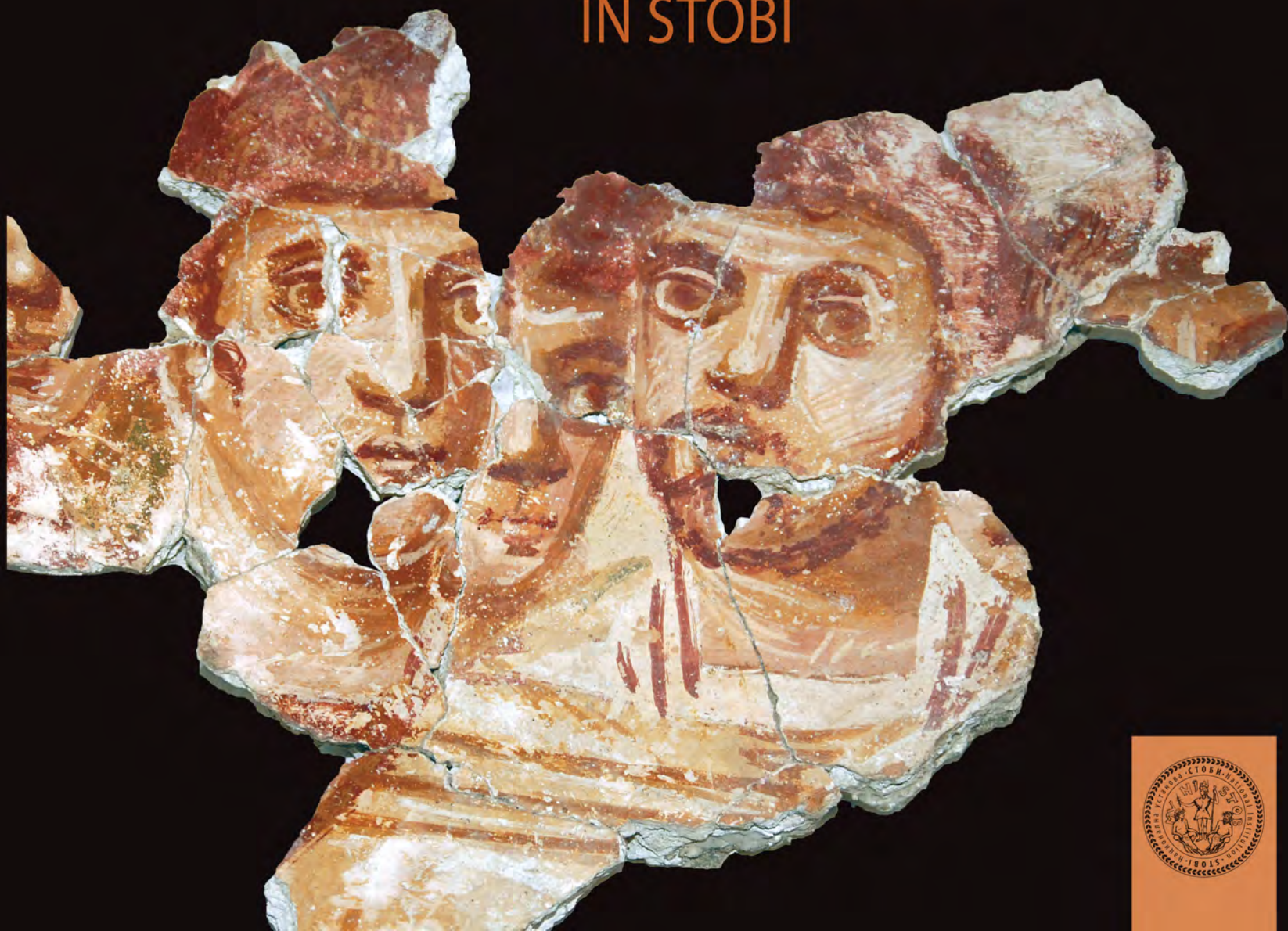


EARLY CHRISTIAN WALL PAINTINGS FROM THE EPISCOPAL BASILICA IN STOBI







NATIONAL INSTITUTION STOBI

EARLY CHRISTIAN WALL PAINTINGS FROM THE EPISCOPAL BASILICA IN STOBI

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Authors of the exhibition:
Silvana Blaževska, Miško Tutkovski, Tonka Mitrova

Authors of the catalogue:
Elizabeta Dimitrova, Silvana Blaževska, Miško Tutkovski

Translation:
Elizabeta Dimitrova, Goce Pavlovski

Photographs:
Vlado Kiprijanovski, Miško Tutkovski

Proof reading:
Jason Miko

Design and computer layout:
Branko Gašteovski

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FOREWORD

The Episcopal basilica at Stobi, the oldest and most important Early Christian monument in the Republic of Macedonia, is among the numerous treasures of great cultural and historical significance uncovered under the deep layers of earth deposited with centuries in the ancient town of Stobi. After almost a century of research, the Episcopal basilica still attracts the interest of those who study the remains of the Macedonian cultural past from various aspects. One of them, certainly, is the fresco paintings that decorated the interior of this Early Christian temple. Because of its state of preservation and its iconographical and coloristic qualities, the wall paintings from the Episcopal basilica represent a unique and exceptional example of painterly cultural heritage from the 4th century in the wider Mediterranean region.

The exhibition, *Early Christian Wall Paintings from the Episcopal Basilica at Stobi*, open on May 18, 2012, represents an exceptional possibility to introduce the public to this important fresco ensemble, discovered during the 1970's, which would not be possible without the serious conservation activities that our institution undertook in the course of 2010 and 2011 regarding their cleaning and preservation. After seven months of work, the team of conservators succeeded to preserve and partially restore the brightness of the wall decoration of the earliest Christian temple at Stobi, to the extent to which their condition allowed, respecting the modern principles of restoration work.

This important project was possible thanks to the Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Preservation for 2010 granted by the Embassy of the United States in the Republic of Macedonia. On behalf of the National Institution Stobi I would like to express gratitude to the Embassy of the United States in the Republic of Macedonia, especially to former Ambassador Philip Reeker, and certainly, to present Ambassador Paul Wohlers, for the continuous support that the Embassy of the United States provides for preservation of the Macedonian cultural heritage and for their understanding and support during the complicated conservation process that sometimes did not follow the planned timeline.

Constructive advice and support of the Cultural Heritage Protection Office were always welcome in the course of the preparation and realization of the project, and we owe our debts to director Pasko Kuzman and Kristina Biceva. We are also grateful to the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Macedonia and



Minister Elizabeta Kančeska Milevska for their continuous support in our efforts to explore, preserve and present the archaeological site of Stobi to the public.

On this occasion, we would like to express our gratitude to the National Bank of the Republic of Macedonia and especially to Governor Dimitar Bogov, for his cordial support of the idea of this exhibition to contribute towards the celebration on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the monetary independence of the Republic of Macedonia. It is a result of the constructive and open cooperation between the Department for Numismatics at the National Bank and NI Stobi over the last several years. The professional suggestions and the sharp sense of aesthetics of Katerina Hristovska, the Head of the Unit of Numismatics, were of significant help in the process of the visualization of the exhibition. The architect Tatjana Nacevska-Jamakoska technically defined its spatial concept.

We are most indebted to our conservator's team, to Momčilo Trajkovski and Dragan Vergovski – Alpi from the National Conservation Centre in Skopje who conducted the project in which young conservators participated: Tome Filov, Mariana Dimova, Dzulijano Laucoski Vergovski, Alma Idrizi, Nenad Stančev, Valentina Ilijevska and Marijana Mileska. Some of them gained their practical knowledge for the first time at our project at Stobi. Miško Tutkovski and Tonka Mitrova were responsible for the complicated and arduous process of documenting the different phases of the fresco paintings as well as the process of their conservation and restoration.

The conservation and restoration activities of the wall paintings from the Episcopal basilica at Stobi represent the beginning of the complex process for the final preservation of the oldest Early Christian church in the Republic of Macedonia. Its final preservation and presentation is one of the major priorities of the National Institution Stobi. It is our greatest hope that the fresco paintings and other works of the Early Christian art that decorated the interior of the Episcopal basilica in the near future will be presented in the church at Stobi, where they actually belong.

