

PALEOBYZANTINE CHURCHES OF NIŠ
Preliminary survey

A greater number of churches from the period of IV to VII century should be expected in Niš and its surroundings for at least four reasons.

The first among them is, of course, that the Emperor Constantine the Great, who was born in Niš, „magnificently decorated“¹ his birthplace, as witnessed by chroniclers, following the usual pattern of those times (like his predecessors Galerius who built Felix Romuliana, or Diocletian who erected the palace in Split). Numerous structures that he founded most certainly included a number of Christian temples as well. Therefore, it should be assumed that the first Christian churches were constructed in Naissus during the first half of the IV century.

The second reason is embedded in the fact that St. Athanasios the Great spent some time in Naissus. His presence affected the entire life, as well as artistic and architectural endeavors of first Christians in Niš. After the Council in Serdica (Sofia), Athanasios the Great came to Niš to celebrate the Easter of 344 together with Gaudentius, the Bishop of Niš. This had an impact on the spiritual and artistic life of Niš inhabitants.²

The third reason reflects in the evidence that Niš was a town of martyrs – Martyropolis,³ known among the contemporary Christians by its martyrs and their relics, which influenced the development of architecture and determined the types of buildings in these areas. Mention should be made of the famous Christian philosopher of the IV century St. Victricius, the Bishop of Rouen (France), who cited Niš in his work „*De laude sanctorum*“ as one of the significant towns in which miraculous relics of martyrs are kept. Since Niš was classified as equal to Constantinople, Antioch, Thessaloniki and Rome, it would not be difficult to comprehend how famous it was for its martyrs to deserve

¹ П. Петровић, *Ниш у античко доба*, Ниш 1976, 37; Org. Const. 2,2.

² М. Ракоција, *Рановизантијска гробница на свод код села Клисура поред Ниша и кратак осврт на проблем засведених гробница*, Ниш и Византија II, Међународни научни скуп, Ниш 2004, 158 са литературом.

³ М. Ракоција, *Манастири и цркве града Ниша*, Ниш 1998, 14; М. Rakocija, *Cultural treasures of Niš*, Niš 2000, 42, 51-52.

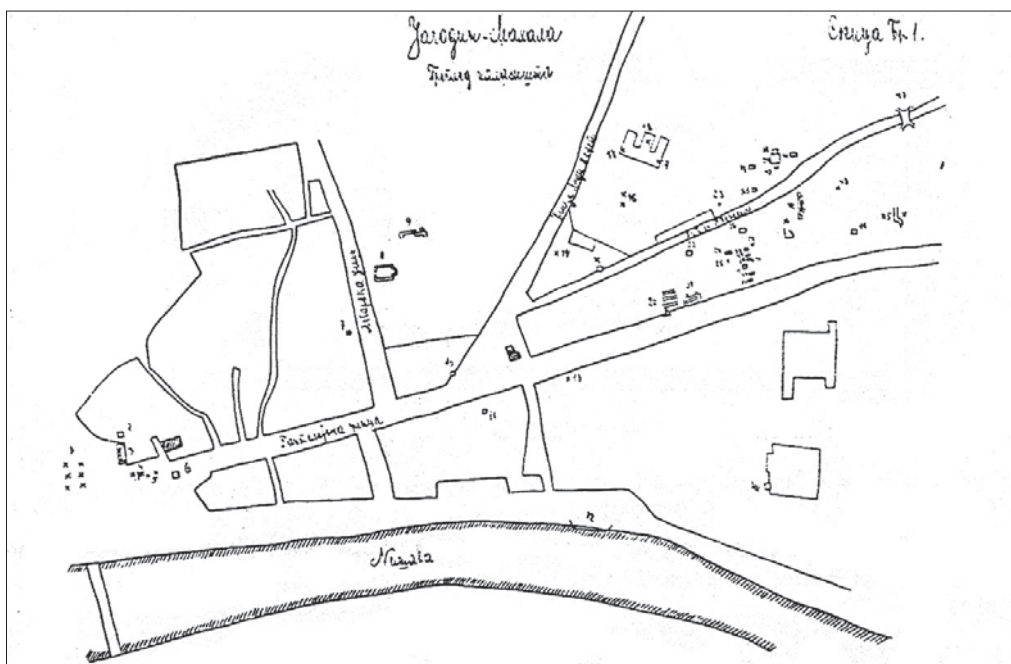


Fig. 1. The map of the finds in Jagodin Mala, according to A. O. Slavetić

Сл. I. Карта налаза у Јагодин Мали, према А.О. Славетићу

to be aligned with the centers of such reputation.⁴ The names of martyrs have remained unknown, except, maybe, for St. Procopius who was later mentioned in connection with the Cathedral and who used to be the patron of the town of Niš throughout the Middle Ages.⁵ The tombs of respectable martyrs, as the most prominent places of burial,⁶ were directly linked to the later built church of equal prominence. It can be stated with much certainty that the basilica with the martyrium once used to be one of such places (*cella memoriae*).

The fourth reason may be observed in the fact that, due to frequent Avar and Slavic raids, Niš developed into a strong military base and a center of Byzantine culture, which radiated from here towards the continent inlands. During that period, and particularly during the reign of the Emperor Justinian, as we learn

⁴ H. Delehaye, *Les origines du culte des martyrs*, Bruxelles 1933, 246; J. Zeiler, *Les origines chrétiennes des provinces danubiennes de l'Empire romain*, Paris 1918, 108; Л. Мирковић, *Старохришћанска гробница у Нишу*, *Старинар V-VI* (1954-1955), (Београд 1956), 67: „An aliter in oriente Constantinopoli, Antiochia, Thessalonica, Naiso, Romao in Italia minseris, porrigunt medicinami ...“

⁵ В. Марковић, *Православно монаштво и манастири у средњевијековној Србији*, Сремски Карловци 1920, 39, 48; Ј. Калић-Мијушковић, *Ниш у средњем веку*, *Историја Ниша*, I, Ниш 1983, 87.

⁶ А. Grabar, *Martyrium. Recherches sur le culte des reliques et l'art chrétien antique*, vol. I, Architecture, Paris 1946; I. Herklotz, *Sepulcra e monumenta. Studi sull'art sepolcrale in Italia*, Roma 1985, 28-36.

