

# *Early Christian architecture in Bulgaria twenty years later: A survey*

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The Early Christian archeology in Bulgaria has a history of over 130 years. The first ones to discover describe partially basilicas of 4th-6th c. AD starting with the 1890ies are the founders of Bulgarian archaeology H. and K. Shkopil. It needed 100 years before in 1999 all known till then about 160 Early Christian churches in the country were collected, described and discussed in the study of N. Chaneva-Dechevska: “Early Christian architecture in Bulgaria (4th-6th c. AD)”.

During past twenty years, over thirty new Early Christian buildings or compounds of same period have been discovered or re-investigated. In this paper only some of them, mostly important ones will be listed .

## EARLY CHRISTIAN CHURCHES ON THE BULGARIAN BLACK SEA COAST

1. An Early Christian basilica situated on the coast was excavated recently near Topola, Region of Dobrich. It is a one-aisled and one apse building with narthex and a little side atrium. The church was dated to the 5th-6th c. AD.
2. In Odessos (Varna), the episcopal basilica excavated in 1969-1973 was re-investigated in 2002-2003. A much destroyed by earthquake earlier and smaller but originally lavishly decorated basilica of ca. late 4th c. AD was discovered. It was maybe one-aisled (?) with narthex. In the early 5th c. AD, a much larger second basilica also decorated by mosaics and wall paintings was erected over. It was three aisled, with one apse and narthex and had a large circular in shape baptistery next to the northeastern corner. There was a ciborium in the south corner of the presbytery and a crypt was constructed underneath, where a unique bottle-shaped marble reliquary with relics inside was discovered. In the second half of 5th c. AD a third basilica of same layout and added exonarthex was erected over the second one, which functioned until early 7th century.

3. An excavated in the early 20th c. by H. Shkorpil Early Christian church at Djanavara locality near Varna was re-investigated in 1997-2004. The church has an unusual layout. It is one-aisled and has constructed inside apse with synthronon, four premises extending at each corner of the building and a narthex. The floors of three premises are covered by mosaics, while in the fourth one the cross-shaped baptistery is positioned. Under the presbytery, Shkorpil has discovered a unique set of three reliquaries: marble, silver and gold one with relics in the last one. The followed investigation on the site around in 2005-2018 revealed that the church belonged to a large monastery, which covered an area of ca. 60 x 40 m. The complex included a large atrium with portico and a two-storied monastic wing south of it. The church and the monastery have been dated to the second half of late 5th – early 7th c. AD.

4. In the archives of K. Shkorpil, data about an unknown so far basilica excavated by him in early 20th c. at Cape Galata near Varna (Odessos) have been discovered and published recently. It is three-aisled with three-sided apse, narthex and an elongated side atrium without portico from the south and was dated to the 5th-6th c. AD.

5. South of Odessos (Varna) a new Early Christian basilica was investigated recently. It is a three-aisled, one apse church with narthex and atrium with portico and has two chapels with apses, situated on both sides of the presbytery, which have had wall mosaics. The basilica dated to the 5th-6th c. AD had marble furnishing of the altar and was surrounded by a thick wall.

6. In an unknown by name Late Antique port town located at Cape Sveti Atanas near Byala, Varna region, a large Early Christian compound was excavated. It consists of a basilica, outside baptistery and the house of the priest next to it. The church is three aisled with one apse and narthex. It has two periods of construction and in the first one (ca. first half of 5th c. AD) a baptistery decorated by wall paintings was situated in the northern part of the narthex. Three fragments showing the face of Jesus and inscriptions in Latin HIESUS and MARIA (i. e. Jesus and Mary) were discovered along with some other colored fresco fragments around the baptismal font. During second period of construction (second half of 5th c. AD), this baptistery was abandoned, partially demolished and covered by tile flooring. This section of the narthex was converted into a chapel with small apse and in the church apse a synthronon and a ciborium have been added to its space. A new special baptistery building with cross-shaped baptismal font inside and an ante-room was erected north of the church. South of the basilica, the residence of the priest was positioned. The basilica and the entire religious compound

around it was in function in the 5th - early 7th c. AD.

7. A new much destroyed Early Christian church was excavated at the Ancient port town Poros/Phoros located on Burgas bay. This is a relatively little basilica with three aisles, one apse and narthex. Beneath the brick floor of the nave a grave was discovered. The church was dated to the late 5th-6th c. AD.

8. In Sozopol (Apollonia), the remains of an Early Christian basilica have been discovered underneath a Mediaeval church of ca. 10th-11th century. It was probably three aisled with narthex and has one circular apse. The preliminary dating is ca. 5th-6th c. AD.

9. On St. Kyrik Island located in the bay of Sozopol, the remains of a very much destructed Early Christian basilica came to light. It has one nave (?) with apse and to the north there is adjoined a second premise with apse. The preliminary dating of the building is ca. 5th-6th c. AD.

10. Most exciting discovery in the region came from St. Ivan (St. John) Island also in the bay of Sozopol. There, an Early Christian basilica of ca. 5th-6th c. AD was discovered. It is very much destroyed by a Mediaeval Church erected over in 10th-11th century. Apparently, the ancient basilica was three aisled, with one circular apse and narthex. During the excavation, inside it, a crypt with a marble reliquary with relics of St. John the Baptist was discovered. This was confirmed by another small reliquary made of limestone which bears an inscription in Greek, where the name of this saint was mentioned. It was found empty not far from the other one, but helped this discovery to become a world sensation.

## EARLY CHRISTIAN CHURCHES IN NORTH BULGARIA

In North Bulgaria, in vicinity of the Bulgarian Black Sea coast, there have been discovered several new Early Christian churches.