Silvana Blaževska
Director of the National
Institution Stobi

The Episcopal Basilica in Stobi

The old town of Stobi, built at the confluence between the Crna and Vardar Rivers on the crossroads of two significant routes, had all the preconditions for prosperity during the Roman period and the Late Antiquity. Since the time of Augustus up to the late 3rd century, *Municipium Stobensium* grew into a large urban, trade and religious center in the north part of the province Macedonia, a city of cosmopolitan character with a population of varied ethnicities in which the east and west influences intervened resulting in a splendid architecture and material culture.

After the natural disasters and devastations of barbarian ravaging in the second half of the decadent 3rd century, the early 4th century marked a new era in the development of Stobi. Since Constantine's Edict of Milan in 313 granted religious freedom to Christianity, many towns all over the Empire became bishop's seats, the old town of Stobi among them. The first known bishop of Stobi was Budios, recorded by the ancient sources as one of the church officials present at the first Ecumenical council in Nicaea in 325. The new administrative reforms in 386 probably established Stobi as the capital of the

new province *Macedonia Salutaris* and somewhat later at the end of the century or the first decades of the 5th century when the province was renamed in *Macedonia Secunda*, the sources mention eight towns in these borders with Stobi being primary on the list.

The socio-political and religious changes during the reign of Constantine were reflected in Stobi as well. In the 4th century, besides the old reconstructed and remodeled buildings such as the theatre, the synagogue, the temple of the Egyptian goddesses Isis and the public building with arches, the town acquired a new urban image with luxurious residential and public buildings, baths and fountains, new fortifications and among them, the first Christian basilica.



Old Episcopal
basilica, first half
of the 4th century

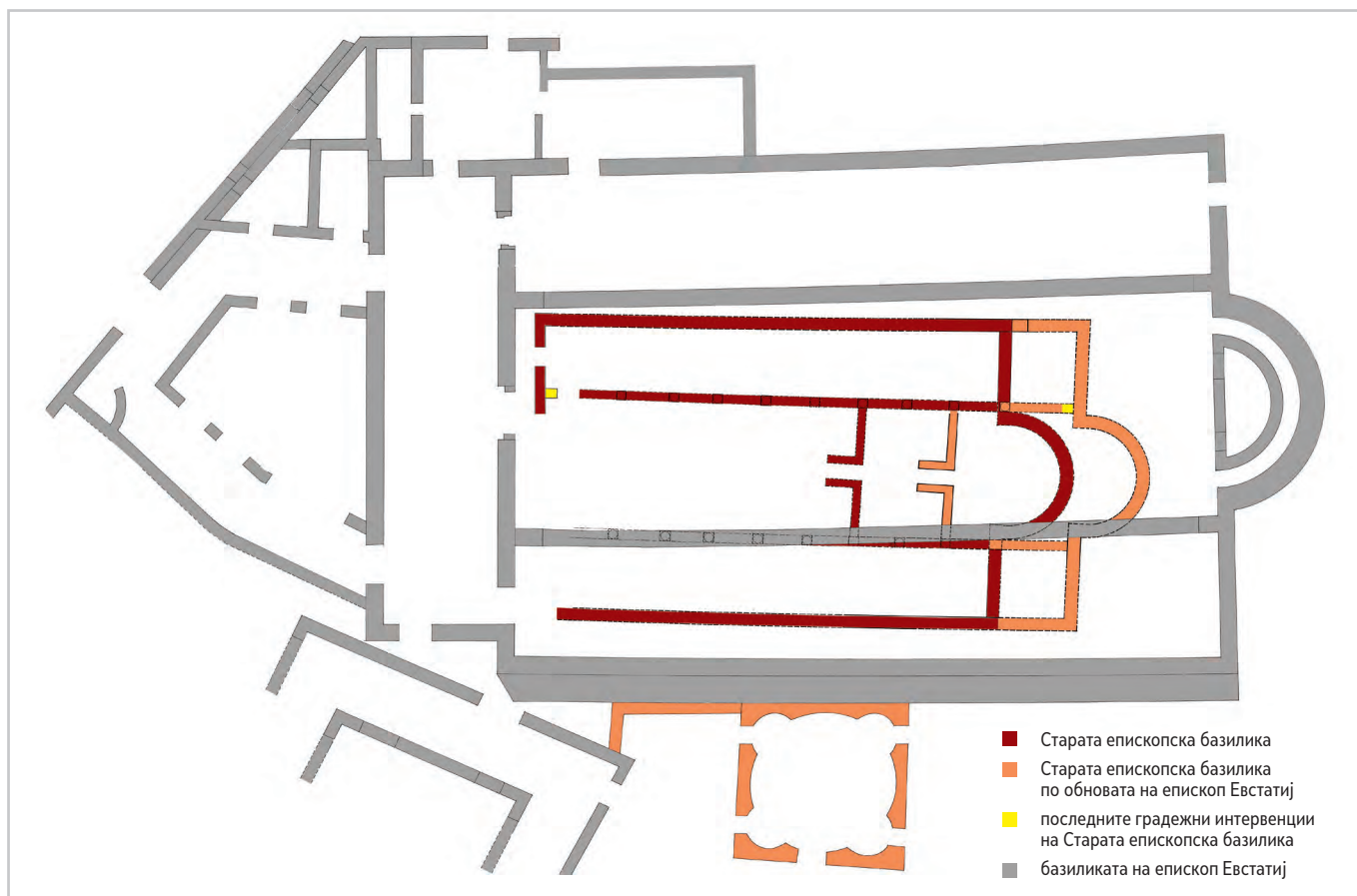
The oldest church in Stobi was erected in the south part of the town, in the shadow of the roman theatre. It was built on top of an older building whose plan and function are not clearly defined. That is the presumed *Domus ecclesiae*, the house where believers congregated during the days when Christianity was forbidden. Some of the scholars in the past tended to associate this place with *area martyrum*, regarding the adjacent theatre as the arena where many righteous followers probably suffered their tragic death during the persecutions of the Christians.

The first church is a three-aisled basilica with a deep semicircular apse and a presbyterium with a low chancel screen. The lower zones of the walls were made of stones and mortar while the upper parts were made of mud



Roman-Ionic capitals from
older buildings reused in
the Old Episcopal basilica

bricks. The roofing construction was made of wooden beams with a thatched ceiling. Unfortunately, the architectural decoration of the interior including the columns dividing the central nave of the aisles is not preserved. Judging by the different bases on the stylobate and the two Roman ionic capitals found during the excavations in 2010, it seems that the interior decoration comprised marble elements from older buildings. The floor in the nave of the first basilica was covered by



a colourful mosaic with dominant geometrical and floral motifs in the *opus tessellatum* while the floors in the aisles were covered by hydraulic mortar.

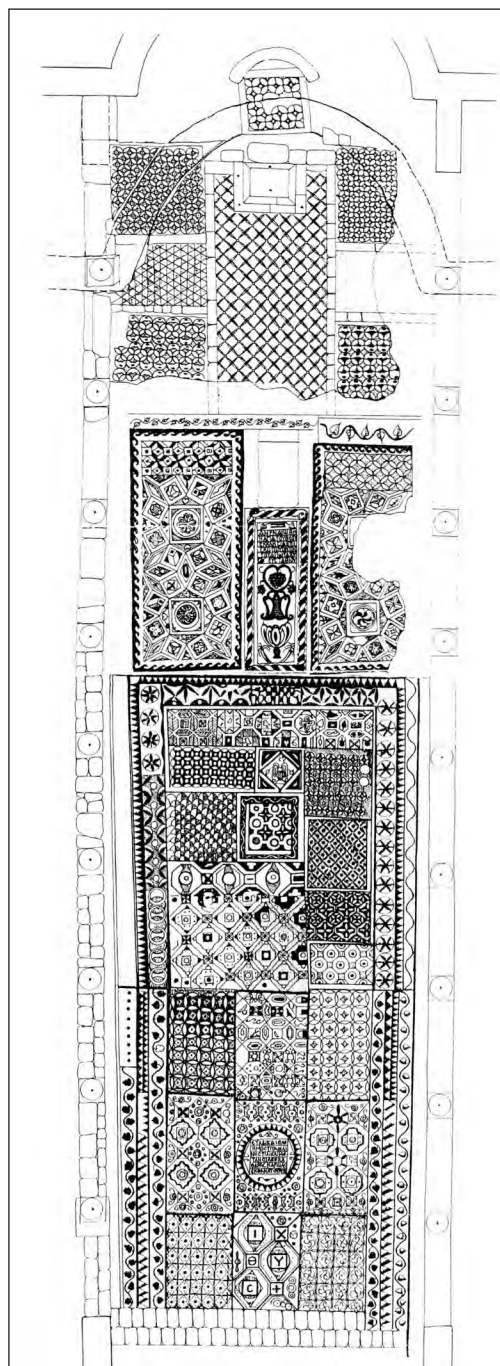
In this earliest phase of the mosaic decoration Christian symbolism is recognized in two central fields on the west end of the nave, just by the entrance. In one of the framed areas



