

Blaga Aleksova

Domus Ecclesiae at Stobi The First Christian Community House in Macedonia

UDK: 904:726.5(381)“03/05”

Macedonian Academy
of Sciences and Arts,
bul. Krste Misirkov b.b., Skopje

The existence of the ancient city of Stobi at the confluence of the Erigon and Axios, known today as the Crna and Vardar Rivers was known already at the end of the nineteenth century. The city is located 160 km north-west of Thessalonica on the magistral highway that led from the Danube to the Aegean Sea. Because of this the city has an especially significant strategic, military, and commercial location in ancient times. The city of Stobi occupies three low terraces that descend towards the Crna River. It is surrounded by two city walls with towers and gates, of which the main entrance gate is located on the west side. The necropolis of the city, in use during the Roman, Byzantine and Slavic periods, is located in the area extending from the Cemetery church all the way to the Palikura Basilica.

The discovery of some structures in the city was began already during World War I when religious buildings in the city it self and its immediate environs were dug up and uncovered. Systematic archaeological investigations in the years 1920-1940 uncovered the urban area of the late antique city known today, with its public and private buildings. Since liberation intensive investigations have focused for the most part on already uncovered structures.

The excavations in the recent years have demonstrated that south of the Synagogue and Central Basilica, and the Baptistery of the Episcopal Basilica are found remains of a Hellenistic cemetery that was destroyed by later constructions. In this area were located the suburbs of the polis, which extended northwards as far as the Vardar. The acropolis was located at the highest point of the hill attested by the find of a coin of Philip V. A refugium of Paeonian settlement from before the Macedonian conquest may have occupied the summit of the hill overlooking the Vardar, whose largest part was cut by the construction of the railroad and the highway.

The Roman city oppidum civium Romanorum and the Municipium Stobensium, quickly spread outside the city wall dating in the 4th century A.D. The lower city, which occupied a broad area from the Central Basilica and Theater to the Crna River,

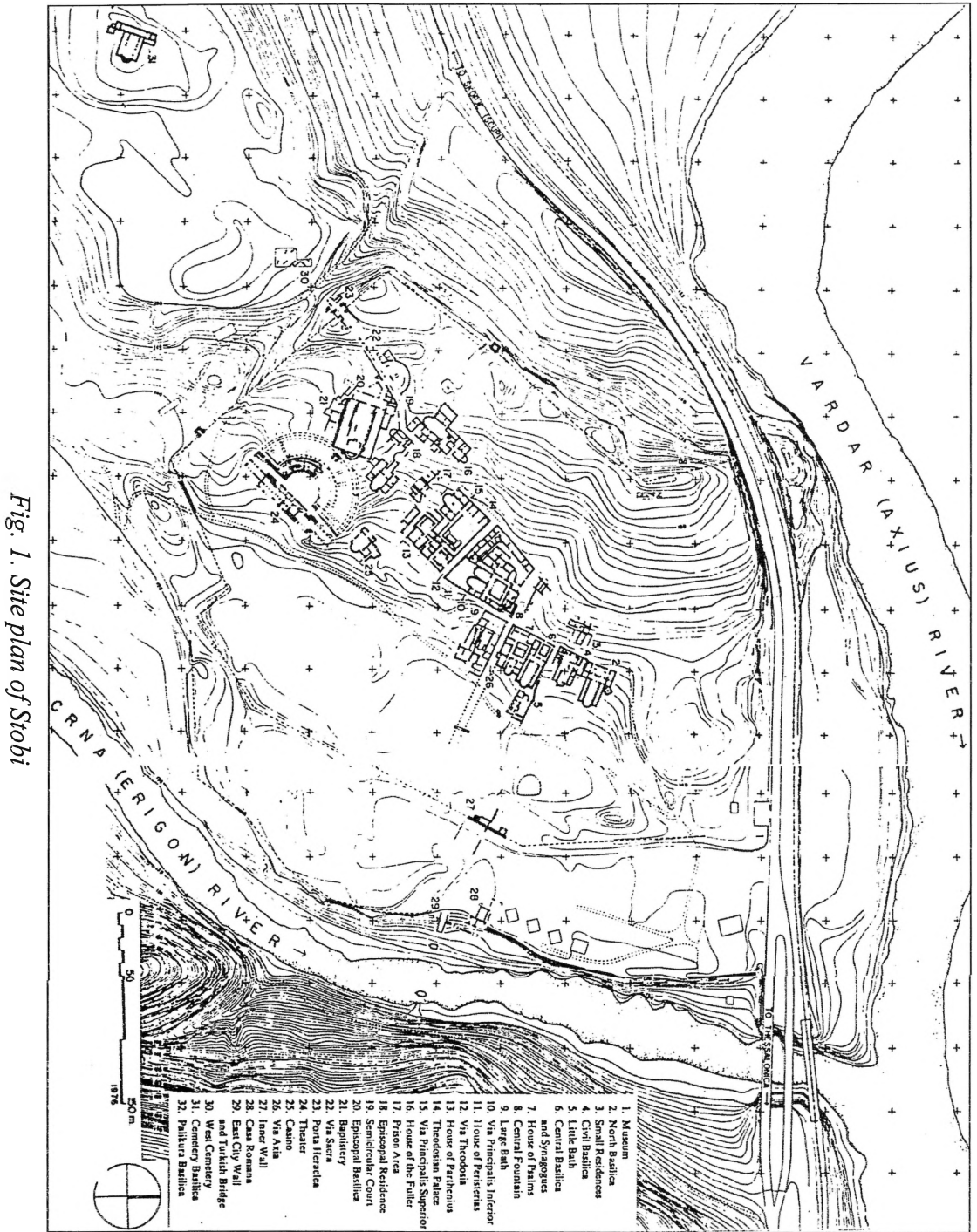


Fig. 1. Site plan of Stobi

is today covered with sand. Because of frequent flooding and Gothic attack the inner city wall, in which we find marble blocks from the Theater built in, was erected.

