 and No 2 in the environment of Nicopolis

**Pavement and wall mosaics.** In Parthicopolis, Mikrevo, Katuntsi and Nicopolis and its area are represented two kinds of mosaics (pavement and wall) and all the basic mosaic techniques. Wall mosaics have been laid in the baptistery of basilica No 4 in Parthicopolis<sup>81</sup>, and probably in the conch of basilica No 2 in the environment of Nicopolis, but not preserved, only with the smalta tesserae in a very rich palette<sup>82</sup>. With pavement mosaics are covered three of the basilicas of Parthicopolis; the Episcopal residence between basilica No 1 and No 2<sup>83</sup>; in basilica No 4, the space in front of the prefurnium of the same basilica; the basilica in Mikrevo; the supposed basilica in Katuntsi; basilica No 1 and 2 and some unidentified one in the environment of Nicopolis. Most often the technique *opus tessellatum* is applied, only in very small parts with figural representations – *opus vermiculatum*, mainly smalta, *opus sectile* (figs. 12, 13). Polychrome *opus sectile* is laid on the floor of the baptistery pool and in very fine palette is the one in the apse of basilica No 4 in Parthicopolis. In the receiving room of the episcopal residence between basilica No 1 and No 2 of Sandanski a rare for Bulgaria technique can be met, combining the mentioned three ones plus a fourth one, reminding *opus sectile*, but with irregularly formed sides of the stone pieces. It is probably spread through the influence of the mosaic workshops of Macedonia and Thessalia to the area of Parthicopolis.

The earliest mosaics in the studied area are the one of the Episcopal residence of Nicopolis ad Nestum with a geometric scheme filled with flowers from the middle of 4<sup>th</sup> century and the earlier mosaic from first period in the naos of basilica No 4 in Sandanski, with several different geometric schemes and fillings, among them birds flanked by branches. In the second building period of the same basilica, the basilica of bishop Ioannes (basilica No 2) and basilica No 3, all in Parthicopolis, and in the basilica of Mikrevo we see new schemes filled with cantharoses, fishes and birds, and very wide borders. Some of the latters, such as the one from basilica No 3 are very interesting including arcades on columns with hanging ivy leaves or the divided by two columns tribelon at the threshold decorated with mosaics. The fishes and the birds show the creatures of the Earth and Ocean created by God, showing his might and his love and help for the mankind and the universe. Many Early Christian symbols can be observed too on the mosaics, such as the cantharos with wine, the symbol of Eucharist, the vine tendrils and scrolls, the symbol of Christ and the Resurrection, the Fountain of life, symbol of the Christian religion, God, Faith and Everlasting life in the Paradise.

<sup>81</sup> R. Pillinger, A. Lirsch, V. Popova (Red.), *Corpus der spätantiken und frühchristlichen Mosaiken Bulgariens*, I, II, Wien, 2016, Taf. 287, Abb. 708.

<sup>82</sup> В. Попова, *Две раннохристиянски...*, 2011, 273.

<sup>83</sup> В. Попова, Един паметник с рядка мозаична техника от ранновизантийския Партикополис. - *Изкуствоведски четения 2007*. Институт за изкуствознание, 2007, 408-421.



The mosaic inscriptions usually read either some psalm texts, or telling us the name of the church, probably in the narthex of basilica No 4, (**fig. 14-1**) or of the donator or bishop responsible for the building and decoration of the basilica. Such is the case with the inscription in eight rows in Greek of bishop Ioannes in basilica No 2 of Parthicopolis, praising his building activity (**fig. 14-2**). The mosaics schemes and its fillings and the mosaic inscriptions in the area of Middle Strymon are very near to the ones of Thessaloniki, the other cities and towns of Macedonia I and II and Thessaly.

In Nicopolis ad Nestum another early mosaic style can be met, laid in the period of Theodosius I in the second half of 4<sup>th</sup> century. It is the naos composition (**fig. 15-1**) in the so-called puristic style<sup>84</sup> without any figurative representations, except the two narrow panels with the symbolic vases and wine scrolls alongside the chancel. This style is supposedly descending from Constantinople and spreading predominantly in Thrace and near the Black Sea basin. The period of Theodosius I had a strong impact on the establishment of the Orthodox Christianity, and generally on the architecture and decoration of the Early Christian art in the Balkans<sup>85</sup>.

In the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> century the dominating mosaic scheme in Macedonia I and Thrace often consists of interlacing circles (or circles and ellipses). In basilica No 1 near to Nicopolis we can see such a scheme filled with birds flanking the cantharos, the dolphin, the rabbit, eating grapes etc.<sup>86</sup> (**fig. 15-2**). All these compositions in Nicopolis ad Nestum, Parthicopolis etc. reveal a richer repertory and symbolics, marking the new mosaic development in 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> century with its new styles. It is obvious in some cases the presence of itinerant mosaic ateliers or the similarity of the local ones with the famous ones of Thessaloniki and the other artistic centers of Macedonia Prima and Salutaris, Thessaly and Constantinople.