Mosaic floor in the nave of the Old Episcopal basilica, first half of the 4th century

Plan of the Episcopal basilica and the Baptistery with highlighted construction phases

Mosaic floor in the nave of the Episcopal basilica after the renovation of the bishop Eustatios

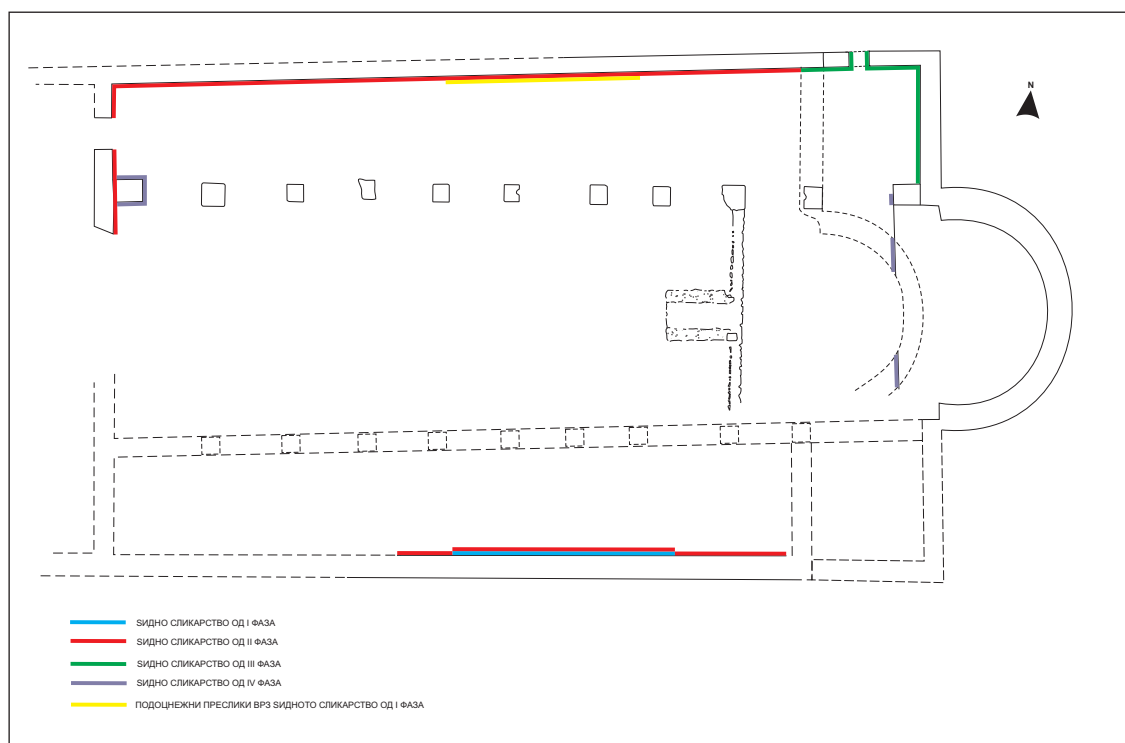


there are the initials Ἰ(ησοῦς) Χ(ριστός) Θ(εοῦ) Ὑ(ιός) Σ(ωτήρ) while the other is a medallion containing a Christological message to all the believers who visit the church:

Εὐχαί καί ἐλε-	Through vows and
ημοσύναι καί	charities and
νηστεία καί με-	fasts and
τάνοια ἐκ κα-	obeisance
θαράς καρδίας	from pure heart,
ἐκ θανάτου ρύετε.	save yourself from death.

The inner decoration of the first church was complemented by the paintings on the walls of the church and the ceiling of the aisles. Not long after the construction of the oldest church, only the south wall was decorated in the fresco technique on clay bedding reinforced with straw and smoothened by a thin layer of lime mortar. Only the lower zone of these wall paintings is preserved with an arrangement of six panels imitating marble incrustation and divided by fluted pilasters with Corinthian capitals.

Soon afterwards, the remaining walls as well as the already decorated south wall were covered by a new layer of murals, but this time in the secco technique. On the north and west wall was an underlay of several layers set. The rough surface was smoothened by clay with straw and a thin



Plan of the Old Episcopal basilica with highlighted painting phases

layer of lime mortar covered by another layer of clay and intonaco – the lime mortar layer prepared for painting. The same technique was applied to the south wall except the area above the older frescoes, which served as an underlay for the new paintings. Only a thin layer of clay was applied, covered by the new mortar for painting.

The frescoes from the second phase are preserved in the lower zone of all the walls, while the north and the west

wall carry remains of the upper zone as well. The arrangement of the lower zone repeats the older decoration of pseudo-architectural marble plates. The second zone depicted various compositions of which only fragments of floral and zoomorphic motifs are preserved. The single

The oldest frescoes on the south wall of the Old Episcopal basilica, first half of the 4th century





Central field of the mosaic floor in front of the presbyterium with inscription of the bishop Eustatios, second half of the 4th century

recognized scene of the Old Testament is located on the west end of the north wall showing Daniel in the lion's den.

The exact date of the construction of the Old Episcopal basilica is an ongoing subject of scholarly discussion. According to one group of archaeologists, the earliest church in Stobi was built in the first half of the 4th century and it is related to the bishop Budios, meaning that it is the oldest Christian temple in Macedonia. This argument implies the existence of a developed church organization at the dawn of Christianity and the obvious need of the large Christian community for a temple of God in which the bishop Budios held liturgies. Others believe that the construction of the oldest basilica was finished shortly before the visit of Theodosius I in 388, who issued two edicts regarding the religion during the stay in Stobi.

Later, the first church was remodeled and extended to the east by the *holiest bishop Eustatios* who perpetuated his name in a mosaic inscription in front of the new altar, over the splendid kantharos symbolizing the Life-giving spring:

Ἀνεναίωθη	The holy
ἡ ἁγία τοῦ θεοῦ	church of God
ἐκκλησία ἐπι-	was reconstructed
σκόπου ὄντος	when bishop was
τοῦ ἁγιωτάτου	the holiest
Εὐσταθίου.	Eustatios.

According to some scholars this happened during the sixth or the seventh decade of the 4th century, honouring the visit of Theodosius, while other scholars consider the renovation at the end of the century or the beginning of the next.

The two major construction phases of the Old Episcopal Basilica are clearly reflected in the wall paintings and the mosaic decoration of the floor in the nave. By remodeling the church, the floor decoration was extended in the new



Part of the fresco decoration on the west wall of the Old Episcopal basilica, first half of the 4th century

presbyterium where a mosaic in mixed *opus tessellatum* and *opus sectile* technique was placed. The new walls on the east side were painted after the construction was finished. They are the third phase frescoes, documented only on the eastern side of the north aisle. The underlay of lime mortar with straw is covered with *intonaco* painted in a combined fresco and secco technique. In this phase as well, the painters followed the previous scheme of decoration as we can notice on the extended north wall, while on the east wall, besides the geometrical patterns, there is another symbolic scene of two lambs flanking the baptismal spring.

The new analysis of the architecture and the different techniques of wall painting corresponding with the construction phases reveal that by the end of the 4th century the Old Episcopal Basilica went through three



Fresco decoration in the first zone on the east wall of the Old Episcopal basilica, second half of the 4th century



Part of the fresco decoration on the ceiling in the north aisle of the Old Episcopal basilica, second half of the 4th century

building phases and four phases of wall painting. The last construction activity was strengthening the interior by building two massive pilasters on both ends of the north stylobate which most probably happened at the end of the 4th or at the very beginning of the 5th century.

