

Architecture, identity and phases of construction of the Byzantine church of St. Mary Vllaherna – Berat/Albania

Klodjana Gjata, Marsela Demaj, Ronela Çuku

(Eng. Klodjana Gjata, Institute of Cultural Monuments “Gani Strazimiri”, Rr.”Aleksandër Moisiu” nr.76 Tiranë, klodjanagjata@gmail.com)

(Urb. Marsela Demaj, Institute of Cultural Monuments “Gani Strazimiri” Rr.”Aleksandër Moisiu” nr.76, Tiranë, marselaplyku@gmail.com)

(Arch. Ronela Çuku, Institute of Cultural Monuments “Gani Strazimiri” Rr.”Aleksandër Moisiu” nr.76, Tiranë, ronelacuku@gmail.com)

1 ABSTRACT

The town of Berat is one of the oldest in Albania, with the earliest traces of settlement dating from 2600-1800 BC, while the castle area had stone fortifications by the the 4th century BC. In antiquity, Berat was known as Antipatreia, a fortified centre which succeeded in resisting the Roman legions for a time. During the Byzantine period, in 533, Berat is called Pulcheriopolis, after the 5th century Byzantine Empress Pulcheria. The 13th – 14th centuries, period in which Berat was still under the Byzantine Empire, was a time of great development for this city. The partial reconstruction of the fortification walls as well as the construction of 3 important churches: St. Mary Vllaherna, Holy Trinity and St. Michael are a testimony of the economic development of this period.

This article is the result of a research study on the Byzantine Church of St. Mary Vllaherna. It aims at the study of the architecture, phases of construction and transformations in time of this church. Today St. Mary Vllaherna presents an unusual architectural plan, an infinity of material traces testimony of its transformation in time and an outstanding interior frescoed by Nicholas Onufri in 1578. For the above reasons St. Mary Vllaherna is chosen as a case study for this research.

As a conclusion, this article presents hypothesis and facts regarding the phases of construction and transformation in time of this church. This is realized through a detailed study of the present architectural structure and masonry, comparative studies with other churches of the same period, geometrical and proportional study of the structure as well as research of historical documentation.

2 LOCATION AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The town of Berat is located in south Albania. It is one of the oldest towns in the country, with the earliest traces of settlement dating from 2600-1800 BC, while the castle area had stone fortifications by the the 4th century BC. In antiquity, Berat was known as Antipatreia, a fortified centre which succeeded in resisting the Roman legions for a time. The town is mentioned by Polybius and Livy, and in the list of fortifications of Emperor Justinian. During the Byzantine period, in 533, Berat is called Pulcheriopolis, after the 5th century Byzantine Empress Pulcheria. The 13th – 14th centuries, period in which Berat was still under the Byzantine Empire, was a time of great development for this city. In fact the emperor Mihal Komnen Dukas of Epirus, lived for a short period (1204-1214) in Berat where he was also was killed in 1214. The partial reconstruction of the fortification walls as well as the construction of 3 important churches: St. Mary Vllaherna, Holy Trinity and St. Michael are a testimony of the economic development of this period. For the outstanding values of the cultural heritage, Berat (together with Gjirokastra) was proclaimed World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 2008.

The church of St. Mary Vllaherna is located within the inhabited historic district of the castle of Berat. Precisely it lies in the western part of the castle, on a steep terrain surrounded by the houses of the Kala district. According to oral testimony it is the oldest church in Berat. The name of the church, St. Mary Vllaherna in iconography is closely linked to the Byzantine Empire. No other medieval church in Albania is dedicated to St. Mary Vllaherna, so it is assumed that this name is brought from outside, probably from Constantinople. The earliest usage of this name dates back to the 2nd century. In the 6th century it was

constructed the church of Vllaherna close to the palace of Vllaherna in the homonym region. Later this name is encountered in the 11th century coins of Constantine IX Monomachus¹.