### Conclusions

Three main periods of development in the Early Christian architecture can be observed in the course of Middle Strymon and Middle Nestos in the plan, building and decoration of the numerous monuments. Period first lasts from the rule of the Constantine I till Theodosius I, when the church administration and the bishoprics have been formed, following the beginning of the church in Philippi and Thessaloniki. It can be supposed that the initial Christian communities of Heraclea Sintike, Parthicopolis and Nicopolis ad Nestum have been created already at the beginning of the spread of Early Christianity in the Balkans, and transformed officially into bishoprics in this first period of 4<sup>th</sup> century. Contemporary to that time was also the still unknown bishopric of Mikrevo and Katuntsi. The city basilicas in the mentioned cities and towns demonstrate

<sup>84</sup> В. Попова, *Две раннохристиянски ...*, 2011, 281-291.

<sup>85</sup> И. Топалилов, Върху един аспект на топонимната литургия в Константинопол през IV век“, в *ΑΝΤΙΧΑΡΙΣΜΑΤΟΣ ΕΠΙΣΦΡΑΓΙΣΙΣ*. Юбилеен сборник в чест на 70-годишнината на проф. д.и.н. Иван Йорданов, Шумен, 2019, 465-481.

<sup>86</sup> R. Pillinger, A. Lirsch V. Popova, *Op.cit.*, 2016, Abb. 656-662.

a similar plan and architectural decoration, in chronological conformity to the tendencies of the development of the liturgy, furniture and decoration. The plan and decoration of the cemetery basilicas are reflecting its function. Still we have only several examples of transformation from a Roman civil buildings into the Early Christian – basilica No 8 in Parthicopolis and the basilica in Heraclea. The earliest basilicas have been built namely in this first period, from the second quarter of 4<sup>th</sup> to the end of the century. These are basilica No 1 with episcopal residence and basilica No 4 from I building period in Parthicopolis; the capella memoria with added cemetery basilica No 2 and tombs of the bishops of Nicopolis. In the same period is adapted and transformed the previous *villa urbana* of Nicopolis into the Episcopal residence, probably near to the still not found Early Christian basilica and the city center of Nicopolis.

The second main period of the area may be referred to time from Theodosius II till Justinian I, with a short stop during the Huns's invasions in 447 and the years of recovering after them. The main and unique basilicas, monasteries and complexes have been built in that period or its decisive re-building: the Episcopal basilica No 4 from the second period, basilica No 2 and 3, all in Parthicopolis; the Episcopal basilica of Mikrevo; the supposed monastery and its basilica No 1 near Nicopolis ad Nestum; the basilica at Oreshe. The richest decoration of pavement and wall mosaics, in all techniques, and wall paintings in *al secco* and *al fresco* and the best examples of the specially ordered architectural elements, date also from 5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> century. The presence of itinerant ateliers for architectural elements, mosaics and wall paintings and the artistic influences from Rome, Thessaloniki, Constantinople, generally from the Eastern Illyricum and Thessaly is strongly felt.

For the first time in Eastern Illyricum and the diocess of Macedonia and Thrace the whole complex of elements of the stational liturgy was discovered: the Episcopal basilica with atrium; the half-round (or supposedly entirely round) piazza in front of the basilica, functioning as the Early Christian center instead of the Roman agora, as the place the church procession begins to the south alongside *Via Sacra*; the last point of it, the double Rotunda from where the procession turns back to the Episcopal basilica; finely the five basilicas situated alongside the same street in front of each of them the procession was stopping. The sample and the elements are borrowed from the round piazza of Constantine I in Constantinople and repeated in another sites of the Balkans too. This very clearly expressed new Early Christian center of Parthicopolis has been ruled by the new master of the city, the bishop.

Such processions may be suggested also for Nicopolis ad Nestum, but the discoveries here are still very limited, except the location and plan of the episcopal residence, the supposed place of the episcopal basilica near to it as the starting point for the processions. In Mikrevo the latest research reveals that the Episcopal residence with basilica is developing to the south, and the complex with basilica connected with the fortified part by a covered flight of stairs. The

sporadic structures found south of the basilica<sup>87</sup> on the flat surface suggest the possibility the center of this town (?) to be located namely here as re-starting point of a church procession.

There are some differences in the plans and the elements of the basilicas of Middle Strymon and Middle Nestos. In Parthicopolis, its territory and Mikrevo the tree-aisled basilica may have sometimes one aisle higher than the other, entrances from the east, a tribelon, exonartex, atrium, a *skeuphylakion* and chancel structure and screens of the Roman type and style during I and partly the II period. They reveal the initial direct connection and influence of Rome in the plan, the liturgy and the presence of the Constantinian dynasty in the Balkans, or indirectly through the influence of the papal vicariate in Thessaloniki. But from the middle of 5<sup>th</sup> century and the Chalkedonian Council, the influence of Constantinople is becoming dominant in Macedonia I and Thrace.