The fourth painting phase follows the construction of the pilasters in the north aisle of the church. The east pilaster is preserved to the height of the socle, completely opposite to the situation on the western side where the pilaster is preserved to an impressive height of 3.8 metres. Both of the pilasters are covered by a layer of hydraulic mortar to the height of

the socle and only the western has frescoes in the upper parts, painted on a layer of lime mortar. On the north side of the same pilaster, the underlay and the *intonaco* are made of hydraulic mortar. The murals in the two zones are painted in the *fresco* technique. Besides the regular decorative incrustation, our attention was attracted by the unique painting of rodents, located on the north side of the pilaster, above the simple rectangular frame of the lower zone. So far, this is the only known depiction of these animals in Early Christian art.

Several fragments of the ceiling decoration were discovered on the floor of the church. The design of the ceiling fresco was composed by a decorative border of stylized floral motifs around a central area of small squares decorated with cubes and eight-rayed stars, painted on a surface of lime mortar. Besides these, a symbolic representation of the Chi – Ro inside a wreath was painted on the ceiling as well.



The baptistery is located to the south of the church and it has several construction and painting phases. The archaeological data points out that the initial baptistery was built at the same time with the oldest church, but the building that we see nowadays, was erected at the end of the 4th or the beginning of the 5th century, in the time of the last documented building activity in the Old basilica. This leads towards the conclusion that the frescoes of the first phase in the baptistery are chronologically parallel with the paintings of the fourth phase in the basilica. The underlay for the murals was made of lime mortar with straw covered by *intonaco* and painted in the combined *fresco* and *secco* techniques. The frescoes of the lower zones were imitating marble plates and incrustation while the upper zones have

The quatrefoil baptistery of the Episcopal basilica

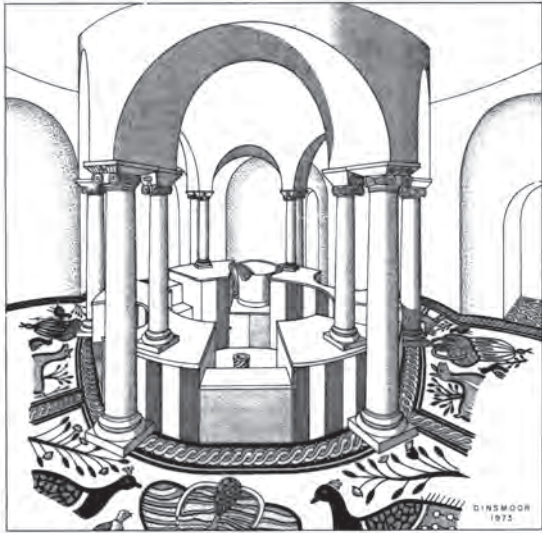


Painted and gilded impost capital
from the window in the apse wall
of the Episcopal basilica, 6th century

figural scenes. The four evangelists were depicted in the conchs, with Matthew being identified by an inscription. Smaller compositions of the Christological cycles were painted in the area below the dome.

In the second half of the 4th century the Old church was demolished and above it, on top of a 4.5 meter fill, the new basilica of Bishop Philip was built, dominating late antique Stobi and the deteriorated theatre. The three – aisled basilica has an atrium and narthex, a subelium and a crypt in the altar area with a relief decorated with marble baldachin. The crypt probably contained the relics of a martyr who will remain unknown. The Bishop Philip memorized his grandeur project by an inscription on the lintel over the entrance between the narthex and the nave. The church is abundant in interior architectural decoration with a marble relief decoration reflecting Christian symbolism. The massive columns were topped by composite, theodosian, capitals with two zones and

between them there were richly decorated parapets dividing the aisles from the nave. Gilded and painted impost capitals stood on top of the mullions from the windows in the apse. A relief decorated circular ambo with stairs on both sides was placed in the centre of the nave. The floors in the nave, the south aisle and the narthex were covered by mosaics as well as the walls judging by the many uncovered gilded glass tesserae. The walls of the narthex were decorated with frescoes. The decorative pattern follows the same scheme from the Old church: the lower zone imitates marble incrustation and the upper zone has biblical scenery.



Proposed reconstruction of the Baptistery,
early 6th century

Sometime towards the end of the 5th or the early 6th century, due to constructive problems, the church was partially renovated. A new presbyterium was built and the colonnades were completely reconstructed.

The baptistery was included in the arrangement of the new basilica. This is the period when the floor was covered by a magnificent mosaic illustrating the 41st Psalm of David with two alternated presentations of peacocks and deers around a kantharos, the symbol of kantharos the Life-giving spring. The third construction phase of the baptistery relates to the second phase of the new basilica. The reconstructions of this period completely changed the interior of the baptistery. The circular piscine was again remodeled

Kantharos from the Baptistery made
of Pentelikon marble, early 6th century





by the addition of two semicircular niches on the eastern and western side with a baldachin supported by six pairs of marble columns. The southeast steps of the piscine were closed and replaced by a massive marble kantharos which served for the baptism of the (infants). In this period, the old frescoes of the baptistery were covered by a thin layer of white mortar with a newly painted program of dominant geometrical decoration. Most impressive in this painting phase is the large Latin cross painted over the depiction of the evangelist Matthew. Later, part of the frescoes from the second phase was repainted with figural motifs preserved only in fragments.

The Episcopal Basilica was active until the last decade of the 6th century when the population abandoned the city. Big earthquakes, the known invasions of the Avars and Slavs as well as the climatic changes were probably the main factors for the abandonment of Stobi, which fell into oblivion in the following period until the 19th century.

The Painterly Horizons of the Frescoes of the Episcopal Basilica: Iconographic Design, Symbolic Configuration, Stylistic Modularity

In the course of the first decades following the triumph of the Christian faith publically confirmed by the promulgation of the Edict of Milan in 313, the Late Antique metropolis of Stobi grew into a representative Episcopal see located at the cross-section of the Balkans' artistic trans-arterial roads. The intensive development of the Christian community which followed the date when the town obtained its Episcopal status is reflected in the architectural production of sacral edifices, as well as in their painterly decoration. The advancement of Christianity is also confirmed by the preserved large-size building skeleton of the original Episcopal basilica, on the walls of which the earliest visual representations of Christian iconography in Stobi were depicted. Ideologically united in a program concept of the authentic painterly decoration which at present-day is preserved only in fragmentary fresco remnants, the ornamental elements, the scenes permeated with baptismal symbolism, the Eucharistic pictures, the soteriological sights, as well as the Christological motifs comprised the

visual panorama created on the walls of the Episcopal temple and in the interior of the quadriconchal Baptistry. With the striking iconographic constellation of the themes, the inventive symbolic explication of the visual concept, as well as the remarkable stylistic qualities of their execution, these frescoes are creative witnesses of the continuous process of creation of the artistic décor within the Episcopal complex throughout the 4th century. Although they have "changed" their original location and lost a great deal of their one-time painterly glow, these frescoes are genuine "refugees" from the distant temporal horizons of the mysterious, inspirational and artistically hyperactive Early Christian epoch.