11. One of them was discovered in the Late Roman road station Palmatis, located near Onogur, Dobrich Region. This is a very large three aisled basilica (55 x 33m) with one apse, narthex and an atrium in the west. The excavation is still in progress but it was revealed that its marble furniture was ordered at once and all details were preliminary numbered in Greek letters. The basilica and was dated so far to the 5th-6th c. AD.

In the past few years, near Krushary, Dobrich region, within the ancient city of Zaldapa, two new Early Christian churches are in process of excavation.

12. One of them is a three aisled basilica with one circular apse, narthex and a large atrium with portico to the west. There is also an adjoined premise (a chapel?) south of the presbytery and in the same direction a large building: possibly the Episcopal residence was discovered. A destroyed crypt – most probably a martyrium of an unknown local saint decorated by incised crosses on two of the walls.was excavated under the nave. The church was erected over an earlier one, which was found very much demolished and has had also a crypt inside, situated in the nave approximately at the same position as the upper one. Both overlapping basilicas are dated to the 5th-6th c. AD.

13. The investigation of the second basilica has just begun in 2018. Only the apse and part of the presbytery came to light during this season and the preliminary dating is also ca. 5th-6th c. AD.

14. At the last years of 20th century, a heavily destroyed Early Christian basilica, possibly three aisled one with mosaic floor has been partially cleared up in vicinity of Chomakovtsi, Region of Pleven. It was dated according to the mosaics to the 5th c. AD.

15. In the same village another one Early Christian basilica, also three aisled with one apse and narthex was discovered about same time. It was dated to the 5th-6th c. AD.

16. An interesting early Christian basilica was excavated in Montana. It is three isled divided by pillars built by bricks and has a narthex. Unusually for the Early Christian architecture in Bulgaria, this church has an inner circular in shape apse. There are two side premises on both side of the apse, which have access from the north and south isles respectively. According to the preliminary reports, the basilica was erected in the 4th c. AD and functioned until 6th c. AD.

## EARLY CHRISTIAN CHURCHES IN SOUTH BULGARIA

17. During last about twenty years, several Early Christian churches of 4th-6th c. AD have been excavated in South Bulgaria and on some more sites the investigations continued since late 20th century.

18. Near Panitsovo, Region of Burgas, the remains of a three-aisled, one apse basilica with narthex was partially excavated. It had a floor covered by bricks but painted figural decoration, of which fragments were discovered in situ on the north wall. The basilica was dated to the 5th-6th c. AD.

19. A very exciting discovery in Plovdiv (Philippopolis) was the so-called

“Little basilica”. This is a three aisled, one-apse church with narthex. The cross-shaped baptistery is situated next to the north wall and there is a small chapel added to the south. The church building has a beautiful mosaic floor with various geometric patterns and had at least two periods of reconstruction. It was in function in the 4th-6th c. AD.

20. During last few years, excavation of the Episcopal basilica of Philippopolis started again and is still in progress. The new investigation helped to reveal entirely the rest of that large three aisled, one apse church with narthex and its atrium. The upper level of the rich in colors and design floor mosaic was taken away in order to start its conservation and underneath, the earlier one was discovered in situ. Three mosaics belong to the two different periods of construction dated so far in the 5th and 6th c. AD for each one.

21. In the rock-cut town Perperikon, near Kardjaly, a big three aisled, one apse basilica with narthex was cleared up. It was dated to the 5th-7th c. AD.

In the 1970ies, at the ancient city of Nicopolis ad Nestum (near Garmen, region of Blagoevgrad), there were excavated two Early Christian churches, which are described in short by N. Chaneva-Dechevska, but now they have been extensively published.

22. The first one is a three-aisled, one apse middle size basilica with narthex and adjoined to it is a martyrium with five graves. The church was decorated by marble furniture and wall paintings and dated to the 5th-6th c. AD, while the martyrium, later transformed into a chapel was erected in 4th c. AD.

23. The second basilica is three aisled, with one apse, narthex and a large atrium with side premises to the south. It was lavishly decorated by marbles (some of them made in open work, which is very rare in Bulgaria) and mosaic floors with geometric patterns. The church was dated to the 5th-6th c. AD.

24. In the 80ies of 20th c., an Early Christian basilica was excavated in Ore-she, Blagoevgrad Region. It was described in short by N. Chaneva-Dechevska but was published in details recently. This church is three aisled, with one apse, narthex and two side premises on both side of the presbytery. It has a rich inner decoration executed in marble and in the apse, a silver reliquary was discovered. The basilica was erected in the first half of 5th c. AD and functioned until the second half of 6th c. AD.

25. Last two decades, in Sandanski (Parthicopolis) continued the excavation in- and around the Early Christian Episcopal Church of the ancient city, which started in late 20th century. It was known by earlier excavation on

the site that it is a three aisled building with one apse, which is rectangular in shape outside and circular inside, with two premises on both sides. It has also a narthex and a very rich decoration of marbles, mosaic floors and wall paintings. During the past years there were investigated the areas south and west of the church, which brought to light a circular baptistery, situated in the southwest direction, which was decorated by wall paintings and mosaics on the vaults. There is another space adjoined next to baptistery from north, and both of them are connected via a corridor to the narthex. The basilica had several construction periods. The first one was dated lately to the 4th c. AD; the second one is of early 5th c. AD and the last one is of 6th c. AD. The building was destroyed by an earthquake in the second half of same century.

This short survey on the recent archaeological discoveries confirmed that the construction of churches in the lands of present day Bulgaria started in the 4th c. AD and Early Christian architecture had its heyday in 5th-6th c. AD.

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