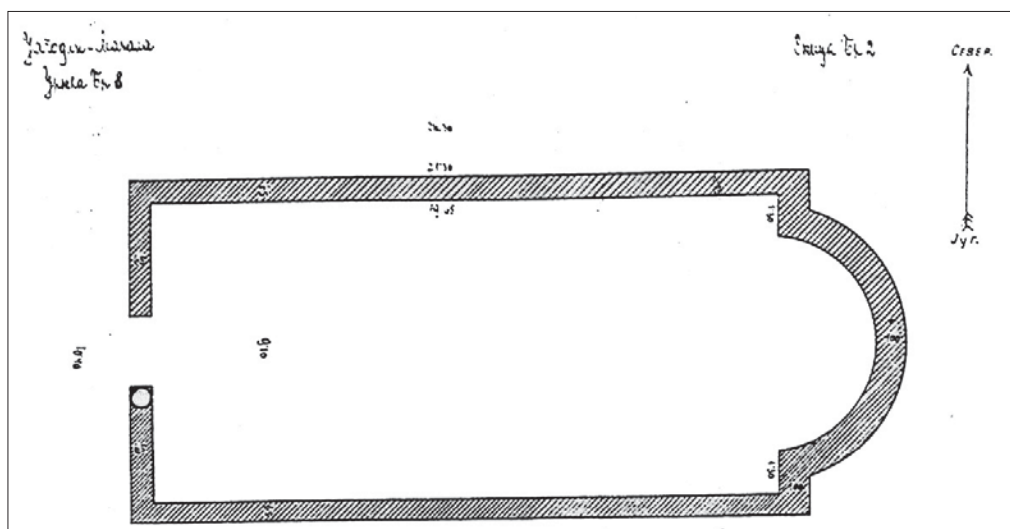


Fig. 2. Jagodin Mala, Church number 8, according to A. O. Slavetić

Сл.2. Јагодин Мала, Црква бр. 8, према А.О. Славетићу

from Procopius,⁷ restoration and construction of fortifications along the peripheral Niš-basin lines included the building of churches as well. Churches can be found in the nearby hills, sometimes as independent structures built on dominant tops⁸ and sometimes within the forts on strategically important hills. Their position on prominent hilltops satisfied military and strategic requirements and at the same time exerted impressive influence on native population with the aim of their Christianization, which was of extreme significance in the first centuries of Christianity.

There are no data on ecclesiastic buildings within the town, except for one parapet slab possibly. It was discovered in the present-day Fortress, next to the Byzantine street colonnade, near the presumed forum of the Roman Naissus. The parapet slab could belong to a nearby church, which should be situated in the forum, but its position is still unknown.⁹

A substantial number of temples in Niš is indirectly witnessed by Priscus, who visited Niš in 448, after it had been destroyed in 441 by Huns: „When we arrived to Niš, we found the town totally deserted, as it had been torn down to the ground by the enemy (the Huns). There were some people on the ruins of temples, having been lingering there due to illnesses.“¹⁰ Taking into consideration the year in which Priscus visited Niš, we are inclined to believe that the

⁷ Ф. Баришић, Прокопије, у: Византијски извори за историју народа Југославије I, Београд 1955, 62/63.

⁸ Л. Мирковић, *Православна литургија* I, Београд 1982, 81; Tertullian, *Adv. Valentinianus* c.3 (Migne, Patr. lat. T. II. p. 580.)

⁹ М. Ракоција, *О парпетној плочи из Ниша, пореклу и типологији палеовизантијских преграда*, Ниш и Византија IV, међународни научни скуп (Ниш 2006), 95-109.

¹⁰ Ф. Баришић, у: *Византијски извори за историју народа Југославије*, I, Београд 1955, 13

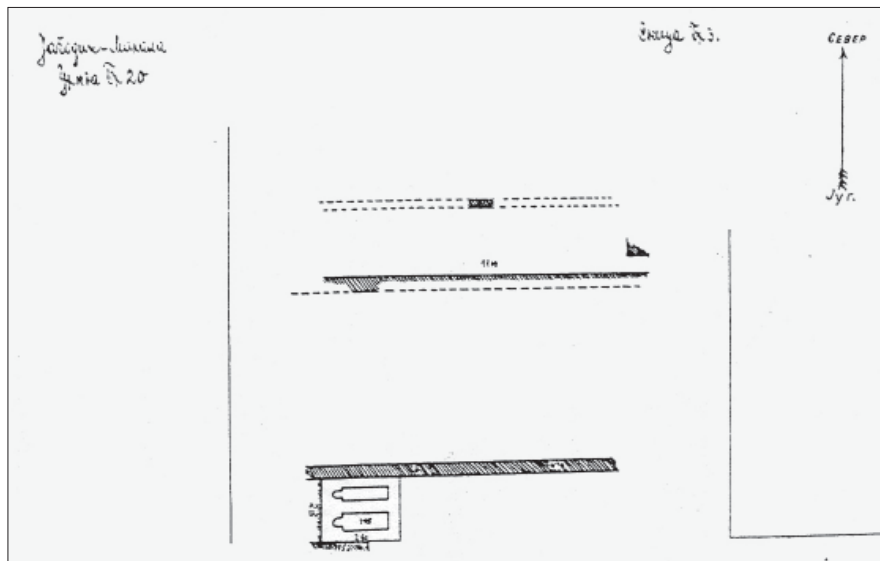


Fig. 3 Jagodin Mala, Church number 20, according to A. O. Slavetić

Сл. 3 Јагодин Мала, Црква бр. 20, према А.О. Славетићу

notion „on the ruins of temples“ refers to Christian churches. The plural in this respect unambiguously points to a greater number of churches having existed in the town of Niš in the first half of the V century. Priscus did not directly explain the exact location of the churches. However, careful reading and precise detection of the town layout¹¹ could uncover all the splendor of ecclesiastic building trade of Naissus, indicated by historical sources and corroborated by modest material traces.

As early by the first half of the IV century, Niš was a stronghold of Christians and an episcopal center. The name of the first known bishop of Niš Cyriacus, mentioned before the Council of Serdica (Sofia) in 343, originates from this period.¹² Mentioning of the bishop implies the existence of a church inside the town where he had his seat. There is no material evidence of a church built within the town limits in that time. One of the reasons for that may be the fact that we still do not know the exact location of Naissus and its limits. The mentioned note of Priscus related to the ruined temples in which he found sick people after the Huns had ravaged Niš refers to the temples inside the town, but we have no proofs of that. We know much more about the churches in the city cemetery that was located outside the town walls, to the east.

¹¹ О полеогенези града: Г. Милошевић, „Италијански план“ Ниша из 1719. године као повод за реконструкцију изгледа средњовековног и античког града, Ниш и Византија III, међународни симпозијум, Ниш 2005, 149-162.

¹² Л. Мирковић, *Старохришћанска гробница у Нишу*, Старица V-VI (1954-1955), Београд 1956, 67, 68.

In contrast to the town, four churches have been discovered in the city necropolis, which leads to the assumption that more of them could have existed within the town walls.

In this period of Late Antiquity, lives of pagans and Christians were entwined and both equally respected their dead. This is witnessed by material traces discovered in the necropolis in Jagodin Mala in Niš, where coexistent pagan and Christian tombs were found. Contents of epitaphs, remodeled pagan monuments and intertwined Roman and Greek names of the deceased bear eloquent testimony to the manner in which the citizens of Niš were accepting Christianity.