Fig. 1: Location of the castle in the city of Berat (left) and location of St. Mary Vllaherna in the castle (right)

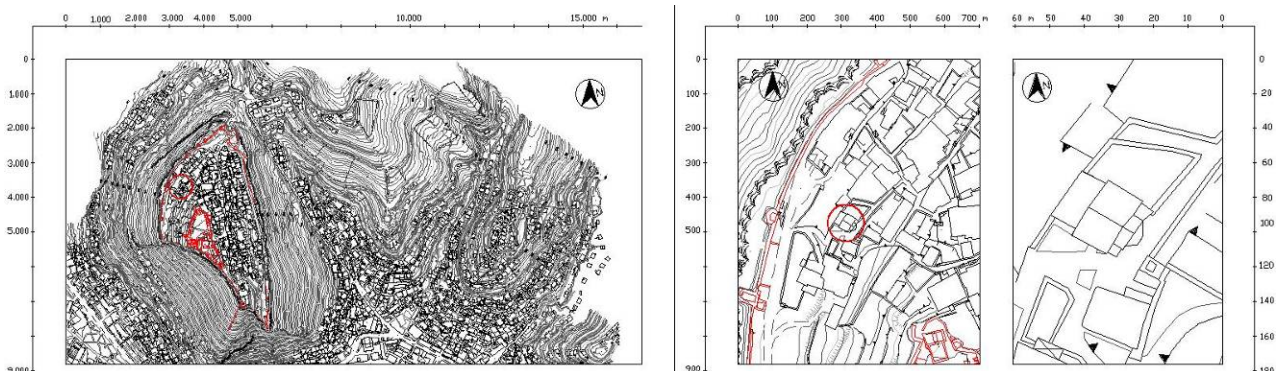


Fig. 2: Topographic map of the region sc:1/1000 (left), plan of the church sc:1/500 (middle), gen-plan of the church sc:1/250 (right)

3 ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION

The church of St. Mary Vllaherna, in its present state, shows a clear superimposition of phases of construction. The plan of the church features a rectangular shape slightly rotated in the longitudinal axis. The deviation of the longitudinal axis and the pointing of the apse slightly towards the south, is determined by the urban layout and the morphology of the site.

The rectangular shaped naos of the church is preceded by a narthex and in the southeast it ends with an slightly raised semicircular apse, which is concave in the inside and polygonal in the outside. In the north it faces a small courtyard enclosed by walls with an entrance from the east (fig.3).

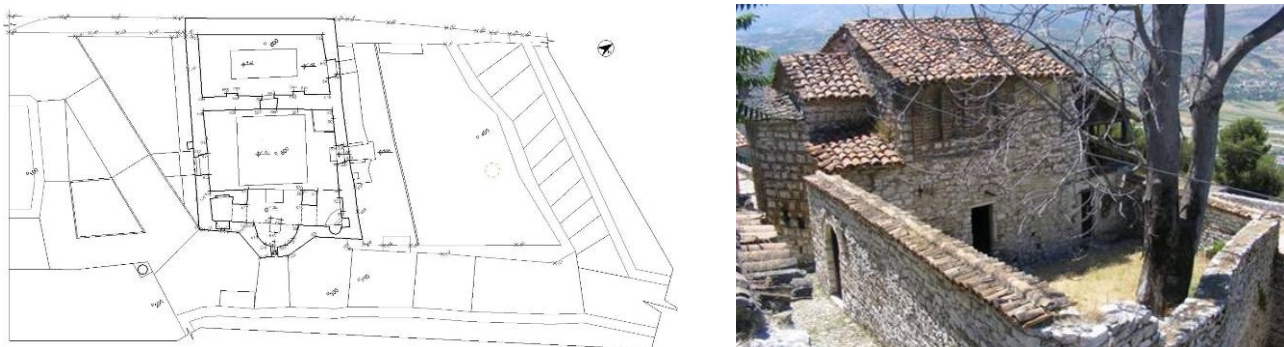


Fig. 3: Gen-plan of the church (left) and view from the north

Two robust pillars divide the naos into two main areas: the central hall and the altar. The apse is located at the centre of the altar area while to the sides are the diaconicon, separated from the hall by a wall with rectangular bays and the prothesis, with rectangular and semicircular bays, both of which are vaulted. The naos has windows in all sides. The windows of the altar, north and south walls are biforate decorated by two lateral semi-archs and a double central arch in bricks. In the north and south wall the outer arch in bricks that decorated the windows is non complete in height (fig.4).

