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ΔΕΛΤΙΟΝ ΤΗΣ ΧΡΙΣΤΙΑΝΙΚΗΣ ΑΡΧΑΙΟΛΟΓΙΚΗΣ ΕΤΑΙΡΕΙΑΣ

On the “Immutability” of Byzantine Architecture

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ON THE “IMMUTABILITY” OF BYZANTINE ARCHITECTURE

Historians of art who take a modern approach to the subject having long recognized the inconceivability of excluding Byzantine art from the history of Western art, not only challenged the view that Byzantine art was “petrified, isolated and far removed from the developments in the mainstream of European art”¹, but have also conclusively demonstrated the value of its contributions, laying particular emphasis on the important influence Byzantine art had on the art of medieval Western Europe down to the Renaissance². Nevertheless, old, rejected ideas still continue to surface in the historiography of European art. One of these is the assumption that from the inception of Byzantine architecture until its end – a span of nearly an entire millennium – it remained completely unchanged. This assumption clearly stems from a simplistic overall conception of the church itself, a conception influenced by the pragmatic concept of space that prevailed in the sacral architecture of Western Europe³.

Any brief account of the roots of this misconception should mention a number of factors. First the noticeably different dimensions of Western and Byzantine churches is certainly significant. In comparison with any Gothic cathedral⁴, a typical Byzantine church of the 12th or the 13th century⁵, even the largest, looks small. Second, the structural elements that are characteristic of each of these two church styles must also be considered. At first glance it may seem impossible to compare a high typical gothic vault with the dome

and vault construction of a smaller Byzantine building; nevertheless, the innovative architectural experience amassed in the latter considerably antedates the most ambitious achievements of the former.

When considering the source of this prejudice about the “immutable” character of Byzantine architecture, the phenomenology of style is particularly important. Historians of architecture are inevitably susceptible to generalizations which compress, as it were, considerable periods of time. As a consequence, such key stylistic developments in Western European architecture as the Carolingian period, the Romanesque style, and the Gothic style, appear almost spectacular. At the same time, however, more subtle geographic variations, and variations over time, both of which are very typical of Byzantine architecture and, by any standards present defining elements of a style, remain unnoticed. To put it simply, a building which reflects the true essence of Byzantine architecture must literally be viewed in its entirety, as a whole. This should be the starting point for any investigation that aims to date works of Byzantine architecture or locate them geographically. Furthermore, this approach naturally makes the above-mentioned variations defining features of style.

It is generally accepted that Byzantine architecture can be divided into three major eras – early, middle, and late – and different characteristics of style are attributed to each, more often tacitly than explicitly. In fact, while these pe-

1. This prejudice emerged in older European art history, whose methods and standards for a long time focused exclusively on the problems of Western European art. Applying the same methodology to the development of Byzantine art, some scholars searched for processes that were typical of the development of Western European art and attributed some phenomena to Byzantine art that never actually took place. For the most thorough account of this see S. Radojčić, *Umetnost prvog milenijuma*, in *Odabrani clanci I studije. 1933-1978*, Belgrade 1982, p. 62-66; *idem*, *O estetskoj vrednosti naseg*

slikarstva XVII veka, in *Uzori I dela starih srpskih umetnika*, Belgrade 1975, p. 263-264.

2. *Ibid.*, *Umetnost prvog milenijuma*, p. 62.

3. V. Korac', *Dva shvatanja prostora u evropskoj arhitekturi*, *Glas SANU* 372 (1993), p. 111-127.

4. N. Pevsner, *An Outline of European Architecture*, Harmondsworth 1990, p. 56-128.

5. Cf. C. Mango, *Architettura bizantina*, Venice 1974, p. 194-295.



Fig. 1. Constantinople, St. Sophia. From the southwest.

riods correspond to three time spans during which crucial changes took place in Byzantine architecture as a whole, changes in attributes of style are discernible over much smaller time spans. The three periods took place. Let us consider each of these periods briefly.

The end of Early Byzantine architecture was marked by what would remain a permanent feature of Byzantine architecture as a whole: the introduction of a dome in a longitudinal building, a process which, as is well known, culminated in the great cathedral of Constantinople, Justinian's St. Sophia (532-537)⁶ (Fig. 1). The significance of this

achievement was greater than just the creation of a building in which a condensed space was covered with a dome. The dome was to remain a key element in the spatial design of Byzantine sacral architecture, hence also a key feature of its structure and form. For generations to come St. Sophia was to represent the architectural embodiment of a perfect imaginary microcosm⁷. With the completion of St. Sophia, a work had been created in which the sphere above the regular and symmetrical cubic space symbolized the cosmos. Moreover, everything that accompanied the architectural realization of this concept of the cosmos was an essential

6. Mango, *op.cit.*, p. 107-123. R.J. Mainstone, *Hagia Sophia, Architecture, Structure and Liturgy of Justinian's Great Church*, London 1988.

7. A. Grabar, Byzance. Symbolisme cosmique et monuments religieux, in *L'art de la fin de l'antiquité et du moyen âge*, I, Paris 1968, p. 71-72. On

the symbolism of ecclesiastical structures see G. Prokopiou, *Ο κοσμολογικός συμβολισμός στην αρχιτεκτονική του βυζαντινού ναού*, Athens 1981; G. Babić, *Kraljeva crkva u Studenici*, Belgrade 1987, p. 33-35, with bibliography.