This fairly large number of churches and

Christian tombs in the city cemetery of Naissus should be primarily understood as the result of respecting the autonomy of grave, well-known in the Roman legal system. Christianity subsequently spread, the cemetery broadened, so the necropolis in Jagodin Mala is nowadays recognized as one of the biggest Early-Christian necropolises in the Balkans.

In the Jagodin-Mala necropolis, which was active in the period from the IV to the VII century, six early Christian churches were registered – four of them before and two after the World War II. In his excavations of 1932/33, A. Oršić Slavetić uncovered four churches and one „mausoleum“, as he named it. In the attached map, he marked the discovered churches with the numbers 8, 20, 42 and 45, while the mausoleum was marked with the number 3.¹³ (Fig. 1)

*The church number 8*¹⁴ - It is located in the eastern side of the Čegarska Street. (Fig. 2) This is an imposing elongated single-aisled structure with a semicircular inner and outer apse in the east side. It is 24.30 m long and 10.40 m

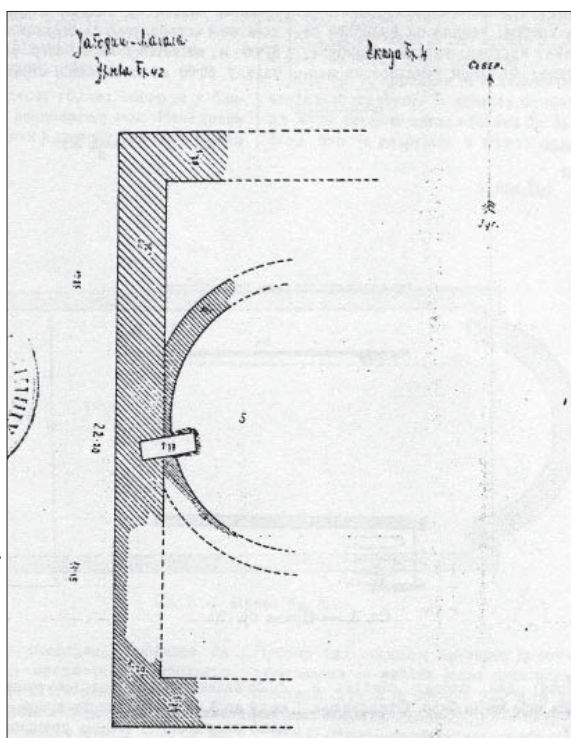


Fig. 4. Jagodin Mala, Church number 42, according to A. O. Slavetić

Сл. 4. Јагодин Мала, Црква бр. 42, према А.О. Славетићу

¹³ А. Оршић-Славетић, *Археолошка истраживања у Нишу*, *Старинар* 8-9, (1933-1934), Београд 1933, 303, сл.1.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 304, fig. 2.

wide. The naos walls are thinner from the apsidal arch wall (1 m in width), most probably because the apse was built and vaulted with a half-dome, while the naos was covered with a wooden roof structure. The church floor was made of lime-coated stone and fortified with masonry in the area under the holy table.

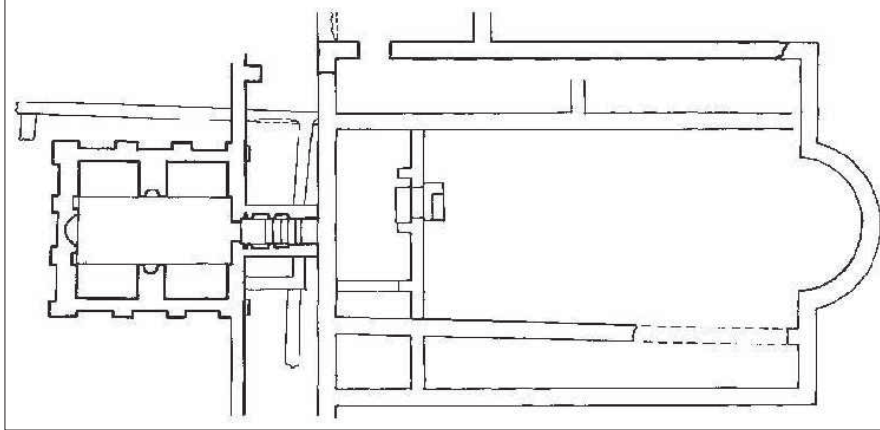


Fig. 5. Martyrium with a basilica, the base
Сл. 5. Мартиријум са базиликом, основа



Fig. 6. A. O. Slavetić in the newly discovered „mausoleum“ with the rectangular structure in its center (Photograph. National Museum of Niš)

Сл. 6. А.О. Славетић у новооткривеном „мазулеју“ са зиданом правоугаоном конструкцијом у средишту (Фото. Народни музеј Ниш)

The church is entered from the west, through a door flanked by two marble columns. The base of the southern column was found in situ. Such flanked entrance with marble columns has been registered in other churches as well, in the surroundings of Niš.

The church is noticeably well-proportioned, with equal apsidal breast-wall ends of 1.30 m in length, and the correlation of the naos and the apsidal arch is finely made.

Nothing of movable material has been found to enable precise dating of the church. However, the solution of the church base, like the width of the apse covering most of the naos, absence of niches in the eastern wall, as well as the elongated naos in the form of a basilica, classify it among the first early Christian churches of Niš.



Fig. 7. The martyrion interior, western side

Сл. 7. Унутрашњост мартирјума, западна страна

*The church number 20*¹⁵ - It is difficult to locate this church exactly by means of Slavetić's sketch. It can only be stated that it was situated in the today's Ratko Pavlović Street. (Fig. 3) Two parallel walls have been discovered, about 11 m in length and stretching in the east-west direction. At the distance of about 2.5 m, lateral walls preserved in fragments are stretching alongside them. In this manner, a three-aisled base is formed. A crypt consisting of two tombs with separated cases for heads was uncovered in the southern nave. A similarly shaped head case was discovered in the three-aisled basilica with the martyrion, so they may be dated to the same period.

*The church number 42*¹⁶ - Slavetić partially explored a structure to the east from the church no. 20, and marked it as the church number 42. (Fig. 4) He then cleared a part of the room defined by a western wall of 22 m in length and by lateral walls preserved in the length of about 2 m, each of them about 1.8 m thick. The interior of the room contained a 0.80 m thick semicircular apse leaned onto the western wall. As Slavetić noted, fragments of „multicolored stucco“ were found in the structure. Although insufficiently precise, the description

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 304, fig. 3.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 304, fig. 4.