¹ PUZANOVA,V.; 2005



Fig. 4: View of the windows respectively in the south, north and est elevation

The naos can be accessed by three doors located respectively in the north, south and west, the latter connects the naos with the narthex. In the north wall there are traces of a walled-up door visible from both the outside and from the inside the naos.

The pavement of the central hall is decorated by a square earthenware tile carpet with an inscribed circle. The rest of the church area is paved with different materials (stone, brick tiles and wood) showing a superimposition of different phases (fig.5).

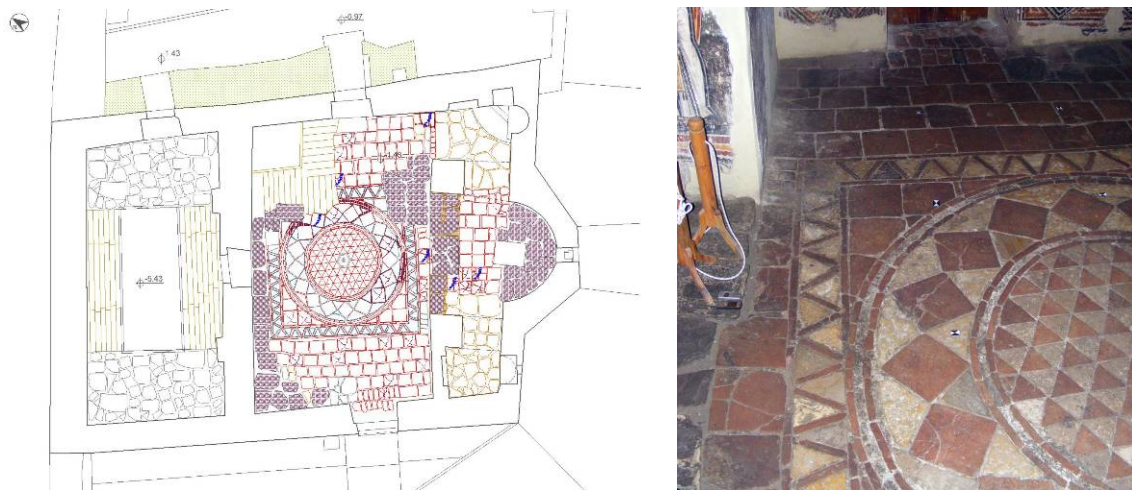


Fig. 5: Plan of the church-different materials and patterns on the pavement (left), Partial view of the pavement (right)

In the interior the walls of the church are entirely frescoed with paintings signed by Nicholas Onufri and dating back to 1578, as it can be seen in an inscription located over the door that connects the naos with the narthex. A superimposition of two layers of frescoes can clearly be seen in the niche on the left of the apse. The layer beneath dates back to an earlier phase of decoration of the naos (fig 6).



Fig. 6: Section B-B facing altar-frescoes rendered in photographic relief image (left), Frescoes in north elevation, Two layers of fresco (right)

On the outside the exposed wall decorations are distinctly characterised by the two-tone effect of brick and stone (cloisonné), that define the appearance of the building while at the same time showing up its modifications. The east wall, except its base section, is entirely constructed with the technique of cloisonné.

In fact the cloisonné is present beginning from the second row, under the window, while the base section is characterized by an irregular masonry made of stones and fragments of bricks. A decoration in bricks in a cross shape is visible in the east elevation (wall in cloisonné). A part of frame of the pediment on the north-east corner, is conserved with bricks put in a saw-tooth shape. The same type of frame is not seen in the corresponding west wall. In fact the corresponding wall in this side is reconstructed and is characterized by an irregular stone masonry.