The city wall lies above a public structure with mosaic floor from the second to third centuries. The area between the outer and inner city walls was abandoned at the fourth century. The city continued to develop at a somewhat higher level west of the inner city wall. In this new area architectural remains from middle imperial times have been uncovered in the Civil basilica, Synagogue, and baths.

Few are the cities from the late antique Christian period, which have preserved in a tightly defined urban space such a large number of sacred cult buildings as there are at Stobi. Today after so many sacred buildings have been uncovered we have made much progress in understanding the true topography of the early Christian architecture at Stobi and its immediate surroundings. Within the city walls themselves large areas are completely unknown.

Christianity was well organized and consolidated at the very early date in the city. It became the seat of bishop, at least by 325 when the Stobi bishop Budius participated in the Concil of Nicea, if not earlier. In the course of his stay at Stobi in 388, Theodosius I issued two edicts in which he forbade the gatherings of heretics as well as any public discussion of religion (Codex Theodosianus 16.2, 5.15).

In the course of the 4th and 5th centuries religious buildings erected over structures were built or renovated. Especially luxurious renovation and construction of the church buildings at Stobi took place during the reign of Theodosius II (408-450) and later during the reign of Justinian (525-565). The presence of Avaro-Slavic invasions is evident in the numerous grave structures in the North Basilica as well as traces in the Central and the necropolis near the Palikura Basilica.

A Jewish community of some wealth existed in Stobi at least by the 3rd century when Polycharmus, "the father of the Synagogue", built a synagogue nearly in the center of the city. Two phases of this building are evident. The synagogue was destroyed in the late 4th century and a Christian basilica was erected upon its ruins.

Stobi, relatively small but strategic Paeonian and Macedonian community during the Hellenistic period, grown to large and prosper municipium during the Early Roman Empire and finally Stobi became the capital city of the province of Macedonia II at the end of the 4th century, when Macedonia was divided into two provinces. The Episcopate was raised to the rank of Metropolitan with the bishopric at Bargala and Zapara and the River Bregalnica.

Stobi was a predominantly Christian city by the 4th century; it was abandoned in the 6th century A.D. during the Avaro-Slavic invasion, and very soon occupied by the Slavic tribes.¹

¹ J. G. von Hahn, *Reise von Belgrade nach Salonik*, Denkschr. Wie, Phil-hist. Kl. 11, pt. 2, 1861, 175, 231-236; Idem., *Reise durch die Gebiete des Drin und Vardar*, Ibid., 15 pt. 2, 1867, 158-188; L. Heuzey, *Découverte de Ruines de Stobi*, RA 2, 1873, 24-42; B. Saria, *Stobi*, Narodna Enciklopedija, Srpsko-Hrv.-Slov. 4, 1929, 489-491; Idem, *Istraživanja u Stobima*, topografija i istorija, GSND 5, Skoplje 1929, 1-13; Idem, *Stobi*, Real-Encyclopedie 4A, 1932, 47-54; N. Vulić, *Geografija Južne Srbije u antičko doba*, GSND 19, Skoplje 1938, 1-15; Ed. Honigmann, *Le Syndekdèmos d'Hiérokès*, Brusseles 1939, 641.6; I. Venedikov, *Zemite po srednia Vardar*, Skopje 1943; E. Kitzinger, *The Early Christian Town at Stobi*,

The Episcopal Basilica

One of the most significant structures, in which investigations have been carried out in recent years, is the Episcopal Basilica, known as Basilica of Bishop Philip. The excavations have provided important information about some constructions of this building, about certain additions, and the function of several rooms.

There were at least 8, and possibly 9, churches in Stobi and its suburban areas. All were apsidal, three-aisle basilicas. The most monumental of the churches of Stobi was the Episcopal Basilica built about middle of the 5th century on an artificial terrace raised some 4,50 m above the floor of its predecessor Old Episcopal Basilica. The floors of the narthex and south aisle were paved with mosaics, while opus sectile of slate and marble was paved in the presbyterium. The walls were covered with frescoes and perhaps in the apse, with wall mosaics. In the altar niche in located a semi-circular space with a martyr's crypt and colonnaded ambulatory.

