

THE VANISHING CHRISTIAN MONUMENTS OF SHKODRA

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Abstract

The history of the Albanian nation contains several gaps due to natural disasters and other fatal occurrences. Several documents from the written archives of the Albanian medieval times are deficient or missing. Those data gaps can be filled only by medieval monuments, works of art which indirectly represent the medieval civilization. The large number of monuments, their artistic quality, and often gigantic proportions, show that church architecture was greatly developed in the Illyrian-Albanian lands during the medieval times. Roman Gothic architecture flourished in Northern Albania, due to the continuing close connection of the Northern provinces with the Western churches. The impact of this architecture is also observed in regions temporarily ruled by Westerners. Through centuries, these Christian religious monuments have suffered not only from the devastating natural phenomena, but also from the devastating human interventions. These monuments should not be seen as isolated, amorphous items, but as an organic, and integral part of the cultural tourism and economic development of our country. In this paper, I will address several Christian religious monuments of Shkodra, which represent an exceptional value of our cultural monumental heritage from the medieval times. The few, oldest data related to these monuments are found in some historical sources of the medieval times, mainly in the correspondence between the missionaries of the church of Rome and our country's bishops during the XVII century in regards to the state of the provinces they visited over that time frame. The first studies of these constructions were done at the end of the nineteenth century by the Austrian consul of that time in Shkodra, Theodor Ippen, who also wrote many articles about these monuments. Besides him, a number of other scholars of this time wrote about these monuments. During the years 1920-1940 of the last century, there have been many publications regarding the location of monuments mentioned in the above documents and the geographic maps of that time.

Keywords: *monuments, medieval, architecture, church, Drishti*

Introduction

Shkodra was first mentioned as an episcopal center of the mediaeval times at the end of the tenth century in the lists of the emperor Jan Cimiska, first as a subordinate of Durres, and later after 1089, as a subordinate of Tivari. We have several documents that pertain information about the medieval churches, starting from the thirteenth century. The oldest monument that appears in these documents is the Church of St. Mary, a church from the year

1288. Other churches found in the Venetian registry of the years 1416-1417 are: St. Stephen, St. Apoloniari, St Cross, St. Mary, St. Nicholas, Saint of Friday, church of all the Saints, and St. Theodore. Today, the only preserved church in Shkodra is the cathedral of St. Stephen located in the Castle, which was turned into a mosque immediately after the Turkish conquest of the city, in 1479.

Since the invasion until the 19th century (1858), the Turks did not allow any church building in Shkodra, and in time, even the existing ones were lost (Idem). Travelers of that time tell about the location of St. Mary at the foot of the Castle, as well as the location of St. Vlash over which, later, the hamam was built.

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The few, oldest data related to these monuments are found in some historical sources of the medieval times (L. Thalloczy & C. Jeriçek), mainly in the correspondence between the missionaries of the church of Rome and our country's bishops during the XVII century in regards to the state of the provinces they visited over that time frame (Injac Zamputi. Tiranë 1963, vol II). The first studies of these constructions were done at the end of the nineteenth century by the Austrian consul of that time in Shkodra, Theodor Ippen, who also wrote many articles about these monuments (Th. Ippen. Sarajevo 1907). Besides him, a number of other scholars of this time wrote about these monuments. During the years 1920-1940 of the last century, there have been many publications regarding the location of monuments mentioned in the above documents and the geographic maps of that time (E. Armao. Roma 1933).

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The ruins of the church of St. Stephen's cathedral in the fortress represent one of the most valuable monuments of medieval Shkodra. The church consists of the nave, the center of the altar, and the porch on the south side. In the corner of these two, the minaret is attached, an addition made when the church was turned into a mosque. From the examination of the monument in its present state, it is concluded that it was built during three phases. First the altar room was built. The second phase was the building of the porch and the rebuilding of the southern wall of the church. The third stage is when the church was converted into a sanctuary of Islam cult. The simple planned and voluminous construction of the church, the flat walls, the roof coverings of the naos and cross tiled floors of the altar room, with its single window, are clear evidence of the influence of the Dominican and Franciscan Order on the architecture of the church buildings (A. Meksi. Tiranë 1983, p. 80).