Fig. 8. Ceramic capitol, 1957 (Photograph. National Museum of Niš)

Сл. 8. Керамички капител, 1957. година (Фото. Народни музеј Ниш)



Fig. 9. Ceramic capitol, today

Сл. 9. Керамички капител, данас

of stucco decoration leads to the conclusion that the church facades were lavishly ornamented. Ceramic facade artifacts uncovered later near the basilica with the martyrium confirm that this was not the only richly decorated structure.

Slavetić dated the structure to the IV century by virtue of the coins of Constantine the Great. In default of any closer data related to the discovery site itself, it would not be possible to state that the structure in question was a church, especially because this would be the only early Christian church in the area of Niš with the apse in the western side.

The church number 45¹⁷ - To the east from the church 42, the northern half of an apsidal arch and a breast wall were discovered. Based on the coins of Valens, the structure is broadly dated to the IV century.

*The basilica with a martyrium*¹⁸ - A monumental martyrium and impressive dimensions of the church represent a specific cult structure in which relics were kept of the martyrs Niš used to be known for in the Christian world of the IV century. (Fig. 5)

The martyrium was discovered in 1933 by Slavetić, who called it „a mausoleum particularly nicely built of yellow bricks“. (Fig. 6) Twenty years later, in 1953, under the guidance of Djordje Mano Zisi, a three-aisled basilica was uncovered on its eastern side. The martyrium and the basilica subsequently added to it were designed as an integral structure.¹⁹

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 304.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 304, fig. 5.

¹⁹ The functional interconnection of the martyrium and the basilica, as well as identical modular relations of the crypt and the basilica, lead Nevenka Spremo-Petrović to conclude that they were built at the same time - Н. Спремо-Петровић, *Пропорцијски односи у базиликама илирске префектуре*, Београд 1971, 28/29, Т.Х

The martyrium has a rectangular base and it is all built of nicely laid bricks. Its interior is divided into four big niches (arcosoliums), two in the northern and another two in the southern side, barrel-vaulted and most probably enclosed, inside which the dead were placed. The western wall contains three niches, of which the middle one is the biggest, organized as a sanctuary. Above the middle niche, there is a window through which the relics were honored (fenestella). The martyrium center²⁰ included a place of honor, which contained a rectangular elevated construction in the form of a pedestal for representative ciborium with marble columns found around it, intended for the cult worship. (Fig. 7)

The central area of the martyrium was covered with a semi-cylindrical vault, judging by the photograph preserved from 1933. The interstice between the vault arch, above the arcosolium and below the floor, partitioned in a certain period, was used for burials.²¹ The shape of the above-ground part of the martyrium is unknown. Massive pilasters surrounding it indicate a grandiose building.

This is maybe the right moment to mention several ceramic capitol fragments that are kept in the National Museum in Niš (accession number 99) with a scanty note that it was uncovered in the ruins of a basilica in Jagodin Mala. (Fig. 8,9) Such artifacts were used as a decorative finishing of pilasters and consoles above roofs. The Niš find contains parts of a capitol, but one console as well. (Fig. 10) They were made of well-baked red clay, and consist of a front decorated part and a back concave part. The front part is decorated with relief ornaments in the form of a capitol composed of striped volutes, ivy leaves and a shell. The floral ornament framed by a twisted band decorates the console. Style characteristics and subject matter of the capitol decoration indicate the Roman art, while the style analogies date it to the IV century.

²⁰ Г. Милошевић, *op. cit.*, 124, fig. 2.

²¹ *Ibid*, 127.



Fig. 10. Ceramic console, today
Сл. 10 Керамичка конзола, данас



Fig. 11. Staircase connecting the martyrium to the basilica

Сл. 11 Ступениште које повезује мартријум са базиликом



Fig. 12. Basilica with the martyrium, the tomb structure with the separate head case

Сл. 12. Базилика са мартиријумом, гробна конструкција са издвојеним простором за главу



Fig. 13. Church of St. Panteleimon, foundations of an early Christian basilica, archaeological excavations of 1969/70 (Photograph. National Museum of Niš)

Сл. 13. Црква Св. Пантелејмона, темељи ранохришћанске базилике, археолошка ископавања 1969/70, (Фото. Народни музеј Ниш)

pilasters on the outside. The walls of the basilica were covered by frescoes and marble paneling.

It was entered in the inventory in 1957, with the accompanying note „Jagodin Mala“, that is, after the basilica had been found, so it most probably belongs to this or to some nearby structure. It will remain unanswered whether it decorated the cornice of the above-ground martyrium part or the facade of the basilica, although we would rather be inclined to the first assumption.

If we add to these finds the note on fragments of „multicolored stucco“ within the church 42, we would have enough reason to conclude that this manner of decorating facade walls was widely accepted and customary in this area.

Flanked stairs, decorated with an arcade row, lead from the martyrium to the exonarthex of the later built basilica. The arcade arches are supported by stone consoles decorated with shallow relief resembling ceramic items. The dromus walls were covered with frescoes.²² (Fig. 11)

The basilica is three-aisled, with a semicircular apse on the east side. In the naos, the central aisle is separated from the lateral ones by pillars made of bricks. The narthex consists of two rooms, while the narrow room in their extension took over the role of an exonarthex in the floor of which there is the crypt-accessing staircase.

The basilica is built of stone and bricks applied by turns, and its southern wall is fortified by brick

²² М. Ракоција, *Манастири и цркве града Ниша*, 16, 53/54.

Numerous tombs of different structures were uncovered in the basilica. The tomb structure of bricks with a small semi-circular niche at the west for the head of the deceased was particularly carefully constructed. In the nearby church marked with the number 20, Slavetić discovered tombs with separated head cases.²³ (Fig. 12)

The citizens of Niš that were buried inside this cultic church certainly belonged to high society, while the crypt might have housed some of the local sufferers for Christ's religion, later proclaimed martyrs, by which Niš was well-known even to the bishop Victricius of Rouen in the IV century.