The naos is today covered by a structure of timber frame trusses, covered with tiles, while only the apse is covered with stone slabs (fig.7).



Fig. 7: View of the structure of the roof (left) and view of the roof (right)

The walls of the narthex reach the level of the door architrave. In elevation these walls are covered by a wooden structure (constructed during the restoration works in 1978). A cistern is located beneath the narthex. It was covered by a barrel vault, of which today only the points of attachment remain (fig.8).

The pavement of the narthex (the area around the cistern) is in stone slabs in the north and south and wood material in the east and west sides of the cistern (fig.5).



Fig. 8: Section C-C showing the location of the cistern (left) and views of the remaining structure of the cistern (right)

4 GEOMETRICAL AND PROPORTIONAL STUDY OF THE STRUCTURE

The geometrical proportional study is performed to identify the possible internal organization in medieval times according to the “harmonic section”. In order to identify the “harmonic section” the height of the naos and of the central cupola are measured in relation to the size of the hall and the cross-in square by using a precise intersection between cross-in square and isosceles triangle equal to the size of the apse. The range of wall thicknesses is measured, as well as the angles of wall directions are verified.

The density of wall stratifications in St Mary Vllaherna can be seen in the varied thicknesses, from 53 cm on the apsidal side to 84 cm at the north west head, and through the uncertain course of the walls, conditioned by being out of plumb and unbalanced but also by an initial adaptation of the plan to the evident urban and morphological constraints of the area (fig. 9). Nonetheless, a proportional reading of the edifice reveals yet more design criteria that can be used to understand the original layout; basing the depth of the naos on the size of the apse (in a ratio 3:1), with the former corresponding to the size of the presbitery. Less precise is the

ratio between the dimensions of the narthex and those of the naos; while comparison of the elevation shows that with the loss of the roof due to a probable collapse of walls and pillars towards the north west, the structure has remained irreversibly compromised (fig.10).

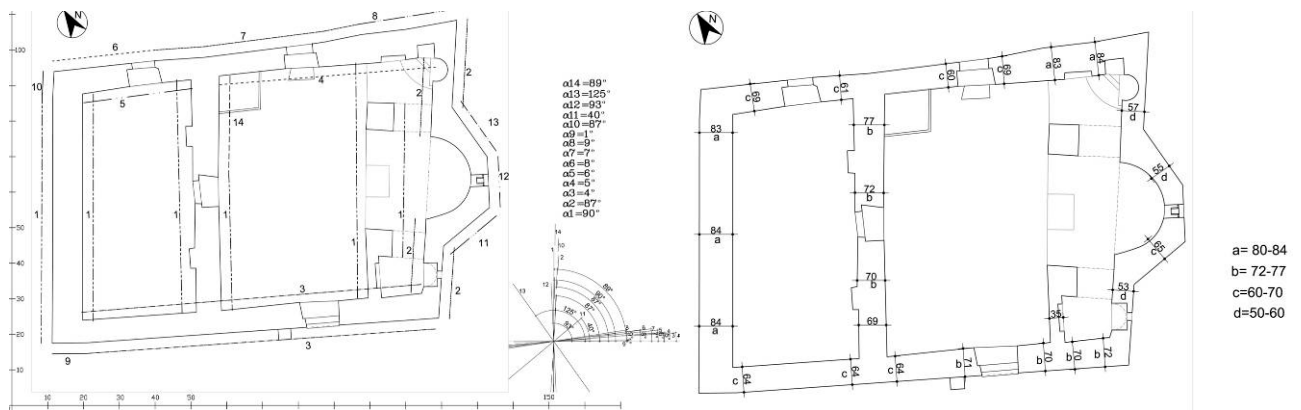


Fig. 9: Study of wall alignments (left), Range of the wall thicknesses (right)