An extensive remodeling late in the 5th or early in the 6th century transformed the appearance of the damaged church. Near the east end of the south aisle a vaulted tomb was built for a high dignitary, perhaps the bishop Philip who called oikodemos of the church in an inscription on the lintel of the entrance to the nave from narthex.²

The Baptistery

During the 1971-2 by the south wall of the Episcopal Basilica, the monumental quatrefoil Baptistery was discovered with a piscina in the middle, built in two phases and used for the last time with kantharos of white marble in the center. There has been a baldachin over the piscina, with preserved marble columns and capitals. The Baptistery floor was laid with polychrome mosaic with characteristic early Christian motifs set in the framework of the building structure itself. Originally it served for

DO Papers 3, 1946, 81-161; B. Josifovska, Vodić niz Stobi, 1953; F. Papazoglu, Makedonski gradovi u rimsko doba, Skopje 1957, 235, 237, 32-33; I. K. Müller, Die Peutingerische Tafel, repr. Stuttgart 1962, 10; Đ. Mano Zisi, Stratigraphic Problems and the Urban Development of Stobi, Studies in the Antiquities of Stobi I, 1973, 185-232 (Stratigraphic); J. Waisman, Stobi, a Guide to the Excavations, Beograd 1973 (Stobi); Đ. Mano Zisi, Enciklopedija Jugoslavije 8, Zagreb 1977, 153-155; J. Wiseman, Đ. Mano Zisi, AJA 75, 1971, 395-411; AJA 76, 1972, 407-424; AJA 77, 1973, 391-403; JoFA 1, 1974, 117-148; JoFA 3, 1976, 269-302; JoFA 4, 1978, 398-405.

² R. Egger, Gradska crkva u Stobima, GSND 5, 1929, 14-44; Idem., Die städtische Kirche von Stobi, JÖAI 24, 1929, 42-87; B. Saria, Novi nalasci u episkopskoj crkvi u Stobima, GSND 12, Skoplje 1933, 1-22; Idem., Neue Funde in der Bischofskirche vo Stobi, JÖAI 28, 1933, 11-139; E. Kitzinger, op. cit., 87-110; R. F. Hoddinott, Early Byzantine Churches in Macedonia and Southern Serbia, London-New York 1963, 116-167; J. Wiseman, Đ. Mano Zisi, AJA 76, 1972, 407-424; AJA 77, 1973, 391-403; JoFA 1, 1974, 117-148; JoFA 3, 1976, 269-302; JoFA 4, 1978, 398-405; J. Wiseman, Stobi, 56-62; Idem., Studies in the Antiquities of Stobi: I 1973; II 1975; III 1981; B. Aleksova, Stobi, episkopska bazilika u svetlosti novih arheoloških iskopavanja, Gunjačin Zbornik, Zagreb 1980, 67-76; (Gunjačin Zbornik); C. Snively, The Early Christian Basilicas of Stobi, Austin 1979, 84-181; K. Orlandos, H. Xylostegos Palaiochristianiki Vasiliki tis Mesogeis is Lekanis, Athens 1952, 460-463; B. Aleksova, Episkopal Basilika at Stobi, JÖB 32/4, 1982, 482-490.