The archaeological excavations of 1966, 1969 and 1970 in the churchyard of St. Panteleimon uncovered the foundations of an early Christian basilica dated back to the end of the IV or the first half of the V century.²⁴ (Fig. 13)

There are no reliable data on churches having existed within the town during the IV and V centuries. However, a material trace related to a church inside the town walls of Naissus has been recognized in the parapet slab with the motif of chrismon, found as a secondary material used in the mosque beside the Byzantine road, near the Forum. (Fig. 14) We can only guess its original location, but we are sure of the Christian content of its decoration. The fact that it was discovered in a mosque, as mosques had often been built on old Christian cultic locations, allows for a hypothesis that a Christian temple should be expected in the close vicinity of this find. The existence of a cultic structure nearby the mosque is also indicated by small items uncovered in this site: a Eucharist disk, enkolpions, floats for vigil oil lamps decorated with chrismons, as well as mosaic blocks of gold-leaf covered vitrified paste, which might have belonged to an adjacent church that should have logically existed near the Forum.²⁵

During the reign of Justinian, in the period of 527-565, as we learn from Procopius, the town walls of Niš were fortified, while in the town surroundings 7 existing fortifications were restored and 32 new forts were built, like the

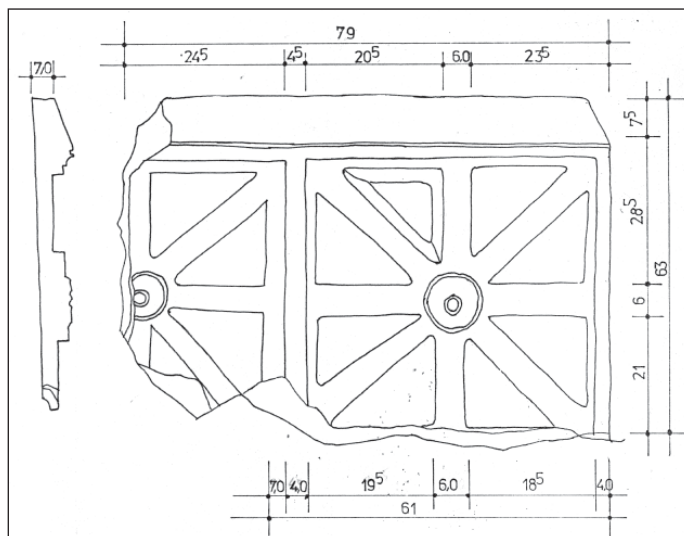


Fig. 14. The parapet slab from Niš

Сл. 14. Парапетна плоча из Ниша

²³ Г. Милошевић, *op. cit.*, 129-135.

²⁴ В. Кораћ, *Истраживање остатака храма Св. Пантелејмона*, Зборник радова Византолошког института, XXXIX, Београд 2001/2002.

²⁵ М. Ракоција, *О парапетној плочи из Ниша и типологији палеовизантијских преграда*, Ниш и Византија IV, Међународни научни скуп, Ниш 2005, 95-110.



Fig. 15. The fortification above Mediana

Сл. 15. Утврђење изнад Медијане



Fig. 16. Church of St. Nicholas in Niš, foundations of an early Byzantine basilica

Сл. 16. Црква Св. Николе у Нишу, темељи рановизантијске базилике

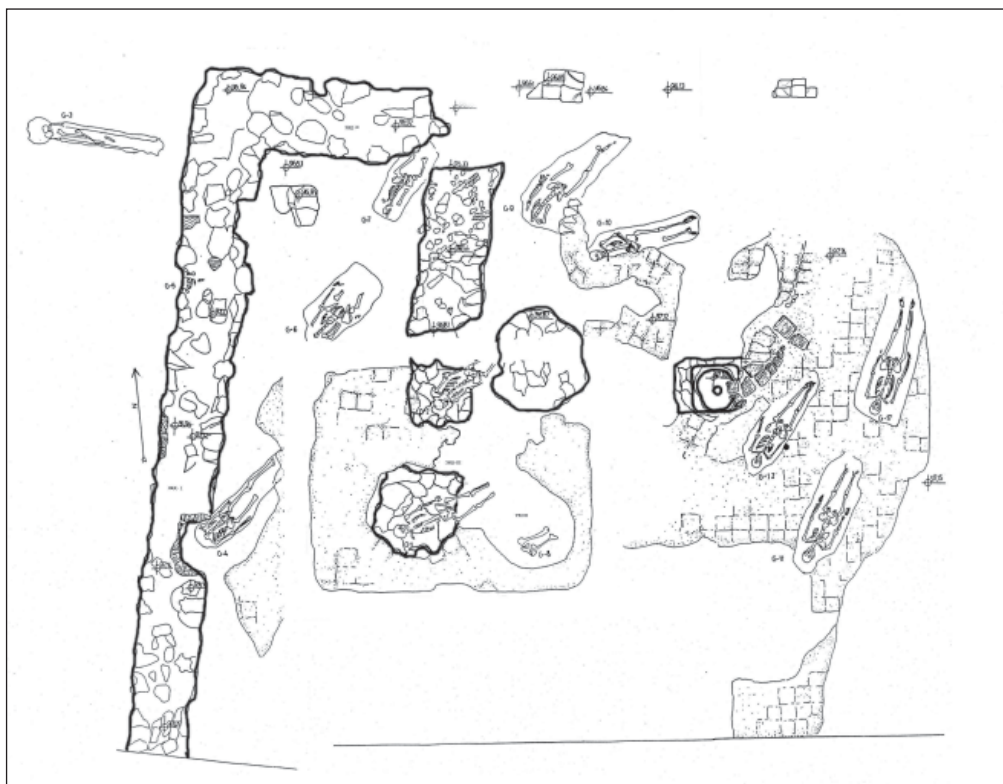


Fig. 17 Church of St. Nicholas in Niš, foundations of an early Byzantine basilica, a drawing

Сл. 17. Црква Св. Николе у Нишу, темењи рановизантијске базилике, цртеж

one above Mediana.²⁶ Sources do not mention construction and restoration of churches, but this undoubtedly happened, as evidenced by known structures and proved by building activities of Justinian across the entire Empire as well. (Fig. 15)

Again, there are no data on any temples that most certainly existed behind these restored firm fortifications. At the moment, our knowledge is restricted to the churches in the town neighborhood – either independent structures or parts of newly erected or restored fortifications. The common characteristic of all of them is their location on dominant hilltops.

Recently uncovered foundations of a basilica in the churchyard of St. Nicholas may also be dated to the same period. By its position, on a hill closest to the town, the basilica represents an integral part of the urban scheme of early Byzantine Naissus.²⁷ (Fig. 16, 17)

²⁶ Ф. Баришић, *op. cit.*, 63; А. Оршић-Славетић, *op. cit.*, 305.

²⁷ М. Ракоција, *Резултати археолошких истраживања у порти цркве Св. Николе у Нишу и покушај убикације епископске цркве Св. Прокопија*, Гласник друштва конзерватора Србије 26, Београд 2002, 127-131.



Fig. 18. Church of St. Nicholas in Niš, the column base

Сл. 18. Црква Св. Николе у Нишу, база стуба



Fig. 19. Church of St. Nicholas in Niš, the marble cross from the altar partition

Сл. 19. Црква Св. Николе у Нишу, мермерни крст са олтарне преграде

Archaeological excavations of 2000/2001 revealed the foundations of the northwestern corner of the building, eastward oriented, consisting of great walls with more than 1 m in thickness, while their length has not been determined. Large quantities of rubble composed of Byzantine-style bricks, ashlars and mortar lumps suggest huge dimensions of the structure. Its interior contained a row of columns, of which one column base with a plinth and the pedestal substructure of another column have been uncovered so far. (Fig. 18)

The column base is placed on a rectangular pedestal of bricks and stone. It is cut in a monolithic stone, considerably damaged, but nicely dressed once upon a time. The column base diameter points out that it should have been more than 3 m high and that it supported the roof structure of this grandiose building.