The Pseudo-architectural Revetment of the Interior's Lower Zone

Speaking of the earliest painterly layer created in the first quarter of the 4th century, one can confirm that a part of the decorative arrangement which in a form of pseudo-marble revetment once ornamented the lowest register of the south wall of the edifice is partially preserved. The iconographic

program designed for this zone of the fresco arrangement was executed in the shape of a painterly emulation of luxurious decorative revetment produced in noble materials and





Pseudo – architectural panels on the south wall of the Old Episcopal basilica, first half of the 4th century (detail)

was conceived in a scheme of rectangular pseudo-panels divided by channeled columns decorated with Ionic capitals. Within this concept, in the coherently structured system of architectural decoration emulating the spatial arrangement of a luxuriously ornamented interior covered with slabs made of polychromatic marble, rectangular fields were configured and decorated with picturesque graphic components. Striving to avoid the repetition of the elements in the aesthetical ornamentation of the pseudo-panels, the fresco masters depicted rhomboid frames with a central decorative motif positioned on the surface of three of the rectangular fields (round medallion, stylized floral motif with a circular shape, rectangular frame with vegetal ornamentation), while the panels situated in between are decorated merely with a coloristic modulation of the basic chromatic tone, which generates associative vegetal and graphic ornaments. In that regard, the palette of colors applied with a purpose of creating a picturesque impression of precious marble revetment consists of a dark red nuance (porphyry), saturated greenish tone (serpentine) and a warm shade of ivory (bright marble with sedimentary granulation). Joined by the channeled columns into a unique decorative skeleton, the ornamental pseudo-panels are united in an impressive visual design with an optical

effect of a polychromatic revetment appropriate to the luxuriant interior of the Episcopal edifice. Known to have been used in the decorative matrixes applied in the lower zones of the interior painterly ornamentation of basilical structures in the 4th and the 5th century (Rome, Thessalonica, Dion), the graphic design composed of architectural pseudo-panels is the true representative of the most traditional manner in the conception of the first register of the painterly ensembles in the representative Christian temples created in the Late Antique era.

A somewhat more repetitive principle in the design of the fresco decoration applied in the lowest zone of the church walls can be detected in the configuration of the second painterly layer created towards the mid-4th century and preserved on the south, west, as well as on



Drawing of the fresco decoration on the north wall of the Old Episcopal basilica, 4th century

the north wall of the building's interior. Inspired by the authentic manner in the conception of the architectural pseudo-decoration, the authors of the younger painterly layer created a rigid and consistent system of rectangular decorative panels joined by channeled columns ending with conic capitals. The basic decorative matrix in the graphic conception of the panels consists of rhomboid frames with a central round motif and smaller circular elements positioned in the angles of the main field. Although it does not deviate substantially from the basic decorative scheme of graphically designed architectural revetment which has already been applied in the earliest fresco layer of the Episcopal temple, the second phase of the painting displays modest painterly effects in regard to the plastic values of the

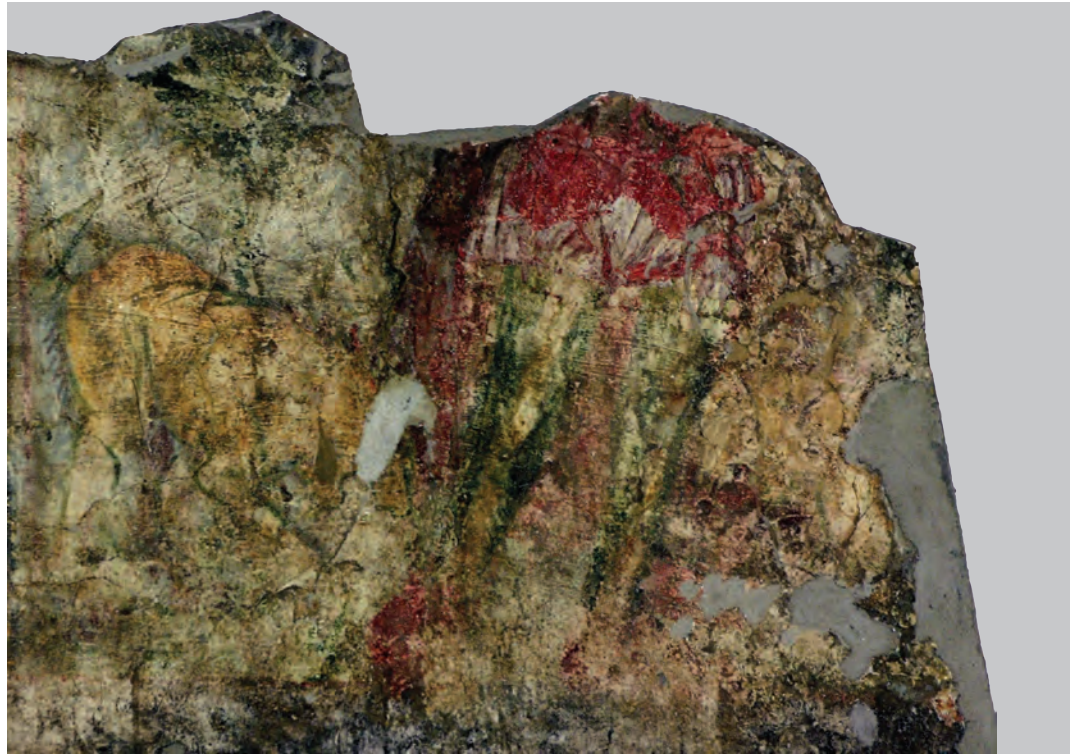
depicted ornaments and more reductive coloristic scope in creation of the tonal qualities of the visual components. The same refers to the visible portions of the scenes depicted in the second register on the north and west wall of the edifice, where one can see compositions with zoomorphic, vegetal and allegorical motifs. Detached from the lower zone by an ornamental edging composed of elaborated three-leaved palmettos, these scenes, located in the higher register of the painterly decoration, most probably illustrated the ideological postulates of Christian symbolic iconography. In the range of these compositions, in the western part of the north wall, there was the symmetrically formulated scene depicting the Old Testament prophet Daniel among the lions.

The Prophet Daniel in the Lion's Den

Only the lower part of the figure of the Old Testament prophet flanked by two zoomorphic images of lions is still visible from the scene illustrating the mentioned motif. Hence, only the lower part of the figure of the prophet is preserved dressed in a short coral-red tunic and a pallium depicted with rich folds and colored with saturated carnelian-red nuance. The firmly structured anatomic code in the representation of the prophet's figure reveals his soundly modeled lower extremities, positioned in an inconspicuous astride. In the compositional configuration

of the depicted scene, the Old Testament prophet is flanked by two lions, pictured with open jaws and positioned on the level with his feet. The animal represented to the right of Daniel, depicted with perfectly modeled anatomy, round muscular components and luxuriously unfurled ruff, bends towards the prophet's figure and, as a sign of obedience,

The prophet Daniel
in the lion's den,
upper zone of the
north wall of the Old
Episcopal basilica,
first half of the 4th
century



bows to him in its corporal magnificence. From the lion depicted to the left of the prophet only parts of the head and the shoulder are visible; however, according to the observable elements, the animal was represented in a perfectly symmetrical position to its counterpart in the scene. This variant in the depiction of the Biblical motif that illustrates the tale of the prophet Daniel, who, due to his devotion to God, has been thrown in the den with the ferocious lions, was a frequent painterly motif in the décor of the sacral edifices in the period of the 3rd – 6th century. Belonging to the iconographical matrixes originating in the eastern territories of the Christian world, this variant refers to the more representative manner in the visualization of one of the most frequent Old Testament prefigurations of Christ in the art of the Early Christian epoch. In that context, contrary to the examples in which the nude figure

of the prophet is depicted between the starving lions – common in the painterly decoration of the catacombs and other funerary chambers, the scene depicting the luxuriously dressed image of Daniel accompanied by the tamed beasts grew into an appropriate artistic element designed for the décor of the Episcopal temples, luxuriant marble sarcophagi and costly liturgical vessels produced in gold and ivory. Depicting the Biblical wise man and righteous believer who, with the help of persistent prayers, has not only escaped death but also managed to keep his social reputation and noble privileges, the iconographic constellation that pictures Daniel dressed in his “princely outfit” between the obedient lions is a symbolic sublimation of the idea of religious power and its role in the redemption of the righteous believers.