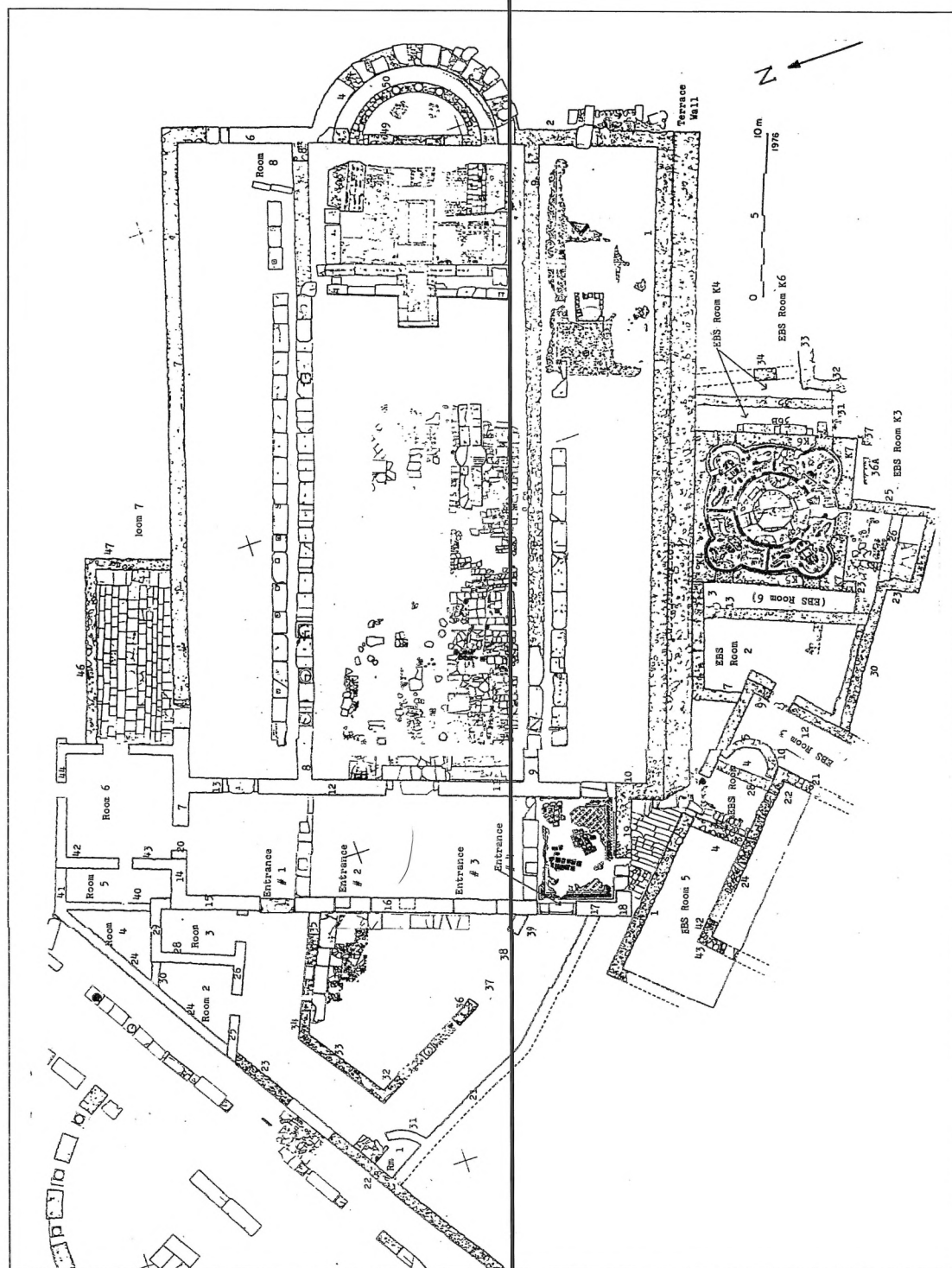


Fig. 2. Plan of the Episcopal Basilica

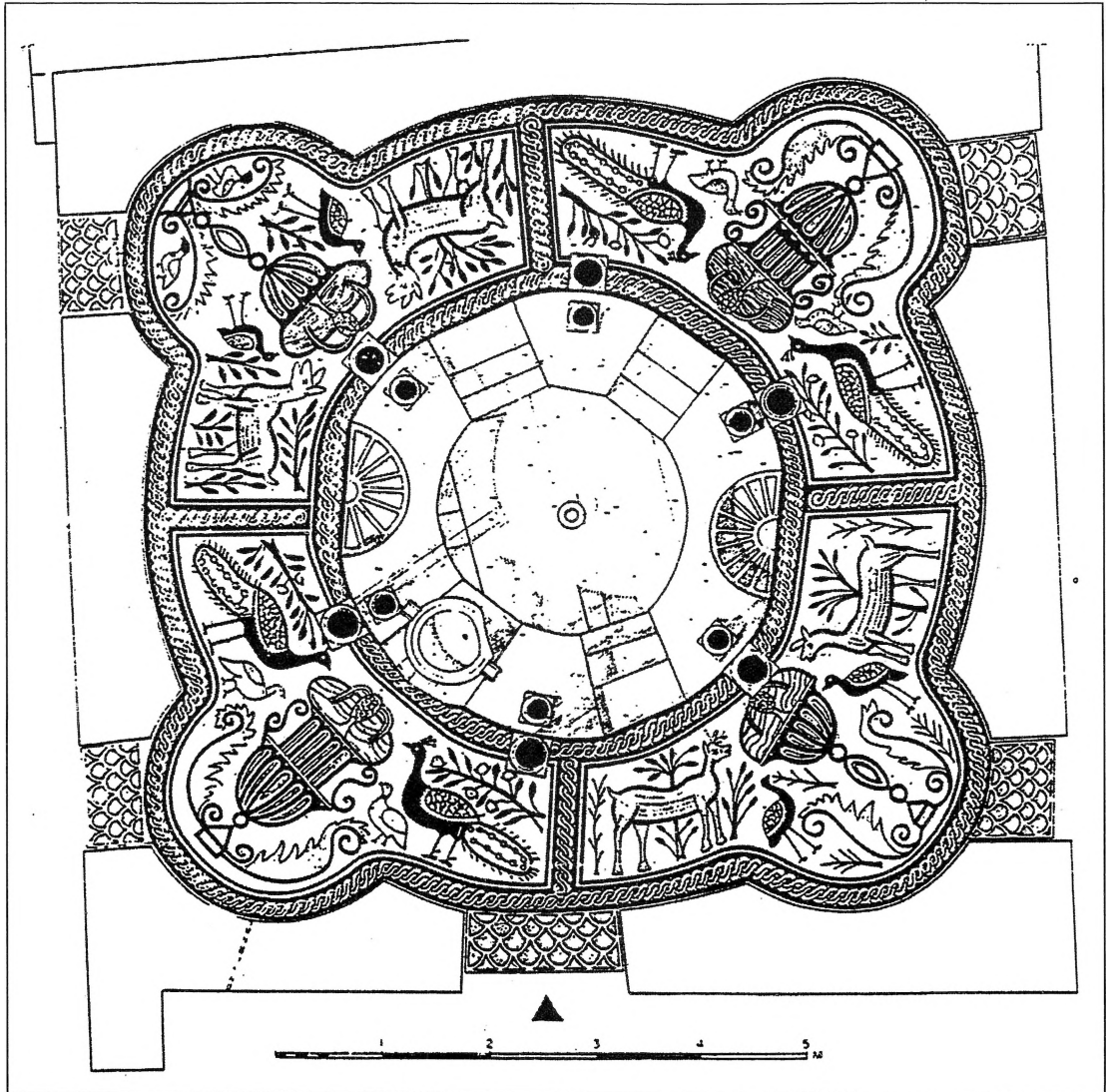


Fig. 3. Restored plan of the Baptistery in its final phase

ritual immersion. In final phases marble kantharos served in a new practice of baptism by abluion or infusion.