The pedestal substructure of another column defines their intercolumnation and indicates the recognizable Byzantine building mode. On this basis, the apsidal area of the church can be identified, although it has not yet been actually determined.²⁸

The church floors were tiled with square bricks, and their imprints are still clearly visible in the mortar that was binding them.

A fragment of a fine-grained marble cross that belonged to a marble altar partition of an early Byzantine church confirms that this really was an ancient cultic place. It is very likely that this was the episcopal church of St. Procopius, mentioned in some sources from the XII and the XIV centuries. (Fig. 19) It housed the relics of St. Procopius that might have contributed to the reputation of Niš as the Martyropolis - the town of the martyr who was the

²⁸ About this: N. Spremo-Petrović, *op. cit.*

patron of Niš throughout the Middle Age - Thessaloniki had St. Dimitrios, Bari had St. Nicholas, while Niš had St. Procopius. A specific study should deal with the question of how the relics of this respectable martyr reached Niš.

The first Christians of Niš used and adopted to their needs the renowned late-antiquity site of Mediana as well, from mosaic decoration, a possible baptistery, to the recently discovered church. This fact, kept aside over a long period, has become unavoidable after the discovery of the church.²⁹ Apart from the presumed baptistery, possible church complex has not been thoroughly investigated, but the existing walls and mosaic decorations impose the obligation to do so.³⁰

The church complex has not been defined, but the discovered church is probably the oldest in Niš, bearing witness of the first Christians' presence in Mediana and therefore of the need for a monumental baptistery, too.

During the church construction, the western fence of the villa with a peristyle had been broken and its stones, as well as the stone with the pagan - Latin inscription, were used for building,³¹ indirectly revealing the atmosphere in which the church was built. (Fig. 20)

The church has a wide semicircular apse in the east side, which spreads to almost entire width of the naos, and a narrow narthex. A mosaic in the form of Christ's Monogram was found in naos, in the place of ambo. The interrelations between the apse and the naos, as well as between the naos and the narthex,



Fig. 20 Mediana, foundations of the early Christian church

Сл. 20 Медијана, Темљи ранохришћанске цркве



Fig. 21. Mediana, the early Christian church, the mosaic ambo

Сл. 21. Медијана, ранохришћанска црква, мозаични амвон

²⁹ М. Васић, *Хроника ископавања Медијане 2000-2002. године*, Старинар, нова серија књига LIII-LIV/2003-2004, (Београд 2004), 290/1.

³⁰ М. Ракоција, *Манастири и цркве града Ниша*, 19/20. 47/48.

³¹ М. Васић, *op. cit.*, 292, 294.



Fig. 22. Ostrovica, the northeastern corner of the early Byzantine basilica with the entrance to the crypt

Сл. 22. Островица, Североисточни угао рановизантијске базилике са улазом у гробницу

determine the church to the end of the IV or beginning of the V century, while its small dimensions and tombs around it define it as a minor cemetery basilica. (Fig. 21)

Numerous churches are located in all dominant high grounds around Niš.

The site of the former church of Holy Archangel Gabriel is located at the gateway of Sićevačka Klisura Gorge, on the left bank of Nišava, near the village of Ostrovica.³² (Fig. 22)

What is left of once monumental temple is only a rectangular, about 30 m long base of what used to be the church walls. The east side of the rectangular is closed southwards by a still visible apsidal arch. A part of the northern breast wall is also visible in the height of about one meter. This wall, made of Byzantine-formatted bricks, was built as a superstructure over the semi-cylindrical vault of the crypt, just above its entrance. This way, the crypt was made the integral part of the basilica. It is fully preserved and belongs to the type of early Byzantine semi-cylindrically vaulted crypts with one niche in the western wall, by which we could date it to the end of the IV or beginning of the V century.³³ The rectangular entrance, topped with radially laid bricks, is barely

³² М. Ракоција, *Културна ризница Ниша*, Ниш 2001, 62/3.

³³ М. Ракоција, *Рановизантијска гробница на свод*, 154, сл.10.



Fig. 23. Ostrovica, the interior of the crypt in the basilica substructure
Сл. 23. Островица, Унутрашњост гробнице у супструкцији базилике

visible today. It is entirely made of bricks and its walls are coated with mortar, while the cases for the deceased, if any, could be under the water that has filled half of the crypt inside. (Fig. 23)

The church above the crypt was built some time later, as was the common practice in the Christian world of those times. Known examples of churches with crypts in their substructures are dated to the V or VI century, so the same may apply to the church site of the former Holy Archangel Gabriel.³⁴

The church on the site of *Kamara near the village of Gabrovac* is still unexplored and forgotten. It is located on a high hill commanding unobstructed views of both Niš and the field of Mediana.³⁵ (Fig. 24)

The early Christian church, known to the local population as a former church site, according to the report of Oršić-Slavetić, was excavated in 1931. Its walls, made of ashlar and bricks, were then preserved in the height of up to 60 cm, together with the floor made of square bricks. The eastern apsidal part was destroyed so the shape of the apse could not be observed. Benches for those preparing to be initiated into the sacred mysteries, that is, for catechumens are stretching along the southern and the western walls. The southern part of the

³⁴ I. Nikolajević, *Sahranjivanje u ranohrišćanskim crkvama na području Srbije*, Arheološki vesnik 28, (Beograd 1978), 681/2.

³⁵ А. Оршић-Славетић, *Белешке са путовања*, Старинар X-XI (1935-1936), Београд 1935-1936, 172, сл. 4.