In Nicopolis the elements of first period mentioned for Parthicopolis are missing. In the basilica the plans and proportions, the kind of *synthronon* and its revetment with mosaics or marble plates, and the mosaic decoration place the basilicas of the area of Nicopolis near to the architecture of Eastern Illyricum and Central Greece. Some architectural elements are locally made of the local marble, but others (capitals, small columns, *mensae sacrae* in Debre, Oreshe and basilica No 1 and 2) are similar to the ones made by the Thessian workshops, in Thessaloniki and in Thessaly, and there is also a group copying the inscribed discs with wreaths with crosses typical of Constantinople.

Period III in the development in the course of Middle Strymon and Middle Nestos belongs to the time of Justinian I, the post-Justinianic time and the end of 6<sup>th</sup> – beginning of 7<sup>th</sup> century. Different processes and stages of development are to be observed, from the flourishment at Justinian to the catastrophic earthquakes and invasions of the Avars and the Slavs. The plan of the basilicas and monastery complexes is changed by the appearance of the *prothesis* and *diakonicon* (in basilica No 4 of Sandanski and basilica No 1 near Nicopolis), of the vault basilicas in Garescos, of new styles and repertory of the chancel screens' decoration, the mosaics and the wall paintings (basilica No 4 of Parthicopolis; the late mosaics of basilica No 2). But the uncertain situation did not allow the further building of new basilicas. The flourishing from 5<sup>th</sup> century till Justinian I in the Early Christian architecture was stopped in the period of Justin II demonstrated by the coin treasures both in Middle Strymon and Middle Nestos. And the monumental snap of the archaeological situation everywhere in present-day Southwestern Bulgaria show us entirely ruined and abandoned cities and sites at the end of the Late Antiquity and the transition to the dark Early Middle Ages.

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<sup>87</sup> My personal observations, on the excavations in the summer 2020.

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РАНОХРИШЋАНСКА БАЗИЛИЧНА АРХИТЕКТУРА ИЗМЕЂУ СРЕДЊЕГ  
СТРИМОНА И СРЕДЊЕГ НЕСТА  
(прелиминарни преглед)

Партикополис и Никопол на Мести налазе се у долинама средњег тока река Струме и Месте. Оба града се налазе на граници две покрајине. Никопол у југозападном делу Тракије, и Партикопол у североисточном делу Македоније. Током ранохришћанске ере, ова два града су административно припадала не само двома различитим провинцијама, већ су се налазила у две различите епархије. Партикополис, црквено потчињен егзарху/викару у Солуну, односно папи у Риму, а Никопол митрополиту и касније (451) цариградском патријарху. Оба града су у границама Источног римског царства. И ако се зна да је Партикополис одувек био епископија, онда је Никопол променио статус црквеног административног центра, уздигавши се од епископије до аутокефалне епископије. Као ранохришћански центри, ова два града имају сличну планску архитектуру, претежно тробродне, једноапсидне базилике, типичне за архитектуру Балкана. Базилике се издвајају по декорацији, али се приближавају по својој планској структури и додатно изграђеним просторијама – дворишта, крстионице, владичанске резиденције и др. Ранохришћанску базиликалну архитектуру представља 17 откривених и у различитом степену проучених базилика: Струмско, Микрево, Дебрен, Катунци; и у три епископска центра – Партикополу, Хераклеји и Никопол у Места. Заступљене су тробродне базилике са једном полукружном апсидом, са нартексима, егзонартексима, трибелоном, атријумима. Проучаване су и две резиденције – у Партикополису. Функционално, базилике се дефинишу као урбана, рурална, гробља са мученичким функцијама, гробља, манастири.

У првој половини 4. века базилике немају припрату. У другој половини 4. и почетком 5. века је најинтензивнија градња базилика у Микреву, Никополу, Дебрени, други период изградње базилика 1 и 4 и изградња базилика 3 и 7 у Партикополису. Базилике подигнуте или обновљене између друге половине 5. и прве половине 6. века издваја се троделним олтаром, са кулама у западном делу код предворја у Струмском и Дебреном.

Анализиране базилике дозвољавају њихово груписање према географском подручју и месту изградње. Идентификовано је неколико значајних комплекса везаних за развој ранохришћанске архитектуре и ширење хришћанства на просторима између Струме и Месте – комплекс базилика 1, 2, 4, заједно са крстионицом, Епископејоном и атријумом, повезан са полукружним тргом са колонадом и стварањем улице за процесije у Партикополу; стварање Епископејоном; промена урбанистичког планирања (Партикополис). На проучаваним територијама уочавамо директан или индиректан утицај на план, литургију, формирање локалних обележја из два главна црквена центра Балкана – Солуна и Цариграда.