Fig. 2. Gavrolimni, Panagia Panaxiotissa. From the northeast.

element of the representation as a whole. Just as the architecture is meaningless without the inside walls being painted according to an established iconographic program, the frescoes and mosaics cannot be fully interpreted in isolation from the architectural design. This principle was observed throughout Byzantine architecture until its end. In some instances it was put into practice more broadly, in some it was realized in more complex and finely wrought compositions, and in yet others it was discernible in the details that reflected the specific requirements of the program.

The early period of Byzantine architecture, which lasted until the renaissance of the Macedonian dynasty (beginning 867), is characterized by a clearly defined arrangement of space with a dominant dome and other well-known elements: the bema, the narthex, and, in particularly important churches built mainly in the vicinity of major religious centers, galleries above the narthex and the aisles. Annexes,

however, which were typically small and used for special purposes, had a long tradition in Christian architecture as a whole, stretching back several centuries to the early basilicas. This is evidenced by the number of structures uncovered by archaeologists that present very carefully planned designs.

These observations on Early Byzantine churches do not fully reveal the range of solutions applied to the main space of the building. It was in this period that the so-called cross-in-square ground plan, with a dome resting on four free-standing pillars, was already in place, while basilicas with a central dome were also being built at the same time. There do not appear to have been any key innovations concerning the church's exterior appearance. In the interior, the building's structure was expressed in basic volumes, reflecting the acceptance of a way of thinking observed in early basilicas. The expression of the interior structure of the building



Fig. 3. Kastoria, Panagia Kubelidike. From the northeast.

became even clearer during this period, because the concept of space was further complicated and elaborated by compressing the original form of a basilica. The method of construction makes it easy to recognize the influence of Constantinople and the Constantinopolitan workshops as well as contemporary developments in the Aegean and Ionian areas (Fig. 2).

The Byzantine architecture of the following period, from the Macedonian renaissance until the fall of Constantinople to the crusaders in 1204, can hardly be considered. Two currents are distinguishable. The first is the mainstream, evidently originating in Constantinople. The second is the spread of monumental sacral architecture in the areas inhabited by Slavs who had converted to Christianity. This architecture basically followed the typical Byzantine plan, but showed originality from its inception, either because types and methods of construction inevitably changed, or because it was influenced by the local building tradition, or a combination of the two (Fig. 3).

While the basic spatial design of the church remained unchanged, new solutions emerged by adding annexes that were used for special purposes. This development was mo-



Fig. 4. The katholikon of the monastery of Gračanica. From the southeast.

tivated by new needs of the cult. The original concept of the central, main portion of the space, however, remained unaltered. The idea of a church as a building of a higher order which transcends earthly reality, a feature whose roots go back to the beginnings of Byzantine architecture, was also preserved. The central part of the church was decorated either with frescoes or mosaics representing scenes appropriate to this concept. Other parts of this restructured space were also decorated. The space of a Byzantine church could not be considered consecrated if it did not have pictorial decorations, hence a system of pictorial decoration developed which grew out of a holistic conception of spatial organization. In other words, a program of pictorial decoration was generalized to the whole, something which had previously been inconceivable in an integral space strictly dominated by a single conception. Of course, this is not to be understood as an account of the development of the iconographic program in the interior decoration of the church; this program had a relatively independent and complex evolution⁸. However, the integration of a number of sacral spaces in a stable architectural entity encouraged the development and spread of the iconographic program by increasing the initial need to complement space with paintings that were strictly subordinated to a unified spatial concept of the church.

One of the currents in monumental Byzantine architecture

8. V. Lazarev, *Storia della pittura bizantina*, Turin 1967, p. 127-136.



Fig. 5. Hosios Lukas, katholikon. From the east.

of this period was the further development of the structure. The church of Hosios Loukas at Stiris in Greece (Fig. 5) is a typical example of the system which emerged in this period as the logical conclusion of developments in the church's upper construction. In this respect the architecture of Constantinople was ahead of Gothic architecture⁹.

Architecture in the late Byzantine period, during the period of the so-called Palaeologan renaissance (1261-1456), was permeated by such striking innovations in the concept of form that in terms of style it departed significantly from the

most prominent architectural monuments of the preceding period (Fig. 4). The church kept all the accompanying elements of pictorial decoration, but the requirements of the cult had multiplied to such an extent that a unified, integrally construed whole practically ceased to exist. Although it would be fair to say that the plan of sacral buildings preserved the old system of spatial symmetry in the church and lateral parekklesia, the general impression is that none of these elements were conceptualized as neatly circumscribed, complete entities. In large monasteries the proliferation of additions to the main church, the katholikon, can be observed. This reflected not only new purposes but also a new conception of sacral architecture. The whole was no longer judged by the strict execution of a

9. Mango, *op.cit.*, p. 244.

rational conception of space. Rather, it was perceived as a tale unfolding itself in a fresco¹⁰.

Even at the highest point in the development of elementary space, when painted decoration followed the church's underlying architectural design, the Byzantine church always remained faithful to what it had been, or more precisely, to what it became when the conception of the microcosmic representation of the world first came into

being. This is the only sense in which Byzantine architecture and art can justifiably be seen as immutable: "Byzantine art was a sufficient source of its own creative power; having experienced the hardships of creation and progress in its early days, it developed with the motion of a perfectly balanced organism expressing the full beauty of its being through its very existence"¹¹.

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10. Korać, *op.cit.*, p. 114-127.

11. S. Radojčić, *Jedna slikarska škola iz druge polovine XV veka.*

Prilog istoriji hrišćanske umetnosti pod Turcima, in *Odabrani clanci I studije. 1933-1978*, Belgrade 1982, p. 279.