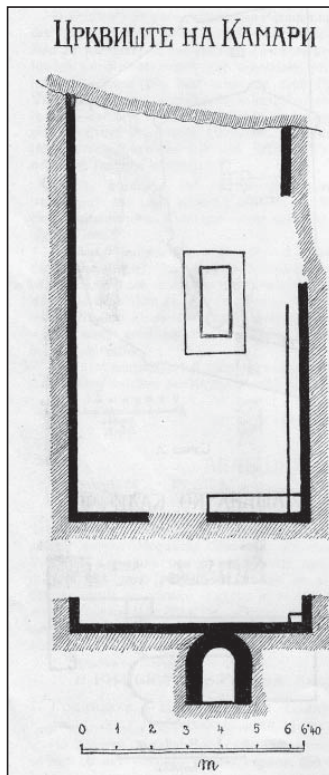


Fig. 24. Gabrovac, the site of Kamara, an early Christian church with a crypt in its substructure, according to A. O. Slavetić

Сл. 24. Габровац, Локалитет Камара, ранохришћанска црква са гробницом у сипструктури, према А.О. Славетићу

church contains an immured vaulted crypt with a skeleton in a casket of slant sandstone slabs. A fragmented sepulchral slab was found near the head of the deceased. It had a Christogram and an inscription from which it could be comprehended that certain Parvul, once undoubtedly distinguished person, was laid to rest in peace here. It had to be in the V or VI century, when the church was built and used, as all the other churches with crypts in their substructures. Only a heap of rubble has remained of all that to be seen today.³⁶

In the village of *Knez Selo*, on the dominant hill called Krst (cross), there are the remains of a Byzantine basilica named the Greek Church by the villagers. (Fig. 25) The base of a three-aisled basilica, about 29 m long and 8 m wide, used to be visible in the past. The walls were massive and built of large rubble stones and ash-lars. A door opening with a stone threshold is in the west side, while the east side contains a similar opening but without a doorsill preserved. Two damaged, but with nicely treated surfaces, column bases are flanking the western entrance with the massive stone doorsill, thus increasing the regret over such a poor condition of this old holy object.

Between the villages of *Klisura* and *Orljane*, below the Serbian town of Koprivan, known previously as the Byzantine Kompos, in line with the liturgical procession, the lower hill used to be crowned with a church, of which only some bricks and mortar lumps have remained.³⁷ (Fig. 26)

Back in 1933, when it was excavated, its trefoil base emerged and determined it to the VI century. Then, the naos floor surface was cleaned and uncovered white and green marble tiles (20 cm x 20 cm), while the floor of the narthex was decorated by a mosaic. In the first centuries of Christianity, the diaconicon was located near the church entrance, to the north from the entrance, in a room with an apse and a cruciform font in which church utensils were washed.

The former representative appearances of the old holy object is most eloquently evidenced by its dominant position and by the tiles of green marble,

³⁶ I. Nikolajević, *op. cit.*, 683.

³⁷ А. Оршић-Славетић, *Белешке са путовања*, 173, сл.5: В. Кондић, В. Поповић, *Царичин град, утврђено насеље у византијском Илирику*, Галерија САНУ 33, Београд 1977, 158, сл.122.

which used to be brought to these regions all the way from Greek islands at those times.

Regarding its base, the church in Klisura is almost identical with the triconchal church outside the walls of the fortress of Caričin Grad, as well as with the original base of the Church of Theotokos near Kuršumlja.

Not far from the Klisura church, near the village of Ćurlina, there is an early Byzantine basilica unmentioned before in any historical sources. (Fig. 27) When it was discovered in 1882, its remnants had the walls of approximately one-meter in height.³⁸ The rectangular base of the temple in Ćurlina, in total length of 37 m and width of 16 m, was designed as a three-aisled basilica with a narthex. Its western side most certainly contained a porch which probably encircled the church alongside its southern and northern sides. Each aisle on the eastern side ends with a three-sided apse. Along the interior arch of the greatest and protrusive middle apse, there are sloping bulges intended for the seats of the bishops - a

synthronos. The sanctuary is separated from the naos by a partition made of two gray-green granite columns placed on a fine-polished marble base. The main nave is separated from each lateral aisle with three rectangular columns built of bricks. A separate door leads to each aisle from the narthex. In the narthex, apart from the main entrance on the western side, which is greater to a certain extent, there are two more openings, one to the north and the other to the south from it. The church is built of bricks, and the watertight mortar was used as the cementing material. According to Felix Kanitz, the interior wall surfaces were covered with frescoes.³⁹

Nowadays, beneath thick deposits of mortar and brick rubble, we may only assume the existence of the walls of what used to be an impressive building, but we can also observe the two mentioned columns of nicely finished gray-green granite (2 m and 1.7 m in lengths and 0.40 m in diameters), which belonged to the sanctuary partition.⁴⁰

³⁸ М. Ђ. Милићевић, *Краљевина Србија*, Београд 1884, 19/20.

³⁹ Ф. Каниц, *Србија, земља и становништво II*, Београд 1985, 184.

⁴⁰ М. Ракоција, *Манастири и цркве града Ниша*, 57-60.

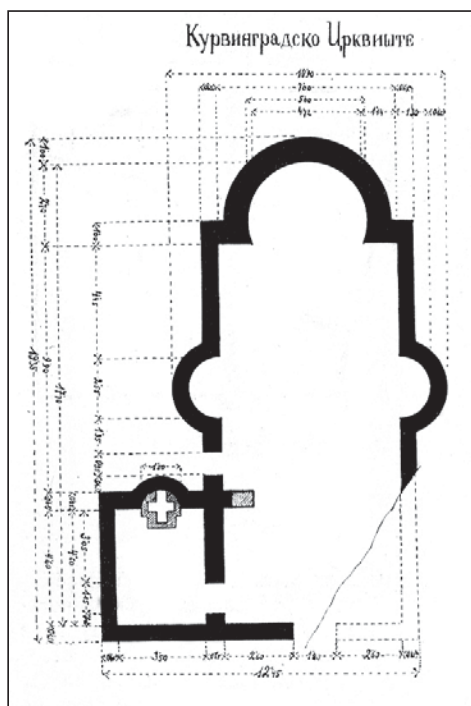


Fig. 25. Knez Selo, column bases in the west side of the early Byzantine basilica

Сл. 25. Кнез село, базе стубова на западној страни рановизантијске базилике



Fig. 26. Klisura, the early Byzantine church, according to A. O. Slavetić

Сл. 26. Клисура, Рановизантијска црква, према А.О. Славетићу

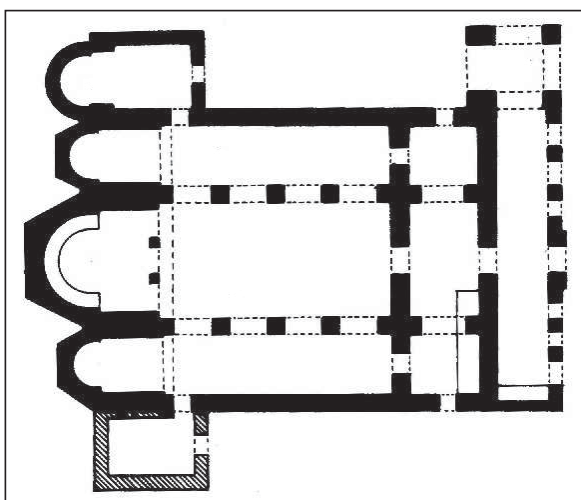


Fig. 27. Ćurlina, the early Byzantine basilica, according to F. Kanitz

Сл. 27. Ћурлина, рановизантијска базилика, према Ф. Каницу

All the distinguished researchers of our past have dealt with the Byzantine basilica in Ćurlina, and to them we owe the exposed data. Their observations represented sufficient grounds for the basilica to be known to the scientific milieu and to assume a significant place in the history of Byzantine architecture of the Justinian's age.⁴¹