Monogram of Christ within a wreath, fragment from the ceiling in the north aisle of the Old Episcopal basilica, second half of the 4th century

The Ecclesiastic Sky and the Eternal Master

The decoration of the ceiling which crowned the fresco painting applied on the walls of the basilica was given an ornamental character founded upon the concept of geometrical and floral iconographic components. In that regard, as one can conclude on the ground of the remaining fragments, the floral garlands entwined from thick greenery and flame-like leaves “ran” longwise the side aisles framing the “illusionistic” panorama comprised of cubical geometric motifs, rhomboid associations and stylized rosettes. The cubes depicted in a pseudo-three-dimensional perspective, the rhombs tripled on a background of little stars, as well as the rosettes positioned in the center of the geometrically précised circle are the structural elements of the “ecclesiastic sky” that crowned the monumental interior of the Episcopal temple. From the painterly motifs that sublimed the symbolic connotation of the entire fresco arrangement applied on the ceiling, only the depiction of a round wreath composed of a resplendent greenery and reddish foliates that frame Christ’s monogram is preserved. It is represented in the variant of

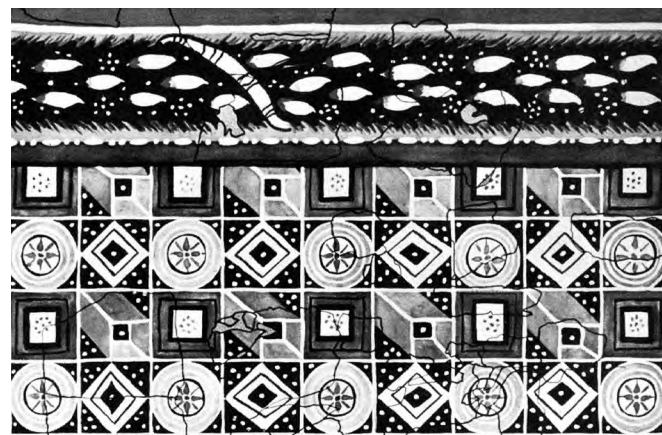
a monogrammatic cross, frequently painted in the second half of the 4th century. Associated with the incorrectly formatted chronological references to His eternal nature (Ω and Θ instead of Λ and Ω), framed with a red edging and flanked by vegetal elements executed in the same chromatic code, Christ’s monogram, i. e. the cross-shaped sign of Christ’s name was depicted as an “iconographic” crown of the ornamental décor executed on the ceiling. On the background of a starry sky which symbolizes the sacral vault of celestial heights, Christ’s monogram was intended to picture the idea of the heavenly triumph of the Savior elevated in the upper spheres of His eternal Kingdom. Comparable

to the ceiling décor of the Late Antique tombs and palaces discovered in the Mediterranean region (Thessalonica, Philippi, Constantinople, and Ravenna), the “highest” painterly register of the Episcopal church in Stobi reflects the

concept of visual representation of the spheres of the sacred skies, where, after the resurrection, the eternal Master rules the Universe.

The Ornamental Décor in the New Sanctuary

When the Episcopal church was extended to the east during the sixth/seventh decade of the 4th century, new architectonic components were added and additional space for new painterly components was created. The new layer of painting was applied on the extended part of the north wall in its eastern section, as well as on the northern portion of the newly erected east wall. Not deviating substantively from the traditionally established system for decoration of the lower registers of the walls with fresco emulation of architectonic revetment, the painters embellished the eastern part of the north wall with ornamental panels similar to the already existent pseudo-



Reconstruction of the painted ceiling of the Old Episcopal basilica, second half of the 4th century

paneling preserved from the painterly ensemble of their predecessors. Accepting their stylistic approach as well, the new painters created new pseudo-panels with an emulation of luxuriant wall revetment composed of geometrical ornaments placed in rhomboid frames, while in their chromatic constellation, they applied several nuances of saturated ecru, cold blue-gray and richly incarnated terracotta. On the east wall of the newly built architectural structure flanked by the decorative pseudo-panels, they depicted the baptismal scene with the motif of God’s well between zoomorphic symbols.



Symbolic scene with two lambs flanking the baptismal fountain on the east wall of the Old Episcopal basilica, second half of the 4th century

The Catechumens by the Fount of Baptismal Water

When looking at the scene, one can see the depiction of the two lambs flanking the baptismal fount. Despite the serious damage caused to the picture out of which the whole upper half is entirely destroyed, one can clearly notice its symbolical structure visualized through the symmetrical arrangement of the catechumens by the well of the “holy water”, i. e. the “source of the new doctrine”. In that regard, the two zoomorphic representations of the lambs are quite perceptible since they are depicted with an accentuated drawing, firmly configured anatomic structure, lively dynamized postures, as well as delicately toned ochre

applied in their plastic modelling. The central motif of the composition which is approached by the two lambs depicted in a symmetrically designed iconographic configuration is visible only in its lower portion, where one can notice the “waterfall” of spouts coming from the baptismal downpour. The upper portion of the scene where the glances of the lambs are directed to was shaped in a form of a solid rock

out of which the water spouts spring. Depicted with fluid drawing and transparent white painterly tones, the gushing water pours down to the foot of the rock in a dynamically structured overflow. Between the lambs and the water torrent there are two purple-red globes inscribed with Christ's monograms belonging to the type of monogrammatic crosses. Although senior scholars have persistently tried to identify this scene with the frequent Early Christian iconographic motif of the Good Shepherd, the lack of the anthropomorphic image of Christ – the guardian of the flock – strongly resists and denies such efforts. In that sense, contrary to the Biblical/sotheriological connotation of the picture of the Good Sheppard, the symbolic context of the scene in which the lambs are quenching their thirst in the water of the baptismal font points to the baptismal significance of the symmetrical pictorial arrangement. Well-known from the fresco décor of the baptismal cubicula in the Roman catacombs from the 4th century located on the Via Appia, this composition sublimates the baptismal dimension



Detail of the scene with two lambs flanking the baptismal fountain

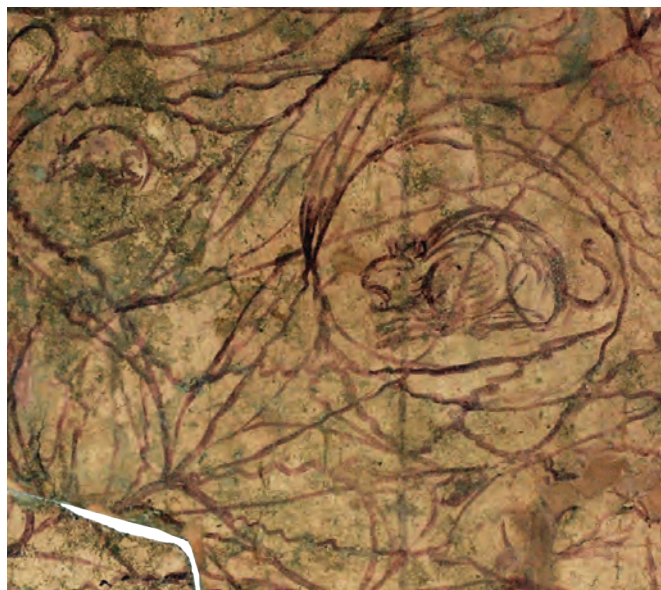
and its institutional significance which “springs” from the depiction of the rock as a symbolical foundation of the ecclesiastical installations. Hence, the scene depicts the lambs as zoomorphic symbols of the catechumens who are initiated as members of the congregation under the noble patronage of the church institution.

The Unexpected Rodent that “Went Astray” among the Holy Images

The last building intervention undertaken in the Episcopal church, i. e. the formation of the two supporting elements in the shape of pilasters for the reinforcement of the east and west walls alongside the northern colonnade - created an additional space for the last painterly intervention in the basilica's interior in the late 4th century. Preserved on the surfaces of the west pilaster, this fresco décor comes as a surprise not only due to its non-conventional “iconographic” components, but also to its exceptional and highly unexpected picturesqueness of the painterly approach in its execution. Namely, besides the emulation of

the decorative revetment of a pseudo-architectural type on the southern (decorative marble panel) and on the eastern side (channeled column) of the pilaster, in the upper zone of its northern side one can see that a furious rat has “climbed” the surface lurching toward a little mouse in a ready to attack position. Depicted with a light drawing that indicates a sketch rather than a painterly product and left with no coloring pigment, as well as elaborated modelling of the forms, the rat is positioned in the central part of the surface in the upper zone of the pilaster. It is surrounded by freely laid strokes of a dynamic linear drawing with abstract fluidity, executed with the same dark-red color applied in the creation of the rodent. Although painterly undefined and left in a stage of a skillful anatomic study of a highly unwanted, yet almost unavoidable creature in the large-size interior of the church edifices, the “Stobi rat” has contorted himself in a ready to

Detail of the unusual representation of rodents painted on the west pilaster, late 4th or early 5th century



jump position towards the little mouse facing the opposite side and unaware of the deadly danger hanging over it. The depiction of the animal elements in their natural inter-dynamic constellation, the location of this “scene” right next to the entrance (where one could have “entered” the church), the lack of structural components in the treatment of the picture (such are: modellation of the forms, configuration of the composition, spatial references, colors), as well as the picturesque biological playfulness in its execution could be easily associated to the spontaneous painting of a “genre” sight, the first, the last and the only one of that kind in the history of Early Christian artistic production. Considering the lack of analogies in the painterly ensembles from the Late Antique period, the non-existent comparative material in the textual sources or patristic literature, as well as the shortage of symbolical references that could be ascribed to the rat in the time of its depiction on the pilaster, its emergence in the Episcopal temple at Stobi is by no means a painterly exclusiveness. In case we are not dealing with a spontaneous anatomic study of an accidental and unwanted “visitor” of the church, which, for reasons unknown, has become a part of the painted ensemble of the temple, then the “angry rat of Stobi” surely opens some new horizons in the projection of symbolic visual messages, leaving us dazed and confused by the incomprehensible and ultra-mysterious spheres of Early Christian artistic creativity.