The Church of the Monastery of St. Sergius and Baku. From the very important and historically documented former monastery, today there is only one part of the southern wall of the church remaining, which speaks clearly of the monument's former greatness, as described by travelers and researchers. Today, this church is in the list of the endangered monuments. The earliest mention of it comes from 1166 when the altar of St. Trifoni was ordained in Kotor (A. Meksi. Tiranë 1983, p. 80). From the names of the old Syrian martyrs from Sergiopolis (Rusafa) we can assume that the church was first built in the 6th century, under Justinian rule (D. Farlati. *Illiricum Sacrum*. Venezia 1817, vol II, p. 367). The Church of Shirqi proves that Christians of Northern Albania were not converted into orthodox due to the Slavic influence. The presence of the Benedictine monks there excludes this possibility. Another indication of the functioning of this church as a catholic one is the mentioning of this church in 1166, in the documents of the church of Kotor of the Abbot of Peter, a title of the Roman Catholic Church (Z. Mirdita. Prizren-Zagreb 1998, pg 357). This monastery along with other monasteries that were dedicated to St. Benedict, such as: Shëlbuemi (Rubik), St. Lleshi (in Oros), St. Mary of Nderfanda, and St. Nicholas in Mat, served as live connections to the Roman Church. Several travelers' accounts from the 17th century inform us of the architectural value and the actual condition of this church at the time. Marin Bici in 1611, (I. Zamputi. Tiranë 1963, p. 103) is the first to write about the damages the paintings of the church had sustained, "the church had a great structure, could hold 3000 people inside, and was decorated with paintings of saints whose eyes had been damaged from the Turks." The Bishop of Shkodra, D. Andreasi, who visited the church in 1623 tells us, "the abbey church of St. Sergius is standing, but the bell tower is a wreck. The building of the church is beautiful, but it resembles a thieves' cave ", i.e. an abandoned place. Later, in 1629, B. Orsini also mentions it as a cathedral abbey (Idem). Considering the actual fragile condition of this it is imperative that we immediately start working on restoring this valuable monument of our national culture.

In the ancient city of Drishti (Drivastum -in), several churches were documented such as: St. Mary's Cathedral (1353), Sancta Maria Vetus (1403), Shëlbuemi (1399), St. George (1400), St. 's Friday (1400) and St. Francis (1404), (A. Meksi. Tiranë 1983, p. 85). Today in this locality are the ruins of two churches; the three- towered chapel in the castle and a church Nefesh to climb to the castle. The three-towered Church, for which the first Th. Ippen speaks, rises separately on a rocky slope inside the castle, near the surrounding walls in the

east side. It is a chapel whose walls are preserved to a height of 1.5 - 2m. The walls are built with raw limestone set in horizontal rows connected with lime mortar and fine sand, showing only a thin line on the outside. On the east side, there is a circular niche located in the corners of the eastern wall and a niche in the south. The three walls of the apse are not well preserved to allow us to see the base of the concave and for the same reason one cannot define the former church's roof top, whether it was a dome or a wooden roof. Regarding the time of construction of the church, based on the blueprint and the wall construction techniques, we think it belongs to the 11th or 12th century (A. Meksi. Tiranë 1983, p. 80).