Nearby Niš, in front of the canyon made by the Toponička Reka River, on a strategically important spot from which the passage from Morava to Svrljig was controlled for centuries, righteously called *Železna vrata* (iron gate), the early-Byzantine citadel *Gradište* is located as a part of the defense system of the Emperor Justinian I (527-565). (Fig. 28) It is situated on a dominant high plateau on the left bank of the Toponička Reka River, opposite of the medieval fortress *Železnik*. Within its strong walls, this citadel also had its church with a marble sanctuary partition, a graded interior apse for the bishops' seats (*synthronos*), and fresco-decorated walls. Of all this, inside the stat-

⁴¹ R. Hodinott, *Early Byzantine churches in Macedonia and Southern Serbia*, London 1963, 195, fig. 104, note 77.



Fig. 28. Miljkovac, the site of Gradište, the altar space with the synthronos
Сл. 28. Миљковац, локалитет Градиште, олтарски простор са синтроносом

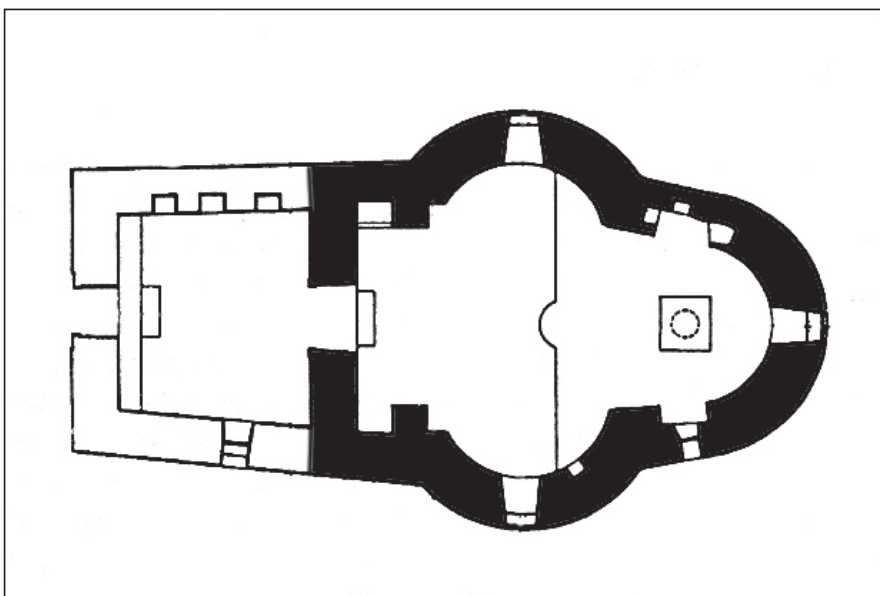


Fig. 29. Matejevac, Church of St. John, the base
Сл. 29. Матејевац, црква Св. Јована, основа



Fig. 30. Matejevac, Church of St. John, the southeastern view

Сл. 30. Матејевац, црква Св. Јована, поглед са југоистока

ed fortification walls, one can observe only modest foundations of the apsidal part, fragments of parapet slabs and decrepit traces of colors on pieces of fresco mortar.⁴²

On the other side of Niš, the Monastic *Church of St. John* was built on the foundations of an early Byzantine church above the village of Matejevac.⁴³ Its base is in the form of an archaic triconchos. (Fig. 29) Three conches are joined around the central area of the square-resembling naos. The choir aisles are smaller and noticeably proportional, while the apsidal aisle is deeper and follows the width of the naos. Thus sublimated plain form of a trefoil is rare in our territory. Having arrived from the east, this form of structures found its stronghold in the early-Byzantine architecture of our parts. Regarding the base type, the size and the interior construction, the Matejevac Church has its closest counterpart in the Church of the Assumption in Mrtvica, which is broadly dated to the V or the beginning of the VI century.⁴⁴ (Fig. 30)

The ecclesiastical building trade was particularly developed in Niš during the first centuries of Christianity, and the town had many churches of different architectonic forms. Until the arrival of Slavs, churches had been built in Niš

⁴² М. Ракоција, *Манастири и цркве града Ниша*, 79.

⁴³ М. Ракоција, *Манастир Св. Јована изнад села Горњи Матејевац код Ниша*, Гласник друштва конзерватора Србије 18, (Београд 1994), 117-121.

⁴⁴ Б. Пешић, *Црква Богородичиног Успења у Мртвици-архитектура*, Саопштења XX-XXI, (Београд 1988/1989), 106.

in accordance with the contemporary trends prevalent in renowned Christian centers of that time. Niš developed into a center and a nursery of Byzantine civilization and art, as well as ecclesiastical architecture, from which it radiated toward the immediate surroundings and further into the continent inlands.

Миша Ракоција

ПАЛЕОВИЗАНТИЈСКЕ ЦРКВЕ НИША

прелиминарни преглед

Најмање четири разлога постоје због којих у Нишу и његовом окружењу треба очекивати већи број цркава.

Први је, свакако, рођење императора Константина Великог у Нишу који је, као и неки од његових претходника по оновременом обичају, свој град „величанствено украсио“. Међу многим грађевинама које је саградио треба претпоставити и извештан број хришћанских храмова.

Други разлог сагледавамо у чињеници да је у Нишу извесно време боравио св. Атанасије Велики, чије се присуство одразило на целокупан живот првих хришћана Ниша, па и на градитељство.

Трећи разлог, видимо у томе да је Ниш био град мученика–Мартириополис, познат међу оновременим хришћанима са својим мученицима, што се одразило и на градитељство.

Четврти разлог се препознаје у сазнању да је Ниш, због честих упада Авара и Словена, постао јако војно упориште и центар византијске цивилизације која је одавде зрачила ка унутрашњости континента. И то је време када је у Нишу саграђен већи број цркава, сада више по околним брдима – некад самосталне грађевине на доминантним узвишењима, а некад у оквиру утврђења на стратегијски значајним брдима. Својим положајем на доминантним узвишењима остављале су упечатљив утисак на домородно становништво.

Црквено градитељство Ниша у првим вековима хришћанства посебно се развило и у њему затичемо цркве различитог архитектонског облика и строја. Све до доласка Словена, у Нишу се граде цркве у складу са једновременим тенденцијама које су преовладале у угледним хришћанским центрима. Ниш постаје центар и расадник византијске цивилизације и уметности, па и црквене архитектуре, одакле она зрачи на непосредно окружење и даље, у унутрашњост континента.