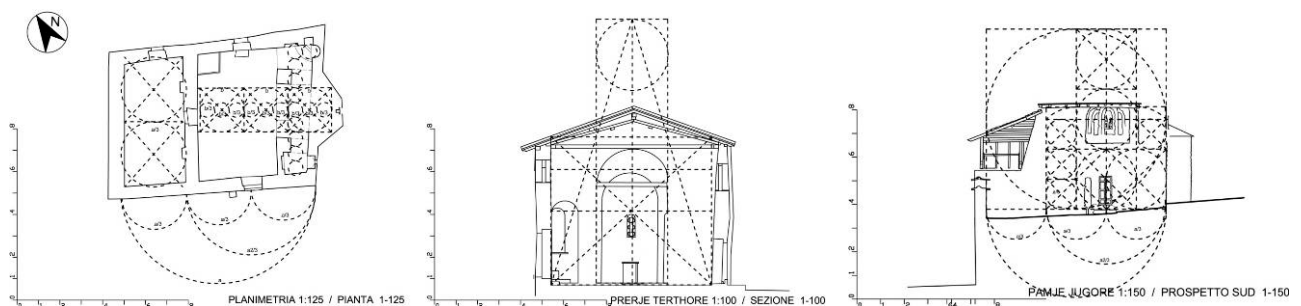


Fig. 10: Geometrical-proportional study in plan, section and elevation according to the "harmonic section"

However, it might be of interest to reconstruct the internal section of the original collapsed church through a system of "harmonic section", taking in comparison for example the church of St. Mary in Malçan, near Saranda or Holy Trinity church in Berat.

5 COMPARATIVE STUDY

A comparative study with other byzantine churches in the area was carried out, regarding the identification of the plan of the church. The study takes into account churches constructed during 10th – 13th century, located in Albania and in the Balcans in general.

The plan of St. Mary Vllaherna has a rectangular shape slightly rotated (towards south) around the longitudinal axis. Although this is a common feature in byzantine architecture, this configuration could be also due to the sloped terrain in which the church is located. Comparison made with the 11th century church of St. Mary in Apollonia/Albania show high similarities regarding the deviation of the plan around the longitudinal axis. Both churches are composed by a naos and a narthex and St. Mary of Apollonia has a cross shape with central dome. Traces found in the north elevation of St. Mary Vllaherna show the presence of an auxiliary space in this side, as it can also be seen in St. Mary in Apollonia. In section, both churches have a cistern area underneath the narthex (fig.11). Comparisons with other churches show clear similarities in the altar area. Based on the structure of the bema, presence of two pillars on the east, and the found traces of the two other pillars on the west, the identification in St. Mary Vllaherna of an inscribed-cross plan with a central dome is possible. Eventhough today there is no trace of columns, based on the observations made in site and on the comparison made with Holy Trinity Church in the castle of Berat, it is assumed that the dome rested, probably, on two pillars and two columns (fig.12). The areas on the right and left of the apse were covered with barrel vaults, as can be seen today in the prothesis. Similarities in the central part of the naos and apse are evident also from the comparisons in elevation with St. Mary in Kakome and St. Mary in Malçan in Saranda. Comparisons made in the elements of the facades show that in general the windows and the walls of byzantine churches were framed by rows of bricks put in saw-teeth shape as it can be seen in St. Jovan and church of Peribleptos in Macedonia. In St. Mary Vllaherna, this type of frame is partially preserved in the east wall and windows.