The Baptistery has been painted in very rich fresco decoration, three layers of which have been discovered. The older two layers contains a large composition that were depicted on the walls and niches adorned with the scene from the life of Christ and portraits of the four evangelists, all in fresco.

The composition, drawing, color and technique of the discovered painting do not form a unified whole, so they do not appear to have been executed at the same time. All this speaks for the long life and age of this structure. In the following final phase the walls of the Baptistery were covered with plaster and sketched crosses and multitude of graffiti. The original painting of the Baptistery corresponds of graffiti. The original

painting of the Baptistery corresponds to the church building that precedes the construction of Basilica of Bishop Philip.

The Baptistery with its mosaics and figural wall fresco painting is dated to the early 5th century A.D. with remodeling that extend to the end of the 5th or beginning of the 6th century. The new research show that the Baptistery is the earlier architectural structure of the 4th century, found 4,50 m below the level of the Episcopal Basilica. Architectural structure of the Baptistery belongs to the Old Episcopal Basilica, dated in the beginning of the 4th century.³

The Old Episcopal Basilica **The Phase I**

The first Episcopal Basilica at Stobi occupied the western part of the complex, west of the Theater. The Old Episcopal Basilica itself has three-aisle plan and it is located at 4,50 m below the floor of the Episcopal Basilica. The plan of the building is defined by part of its perimetral walls. The structure of the alter enclosure with chancel screen and synthronos in the eastern part of the nave was discovered under the floor mosaic II.

The curate was with colorful frescoes on at least the north and south walls and on the ceiling of the side aisles. The side aisles themselves were paved with red plaster and the nave with a mosaic of stone tesserae.

The floor of the nave is decorated with mosaic laid out in square and rectangular fields. In these frames are presented geometric and floral ornaments - circles, octagons, bird - and inscriptions. At entrance are the initial of Christ, a monogram with the cross at the end. Then follows an inscription in *tabula ansata*:

‘Ι(ησοῦς) Χ(ριστός) Θ(εοῦ) ‘Υ(ιός) Σ(ωτήρ) // Ευχαι και ἐλεημοσύναι και
νηστίαι και μετάνοια ἐκ καθαροσ καρδίας ἐκ θανάτου ρύετε.

The historical sources and the archaeological evidence suggest that the Phase I of the Old Episcopal Basilica adopted one late roman palace in the first half of the 4th century. The Church Martyrium was built above an earlier ecclesiastical structure - *domus ecclesiae* or Christian community house in area of the Theater.

Phase II

In the Phase II the Old Episcopal Basilica was reconstructed and enlarged to the east. It was built to the east of the other Presbyterium, which chancel screen, synthronos and floor mosaic was discovered. In the middle of the new mosaic luxurious kan-

³ J. Wiseman, Đ. Mano Zisi, Preliminary reports: AJA 75, 1971, 400-401; AJA 76, 1972, 408, 421-424; AJA 77, 1973, 392, 398-399; JoFA 1, 1974, 144-146; J. Wiseman, Stobi, 62-66; Đ. Mano Zisi, Stratigraphic, 220-223; A. Ahatchatryan, Les Baptistères Paléochrétiens, Paris 1982, 120; B. Aleksova, Starohristijanski baptisterium vo Makedonija, Civilizacii, MANU, knj. 2, 1995, 103-126.