Church of St. John in Rrashkullë. This is the ancient Benedictine Abbey of St John in Rrash Kullaj , Vrakë, in the zone of Malesia e Madhe, an area about 1 hectare of land , which includes the ruins of the church , the bell tower and the surrounding wall . The earliest mention of this church belongs to the year 1166, in historic document referring to the abbot of the monastery of St. Gini (San Giobani in Strilaleo), (A. Meksi. Tiranë 1983, p. 80). Later on October 26, 1356 in a letter from Pope Innocent VI sent from Avignon to the bishop of Balleci (M. Shuflaj. Prishtinë 1968, p.153), the church is mentioned as a Benedictine monastery, “*Andree episcopo Balazensi*” *monasterium S. Johannis ordinis S. Benedicti Drivastensis diocesis in Regno Rassie.*”. This important document is an assertion that this assembly, which was later disassembled, was a Benedictine monastery ruled by the diocese of Drishtë and of the the spread of the schismatic fanaticism in the northern of Albania. This assembly, however, was quickly reinstated and 20 years later it was still ruled by the diocese of Drishtë (A. Meksi. Tiranë 1983, p. 86). Marin Bolica was the first to write about this monument in 1614 (I. Zamputi. Tiranë 1977, p. 261) followed later by Benedict Orsini in 1628 (A. Meksi. Tiranë 1983, p. 80). Based on his testimony, the beautiful and masterfully built church was burned by the Turks. He also speaks about the bell tower built with a variety of marble stones. The church had a prolonged rectangular layout. By the beginning of the 10th century, the north and southwestern corners were still preserved to a certain height, while today the middle of the eastern part is the better preserved portion of the wall (M. Shuflaj. Prishtinë 1968, pg 187). Based on the historical documentation, this wall was built during the 11th-12th centuries.

St. Mark's Church in the castle of Danja. This church is located on top of Mount Deja next to the eastern edge of the wall surrounding the castle of Vau Deja, the former town of Danja. The church was first mentioned in historical documents of the year 1400 (A. Meksi. Tiranë 1983, p.88). Several travelers' accounts confirm that. Gjergj Bardhi, on his account regarding his visit to the church during the year 1631-32, tells us that “the church is lately renovated and covered under our care”. The monument is completely preserved except for the roof. Its layout consists of an extended rectangle with a circular apse on the east side. The building has undergone several reconstructions in time, which can be generally distinguished by differences in construction techniques. Regarding the dating of the church's construction, it is believed to belong to the 12th-13th century since it is mentioned at the end of that period.

Monastery of St. Sophia of Genta in Mazrek. The ruins of this monastery, as known from written documentation, are located in the center of the village of Mazrek where it was known as "Church of Shati" in a land that is used today as the village cemetery. The first to share information about this church is again Theodor Ippen, in whose writing he describes a large church with a bell tower, a chapel and the ruins of a building. From the present state of the ruins, one can conclude that this was a two store building with thick walls of unshaped stones on the inside and squared stones on the outside. Only the northeastern and southwestern corners of the church's walls are preserved. In other parts, the walls can barely be found.

Archeological excavation is needed to determine the overall picture of the church as well as an older stage of it. On its ground floor, there are three entrances, respectively in the northern, western, and eastern sides. The first two are broad entrances that extend into the interior, while the entrance on the eastern side consists of a threshold and a staircase leading to it. Of specific interest are the object in the lower part of the right entrance; a stone lion in the a traditional pose with its tail up, but with a horse's head, and a stone fragment of a part of ponytail with triple band dated from the 9th-11th centuries (A. Meksi. Tiranë 2004, pg 172). These ruins identify with the monastery of "Sancta Sophia of Genta" of the diocese of Sardis (Idem) (Shurdhahu) mentioned in the documents of the 14th-15th century. This monastery, built in the fourteenth century, must have been an important center since its abbot are mentioned each time the bishops of Sardis were appointed.

Conclusions

So obviously there are a number of churches in Shkodra that need renovation due to their fragile condition. Their poor structural condition and the transformations made over the centuries, have made it necessary for us to intervene and restore these monuments to their historical glory. The study and renovation of these monuments should be seen in a broader way because of their similar damages and renovation needs which could be resolved in the same way.

Recommendations

The government, through its specific institutions, must intervene as soon as possible and not leave these important monuments of our cultural heritage to the mercy of fate, because they need protection and restoration.

We think that there should be a committee of historians, scholars, architects, restorers and specialists of church to start working for the salvation of these objects of great importance to our national culture.

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