Probabile posizione delle colonne

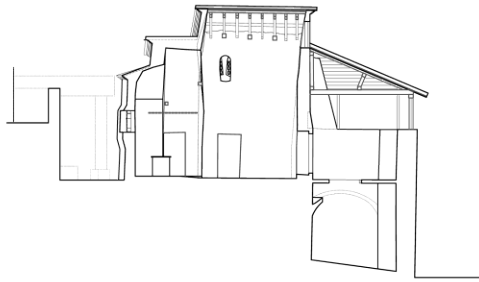
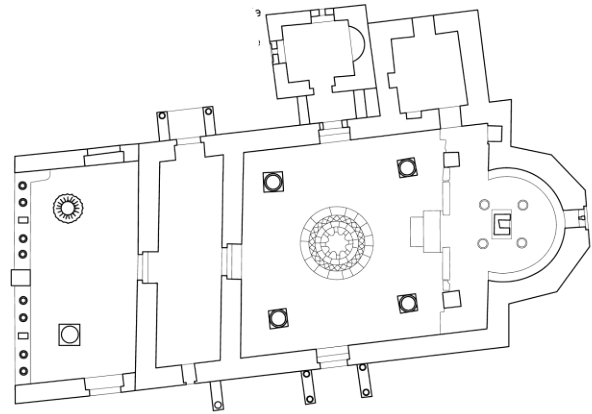
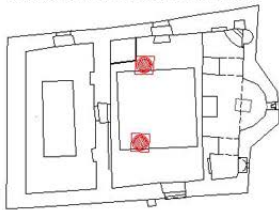
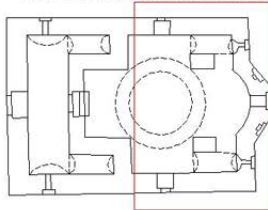


Fig. 11: Comparison in plan and section between St. Mary Vllaherna and St. Mary in Apollonia / Albania

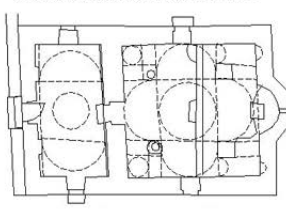
CHURCH OF ST. MARY VLLAHERNA - BERAT / ALBANIA



CHURCH OF ST. MARY - KOSINA / PERMET / ALBANIA



CHURCH OF THE HOLY TRINITY - BERAT / ALBANIA



CHURCH OF ST. MARY - SARAQINISHT / GJIROKASTER / ALBANIA

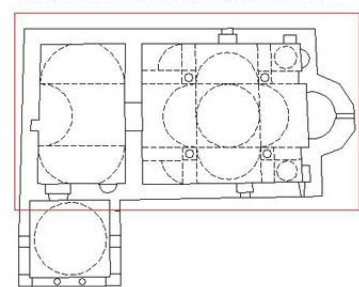


Fig. 12: Comparison in plan between St. Mary Vllaherna, St. Mary in Kosina / Saranda, Holy Trinity in Berat and St. Mary in Saraqinisht/Gjrokastra - Albania

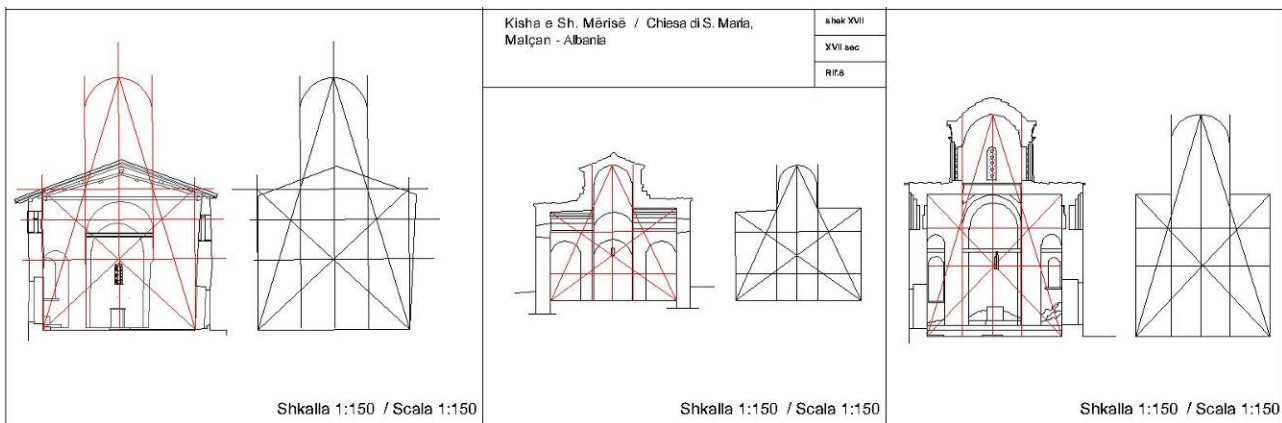


Fig. 13: Comparison in section between St. Mary Vllaherna, St. Mary in Malçan / Saranda and Holy Trinity in Berat – Albania