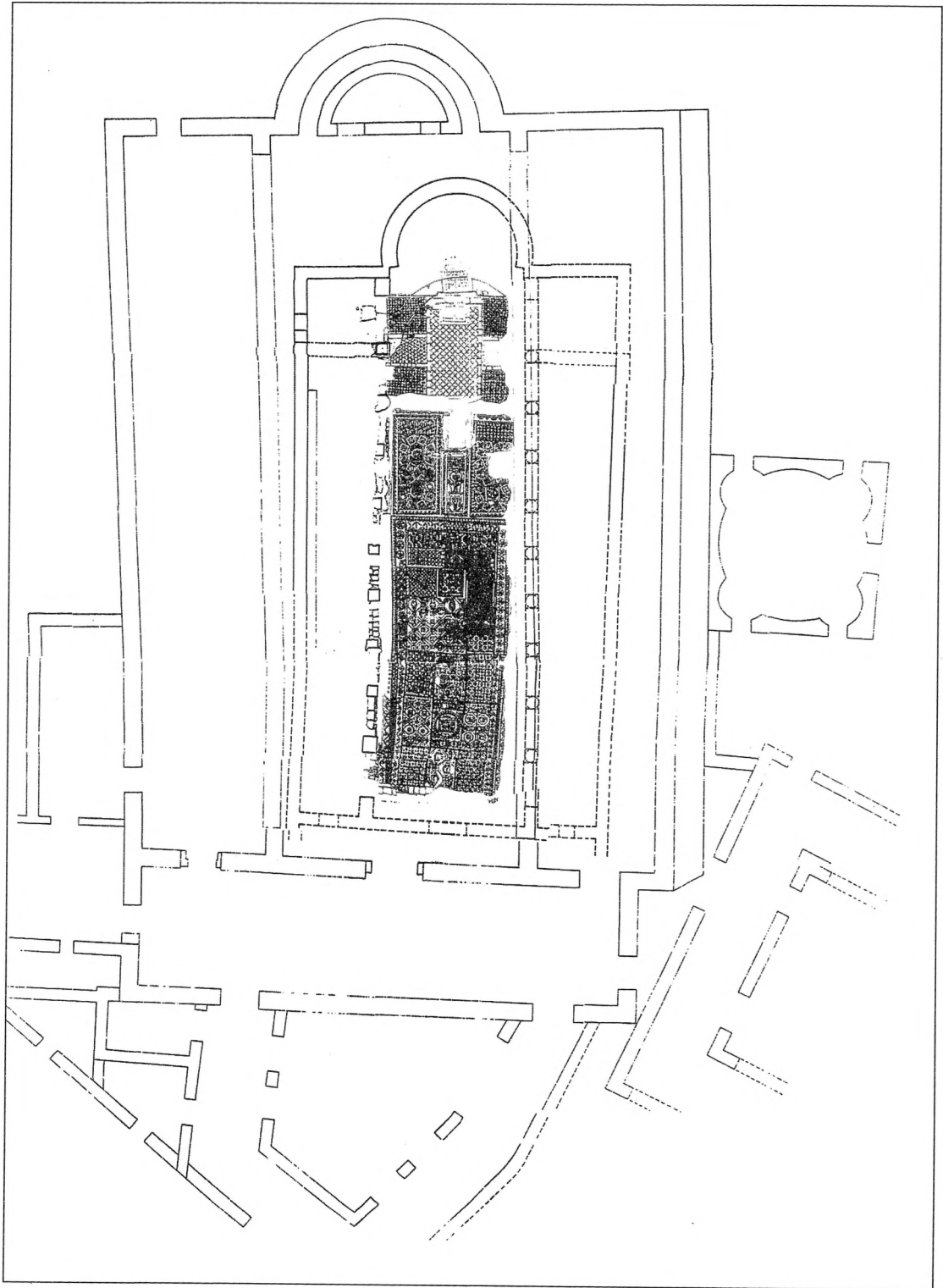


Fig. 4. Episcopal Basilica, below with Old Episcopal Basilica

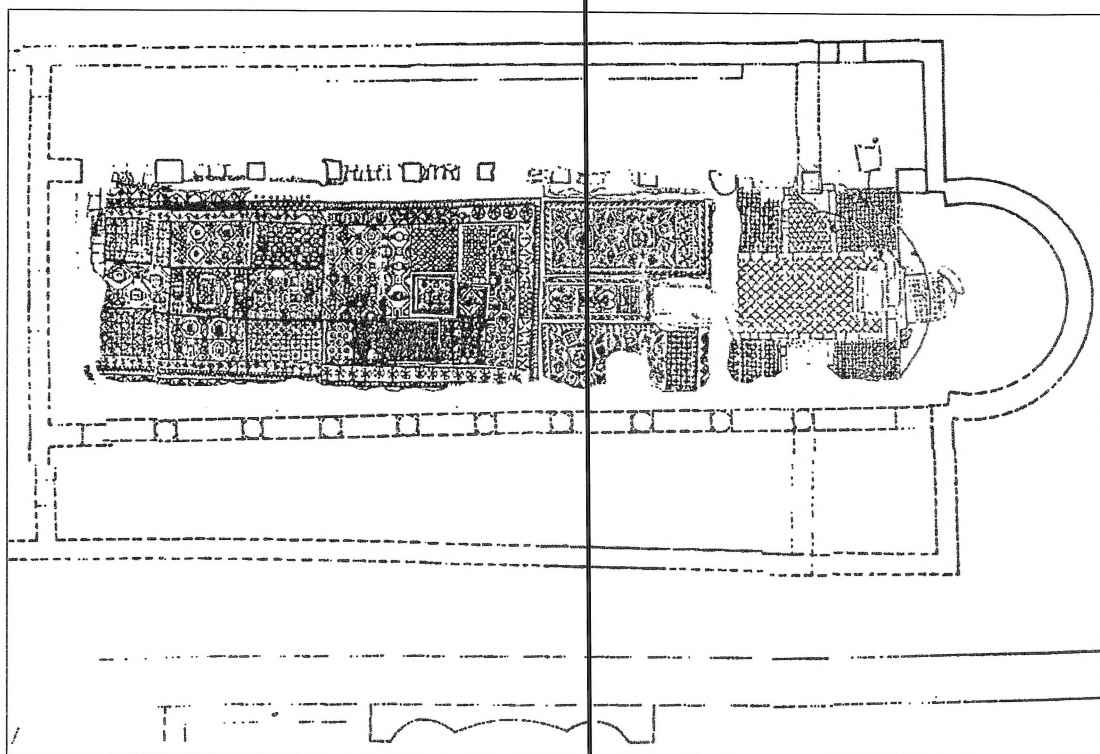


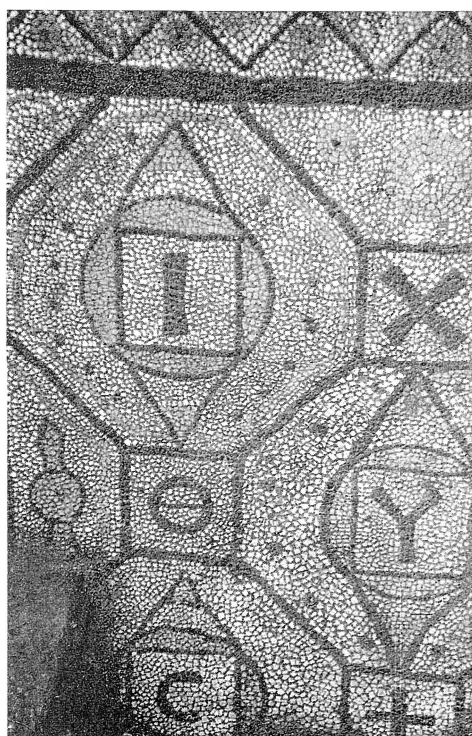
Fig. 5. Old Episcopal Basilica

tharos represent Living water, with the inscription to the east where is mentioned that Episcopus Evstatio reconstructed the holly church (Ἀνεκλιώθη ἡ ἅγια τοῦ θεοῦ ἐκκλησία ἐπισκόπου ὄντος τοῦ ἁγιωτάτου Εὐσταθίου). At the eastern wall of the north aisle was discovered fresco painting of Good Shepherd.

Based at the coins of Constantine, Constant and Constantius excavated below the level of the floor, the reconstruction was carried out in the second half of the 4th century, shortly before the visit of Theodosius in 388, who might as been present for its dedication.

The abandonment of the remodeling Old Episcopal Basilica, the filling of its rooms with debris from surrounding buildings to a level of the 4-5 m thickness and the upper church Martyrium of Bishop Philip took place at the beginning of the 5th century.

The many construction phases of the Episcopal Basilica at Stobi demonstrate the



*Fig. 6. Floor mosaics.
Old Episcopal Basilica, phase I.*

long life of this building, which was the impetus for crucially important period in the art of building and laying mosaic. In addition to the characteristic repertoire of its fourth century mosaic the Old Episcopal Basilica announced a new epoch in style.⁴

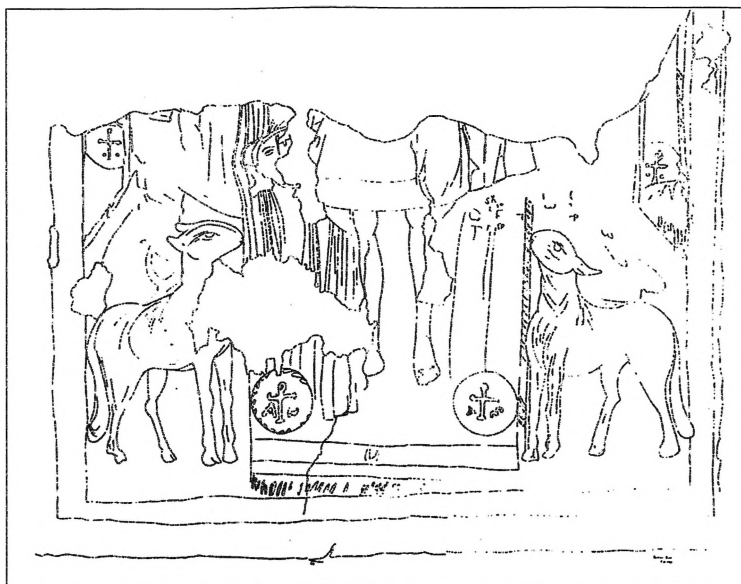


Fig. 7. *The Good Shepard from the E wall of the Old Episcopal Basilica*

The First Christian Community House - *Domus Ecclesiae* in Macedonia