Fresco decoration of the west pilaster, the last phase of the wall paintings from the late 4th or early 5th century





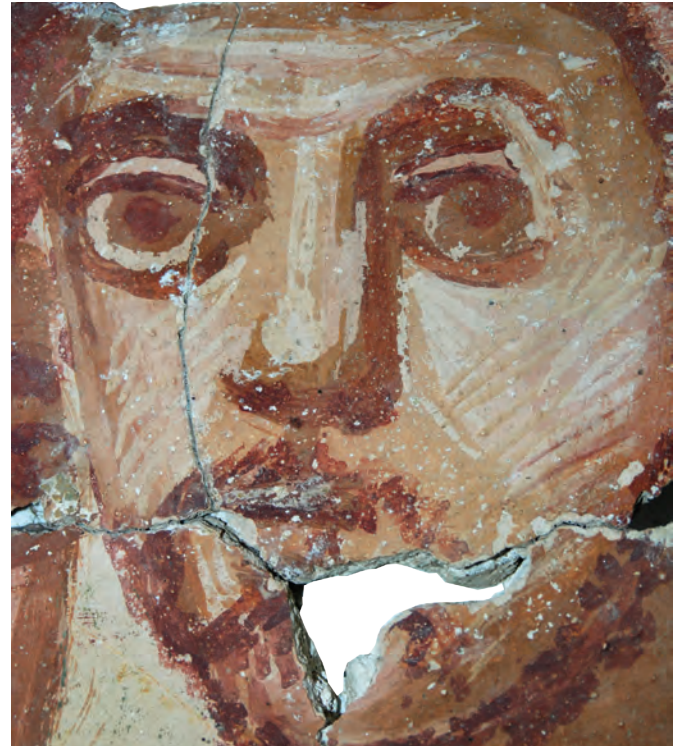
Detail of the scene illustrated in the northeast conch of the Baptistery, second half of the 4th century

The Christological Compositions in the Vaults of the Baptistery

The same period is the time of origination of the fresco painting executed in the quatrefoil baptistery in which, due to the centric configuration of the one-time domed spatial arrangement, the painterly structure of the décor reflects the concept of vertical visual domination of the Biblical messages over the standard ornamental decoration of the interior. Hence, the painters “covered” the wall surfaces

with an emulation of luxuriant architectonic décor made of marble panels, while in the conchs, as well as in the area under the dome they created figural scenes, the symbolism of which reflects the significance of the baptismal initiation for the

blissful destiny of the believers. As the technical features of the preserved fresco fragments clearly show (the angle of their concave arrangement), on the semicircular surfaces of the conchs the masters have depicted the four evangelists in their baptismal missions, while in the area under the dome they have painted the scenes of Christ's public ministry. In that context, in the north-eastern conch the evangelist Matthew was depicted EYA [TTE Λ] OC MATΘEOC, positioned under the semi-circular arch of the edifice which belongs to the scenery of the composition. With a gospel in his left hand and a gesture of blessing in his right, he addresses a group of men located to the left of him. Skillfully grouped in a compact unity and marked by the inscription ΛΑOC, they approach the evangelist headed by their leader who is distinguished by the accentuated gesture of greeting projected in the dynamized motion of his right hand. Depicted in the spatial context of the edifice under which the evangelist is positioned, the stretched hand of the public's representative symbolizes



the gesture of religious embracement of Christianity, acting at the same time as a solid element of the painterly cohesion between the two parts of the scene. Although the decoration applied in the other three conchs has been demolished, the remaining fragment displaying an image of a youthful saint depicted with large eyes and short, dark beard, which once belonged to the painting applied in the south-eastern conch, could have portrayed the evangelist Mark in his role of a Christian missionary. Hence, one can clearly see the conception of the fresco masters in their program configuration of the painterly ensemble that was founded upon the images of the main witnesses of Christ's sotheriological mission, as well as their picturesque evangelic tales. Correspondingly, the conchs most probably



Healing of the deaf-mute man, scene of the Christological cycle in the area under the dome of the Baptistery, second half of the 4th century

comprised the portraits of the authors of the four gospels: Matthew (north-eastern conch), Mark (south-eastern), Luke (north-eastern) and John (south-western), as in a number of baptisteries located in the Mediterranean region (5th – 6th century), while in the area under the dome evangelic scenes related to Christ's ministry and described in their tales were depicted in somewhat smaller sizes, adequate to the concave vault segment under the calotte.

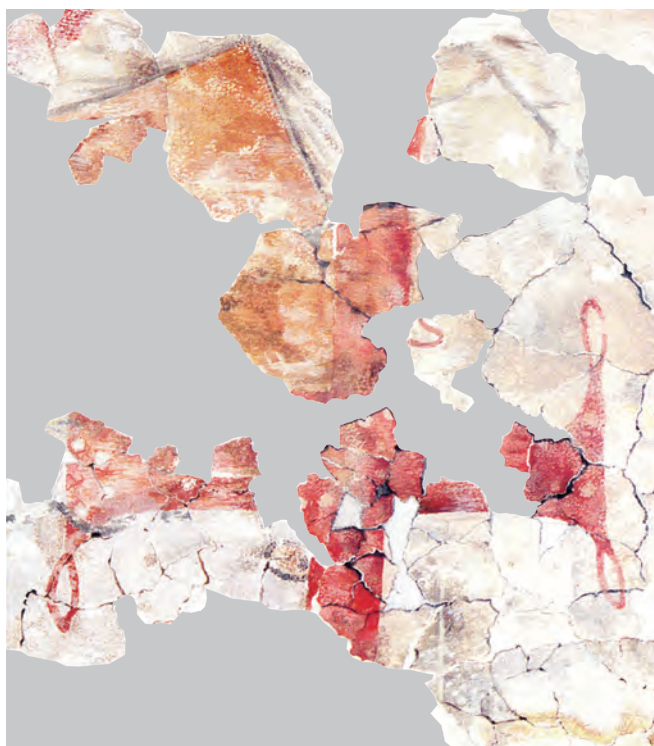
On the ground of the discovered fragments, we can assume that in the eastern part of the area under the dome



of the baptistery a certain scene was depicted in the center of which one can see the figure of Christ. He is portrayed with a golden halo around his youthful image and is accompanied by two apostles. In the left portion of the composition there is an edifice represented as an appropriate element of the scenery, designed with an arch-shaped entrance and a trigonal tympanum.