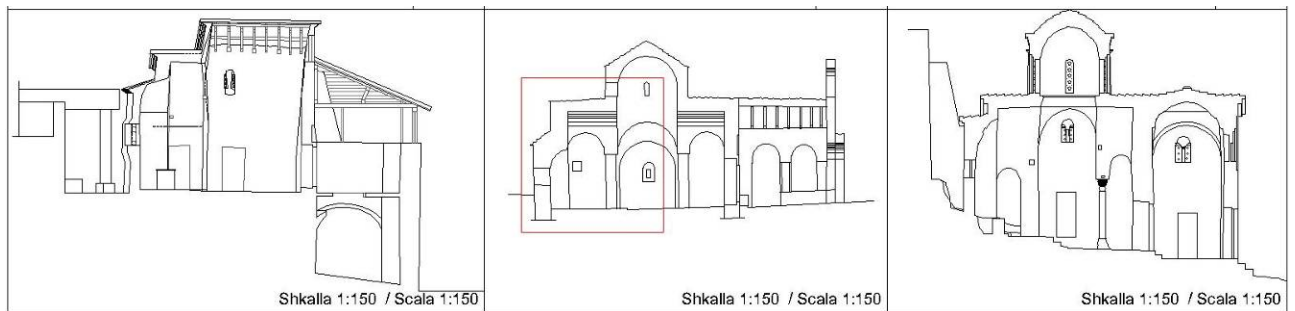


Fig. 14: Comparison in section between St. Mary Vllaherna, St. Mary in Kakome / Saranda and Holy Trinity in Berat – Albania

6 IDENTITY AND PHASES OF CONSTRUCTION

6.1 Pre-existing (Prior to 13th century)

A major restoration was carried out in St. Mary Vllaherna in 1980's by the specialists of the Institute of Cultural Monuments. During the restoration works in 1980, excavation surveys were performed inside the church area. From the surveys it was discovered that the type of masonry below the level of the pavement (northwest corner of the naos) was different from the masonry above. Also it was noted that the two walls identified under the pavement level do not bind to each other. In fact, the west wall abuts the north wall. Based on the difference of masonry it can be assumed that the area below dates back to an earlier phase. This phase is identified from the traces of the walls below the pavement level (which have also an opening – probably a window) and the discovery of an early Christian cross carved under a stone in the north wall. Based on these traces the preexistence of a church (probably paleochristian) can be assumed. Excavation surveys carried out in the courtyard discovered some tombs that indicate that probably the level of the ground was lower. The cistern area was filled up and excavation surveys in this part discovered that in a previous phase the cistern was used as a cemetery area. The excavation surveys done in the central hall of the church discovered a foundation of a pillar (or column). The stone pillar has a different masonry from the other discovered traces of walls (fig.15).



Fig. 15: 1-level of entrance in north elevation, 2-view of north-west corner where surveys were made in the interior, 3-pre-existent masonry found below the pavement level, 4- 3rd pillar found in the western part, 5-type of masonry of this phase

6.2 Phase 1 (1204-1214)

The identification of different range of masonry types as well as the differentiation of older parts of walls from the more recent ones was done by visual inspection of the facades. The observations focused on the identification of materials and construction techniques used. The presence of the technique of cloisonné (combination of stones and bricks) was noticed in north, east and south wall. During the comparative study of the types of masonry, similarities were found between the masonry used in the castle walls (north entrance gate) and the east front of the church (base). This type of masonry is characterized by irregular stones and pieces of bricks and is coeval to the cloisonné.