West of the Theater in the Area Martyrs in the 4th century was erected many commemorative architectural structures, oratoria and martyria. One of the most important of these architectural events was the erection in the 4th century of large Christian church virtually in the shadows of the Theater. The church Martirium was built above an earlier community house - *domus ecclesiae*, an *oiko ekklesias*, or, in the local parlance of Rome, a *titulus* community center or meeting house. Occasionally community houses may even have been built *ex novo*.⁵

Domus ecclesiae in Stobi adopted one late roman palace west of the Theater. In 1993. was discovered the central part of the building - the public assembly halls 7 by 7,20 m, with monumental main entrance on the west side, surrounded on three sides by rooms, with the south-west room with the fresco painting on the south wall. We have neither temple nor altars.

The community house remains at Stobi have been built in plan and design according the tradition of utilitarian domestic architecture, as well as subject to the regional

⁴ J. Wiseman, JoFA 4, 1978, 398-405; B. Aleksova, Gunjačin Zbornik, 67-76; Idem., JÖB 32/4, 482-490; Idem., The Old Episcopal Basilica at Stobi, AJ 22-23, 1983, 50-62; Idem., Starata episkopska bazilika vo Stobi, GZFF 12 (38), Skopje 1985, 43-75; Idem., Stobi, Starata episkopska bazilika, Zbornik MANU, 1986, 357-380; Idem., The Early Christian Basilica at Stobi, Corso 1986, 13-38; Idem., The Old Episcopla basilika at Stobi, ARMOS, Thessalonike 1991, 167-179; Idem., Loca Sanctorum macedoniae, Skopje 1995, 83-127.