In the left part of the composition a male individual is represented dressed in an ochre cloak with red ornaments, the figure of whom is turned towards the image of Christ. Although Christ's face in its spatial projection is oriented to the portion of the scene which is completely demolished, the visible elements of the sight, as well as the preserved letters of the inscription once written above the roof of the edifice IEPOYC[AAHM], point to one of Christ's miraculous deeds performed on the sufferers in the Palestinian city and described in the Gospel according to Matthew. Among them, the only one that corresponds to the painterly description of the depicted event is the Healing of the mute possessed by the devil (Matthew, 9:32-33), a miracle which enraptured the citizens of Jerusalem (*"It was never so seen in Israel"*) since after Christ has cast the devil, the mute was able to speak again. This is also confirmed by the inscription ΦΗΜΙ (*I speak*), discovered above the scene which points to the recovered power of speech given to the mute by the miraculous public "performance" of the Savior. In regard to the style, the scene depicting the Healing of the mute manifests somewhat stiffer drawing, more synthesized treatment of the forms, more formal modelling of the images, as well as more reductive diapason of chromatic values in comparison to the evangelic portraits represented in the conchs. Their soft drawing, the well-balanced configuration of the masses, the tonal modelling of the forms, as well as the harmonious accords of the warm palette of colors reflect the delicate stylistic qualities of the representative artistic creation of the late 4th century, i. e. of the superb artistic achievements in the age of Emperor

The Latin cross painted on top of the representation of the evangelist Matthew in the north-east conch of the Baptistery, early 6th century



Theodosius. The coherent dualism of the contour and its plastic “substance” in the treatment of the depicted forms, the individualization of the represented images, as well as the proportional distribution of the chromatic nuances in the modelling of the facial volumes make these frescoes similar to the recognizable visual qualities of the artistic production of the metropolitan painterly ateliers.

This iconographically elaborated and stylistically attractive painterly décor executed in the upper registers of the baptistery was covered by a new layer of frescoes in the opening decades of the 6th century, when the Christological program concept of the original fresco arrangement was replaced by more reductive visual symbolism. It was at that time when the image of the evangelist Matthew in the

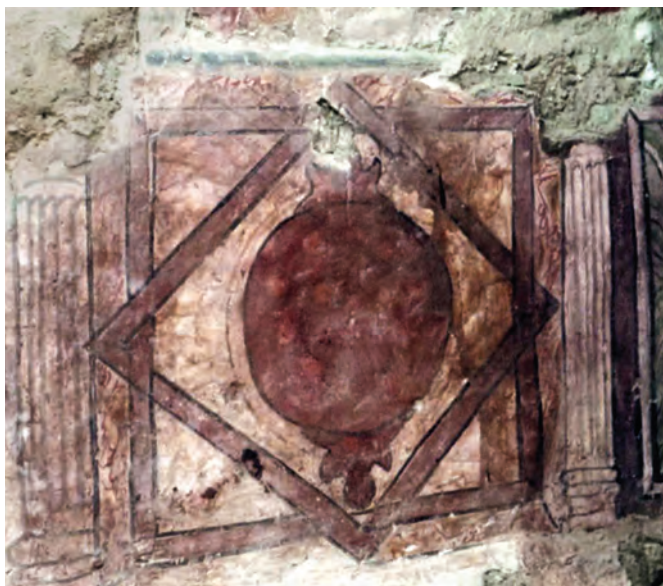
north-eastern conch was overpainted by a coral-red cross ornamented with drops – an iconographic variant frequently depicted in the period of the early 6th century. Located in the central part of the concavely structured surface of the conch and accompanied by symbolical painterly components, the cross-shaped symbol of the universal salvation “ornamented” with the decorative droplets of Christ’s blood shed on the cross of Golgotha was designed as one of the basic motifs in the quadri-partite program configuration of the new fresco arrangement. Most probably resulting from the need of functional association of the baptistery with the reconstructed Episcopal temple, the new fresco decoration in the baptistery, founded upon simplified forms and a reductive symbolic concept, has been transformed into a “painterly background” of the luxurious mosaic pavement executed around the baptismal piscine. At the beginning of the creative and dynamic 6th century, it generously made the way for the substantial iconographical role of the dominant mosaic decoration.

Conservation and restoration of the wall paintings from the Episcopal basilica

The discovery of the wall paintings from the Old Episcopal basilica takes us back to the 70s' of the past century when small parts of the north and south wall were uncovered during the joint Yugoslav – American excavation project at Stobi. In 1973 the two layers of frescoes were revealed on the south wall. Following the analysis of the underlay (bedding) of the murals, the painting technique and the pigments, the upper layer decorated in *secco*, due to bad preservation, was removed from the wall using the *strappo* technique. Preventive treatment of consolidation of the damaged areas was applied *in situ* on the first (older) layer. After the process was finished, the walls were covered by an improvised roofing construction in order to protect them from the weather impact in hope for a quick conservation. Preventive treatment was probably applied to the partially uncovered north wall as well. The results of the analysis and the conservation are published in the second volume of

the Studies in the Antiquities of Stobi by the project director prof. James Wiseman and the conservator Djordje Georgievski.

The archaeological excavations of the Episcopal basilica continued in the following decades until 1991 when the complete repertoire of the wall paintings was uncovered. This time, once again the frescoes were subjected to preventive treatment and temporarily protected by improvised covering constructions. In the period between 1991 until 2004 the authorized institutions did not manage to initiate a proper conservation project to protect and preserve the oldest Christian frescoes



The frescoes on the south wall of the basilica right after their discovery in the 1970's



The frescoes on the south wall in 2010

on the territory of the Republic of Macedonia, leading to serious damages and the complete disappearance of some parts.

In 2004, the team of the National Conservation Centre started the conservation of the murals on the north wall. The frescoes were removed from the wall of the basilica and after the treatment of the reverse side they were stored in the facilities of the archaeological site. Because of the inadequate storage conditions the wall paintings suffered even greater damages which were documented and analyzed for the first time during the preparation of the project for final conservation and restoration of the murals from the Old episcopal basilica in 2010.

The project was prompted by the National Institution Stobi and fully financed by the US Ambassador's Fund

for Cultural Preservation of the American Embassy in the Republic of Macedonia.

In 2010, with the coordination of Momčilo Trajkovski, senior conservator for wall paintings, the conservation process started with an analysis of the frescoes on the south wall in order to define the stability of the painted layer and the underlay as well. Samples of different pigments were analyzed by a non-destructive method (micro Raman spectroscopy) at the ForcaSpecLab for archaeometry at the Faculty of Natural Science and Mathematics in Skopje. The analysis conducted by prof. Biljana Minčeva Šukarova revealed that all the pigments are made from minerals found in Macedonia except the green which originates from Italy. This analysis determined the following activities of the conservation process and the best way for their execution.



Cleaning process of
the frescoes on the south wall



Consolidating the mortar
bedding of the frescoes

By comparison to the archive photos, during the inspection of the condition of the *in situ* frescoes on the south wall, it was concluded that some parts had fallen off and that the colour intensity had decreased drastically. Just next to the four panels uncovered in the past, in 2010 during the major Stobi excavation project, two more panels of the painted decoration were revealed. They were well preserved with minor cracks and intensive colouring.

After the clearance of the sediments on the frescoes, done mechanically and with the use of chemicals (Fig. 6), the painted layer was consolidated and the frescoes were divided in six pieces prepared for removal from the original carrier. With the application of the *distacco* technique the pieces were successfully separated from the

south wall. The next step was treatment of the reverse side and set up of aluminum honeycomb panels as new carriers of the separate pieces.

The conservation project continued in 2011 under the direction of Dragan Vergovski – Alpi. In this phase, the process was focused on the fragments from the north aisle of the basilica, removed in the past. The vast damage was particularly visible at the *secco* paintings: fallen parts, smashed pieces, large cracks, discoloration, fungus and many other damages caused by different insects and rodents.

The fragments were set on aluminum honey comb panels and their structure was consolidated by injecting and coating the damaged parts. The fallen fragments were bordered and puttied being prepared for the final cleaning



Retouching process
of the frescoes



Dragan Vergovski - Alpi and the young
team during the process of conservation

of the sediments. The last stage of the conservation process was the retouching of smaller areas which lost their colouring. The retouch was conducted very carefully in order not to disturb the original depiction using reversible watercolour. The coloured layer was fixed after the retouch, finalizing the conservation – restoration treatment of the frescoes. The wall paintings are now fully prepared to be reaffixed on their original position i.e. the walls of the Old Episcopal basilica in Stobi.

Ceremony for the signing of the Grant Agreement for the Preservation of the Stobi Frescoes , Stobi 2010



The Minister of
Culture, Elizabeta
Kančeska – Milevska
and the Amba-
sador of USA, Philip
Reeker



Guests at the signing
ceremony



Professor James Wiseman
and Mr. Minčo Jordanov



Brian Bauer, Cultural Attaché
of the US Embassy, visiting Stobi



Momčilo Trajkovski with
the young conservation team

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