⁵ R. Krautheimer, Early Christian and Byzantine architecture, Baltimore-Maryland 1976, 1-15; A. Grabar, Matyrium I, London 1972, 9-152.

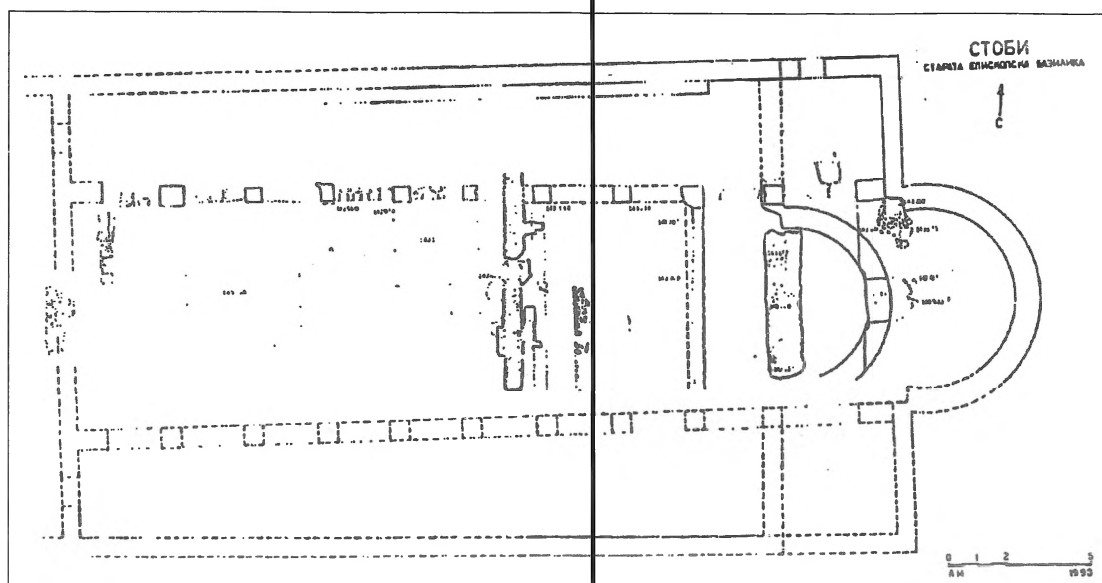


Fig. 8. *Domus Ecclesiae*, below the Old Episcopal Basilica

variation of the 3rd century building within the Roman Empire. Similar community house, formerly we know only from Dura Europos, small town from Mesopotamia, near the eastern border of the Empire. The meeting house at Dura Europos is securely dated, when the structure was certainly in the hand of the congregation in 231.⁶

The remain of the first community house - *domus ecclesiae* of Stobi is also securely dated with the coin of Galerius Maximianus (293-311), really *terminus ante quem* of a activity of this building.⁷ The historical sources and the archaeological evidence suggest that the Phase I and II of the Old Episcopal Basilica adopted one late roman palace in the first half of the 4th century. The central nave of the curate Martyrium - really the Old Episcopal Basilica was built above the central part of the earlier building and the public assembly hall of the community house - *domus ecclesia*. The city of Stobi attended the Council of Nicaea, organized by Constantine I,⁸

⁶ R. Krautheimer, op. cit., 6-7.

⁷ B. Aleksova, *Loca Sanctorum Macedoniae*, 83-127.

⁸ We also known of five bishops of Stobi whose names are preserved in the lists of bishops attending some of the most important of the early ecclesiastical congresses. The bishops are BUDIUS who attended the Council of Nicea in 325; Mansi II, 696; NICOLAUS, Council of Chalcedon, 451; Mansi VII, 162; PHOCAS, Council of Constantinople, 553; Mansi IX, 174, 191-192; IOANNES, the Sixth Ecumenical Council of Constantinople, 680; M. le Quien, *Oriens Christianus II* (rep. Graz 1958), 176; MARGARITUS, who was present at the Second Trullanum Synod in 692; Mansi XI, 993-994. A sixth bishop PHILIPUS from the late 4th or 5th century is known from an inscribed lintel of the Episcopal Basilica; B. Saria, *Neue Funde in der Biscofskirche von Stobi*; JÖAI 28, 1933, 132-133; The name of the seventh bishop of Stobi is EVSTATIOS discovered 1983 on the floor mosaic in the Old Episcopal Basilica, Phase II, from the end of the 4th century. B. Aleksova, *Loca Sanctorum Macedoniae* 83; Idem., *The Old Episcopal Basilica at Stobi*, AJ 22-23, 1983, 50-62.

Abbreviations

AJ	Archaeologia Jugoslavica
AJA	American Journal of Archaeology
Corso	Corso di cultura sull'arte Ravennate e bizantina, Ravenna
Denkschr Wien	
Phil.-hist. Kl.	K. Akademie der Wissenschaften, Wien Philosophische-historische Klasse. Denkschriften
DO Papers	Dumbarton Oaks Papers
GZFF	Godišen Zbornik na Filozofski Fakultet - Skopje
GSND	Glasnik Skopskog naučnog društva
JoFA	Journal of Field Archaeology
JÖAI	Jahreshefte des Österreichischen Archäologischen Instituts
JÖB	Jarbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik
MANU	Makedonska Akademija na Naukite i Umetnostite
RA	Revue Archéologique