Regarding the dating, based on architectural form and construction techniques, it can be assumed that the church dates back to the 13th century, but still a more precise dating can be established. The name St. Mary Vllaherna and its possible connection to the homonym construction in Constantinople, as well as the fact that the emperor of Epir Mihal Komnen Dukas has lived for a (1204 -1214) in Berat are the key elements that help in determining a precise date. During his reign the emperor undertook many reconstructions of the castle walls and realized new constructions such as the great cistern in the acropolis. From the comparison of the masonry types is possible to date this phase of the church at the beginning of the 13th century (1204-1214).

In the north wall, there are traces of a door (now walled), visible from both outside and inside. Above these traces, from the outside, the wall is set a little behind the overall front and has a curved shape. These traces as well as other observations and data on the fresco of the naos, suggest the existence of an auxiliary room to the naos. Two layers of fresco, one above the other can be observed in the niche on the left of the apse. Art historians are of the opinion that the underlying layer, based on the simple technique used and in the almost primitive way of painting the clothing of the saints, can be dated to the middle or end of the 13th century². The fact that the north wall of the naos is attached to the north wall of the narthex suggests that the church already had a narthex in this phase. Traces of three arches found in west elevation of the naos, strengthen the hypothesis that this area was covered by two barrel vaults, and a central dome on pendentives (the same structure of the church of Holy Trinity).

The plaster in *cocciopesto* of the water cistern under the narthex, is a technique seen also in the other byzantine cisterns in the castle. This is an important element for the datation of this phase (fig.16).



Fig. 16: 1-type of masonry of this phase, 2-traces of walled-up door in the north elevation, 3-south elevation, 4- view of *cocciopesto* plaster in the cistern area, 5-traces of three arches in the west elevation of the naos

6.3 Phase 2 (post 13th century – 1578)

This phase is identified by the datation of the mural painting of the church. As it can be seen in an inscription left by the painter Nicholas Onufri in the upper part of the door connecting the naos to the narthex, the interior of the church was entirely painted in 1578. Observations in the interior determine that the church was already covered with a wood structure in the time of painting, which means that the coverage with wooden structure (after the crolling of the dome) is either coeval or preexistent to the painting. The collapse of the dome some time before this phase is probably due to an earthquake, a landslide in the west or the big load of the dome etc. The upper and lower frame of the paintings as well as the placement of wooden beams of the roof are strong elements that support this assumption. By the mural paintings and by observing the traces in the outer masonry, it can be clearly understood that the walling of the door in the north wall and opening of the present door in the same wall dates back to some time before 1578. The pavement in stone and earthenware bricks seems to be coeval to the painting of the interior. This can be verified by the frames of fresco in the upper and lower part (fig.17).



Fig. 17:1-inscription in the upper part of the door connecting the naos to the narthex, 2-traces of walled-up door in north elevation, 3-traces of walled-up entrance to the diaconicon, 4-view of pavement in stone and bricks, 5-view of the upper frame of frescoes

6.4 Phase 3 (post 1578 – 1978)

The church was proclaimed “Monument of Culture of 1st Category” in 1948. A general survey of the church and the documentation of its state of conservation was done in the ‘70s by the Institute of Cultural Monuments. As it is seen in the archive documentation the church in this period was plastered in the south, west and north fronts. The present cracks in the frescoes are verified in the archive photos of this period. They are probably caused by the great reported earthquake of 1751, which caused much other damage in the historical inhabited centre of Berat. The narthex in this period was covered by a low hip roof. The entrance door in the south front and the window openings in the east were walled. The diaconicon covering structure

² THAÇI, F. – DEVOLLI, A.; 1990

was sloped to the east instead of the classic slope of byzantine architecture to the south. The apse and prothesis were covered by stone slates while the rest of the roof was in tiles. The datation of this phase is assumed to some time after 1751. It presents minor interventions to the church, probably with the intention of reinforcement of the structure after the earthquake (fig.18).

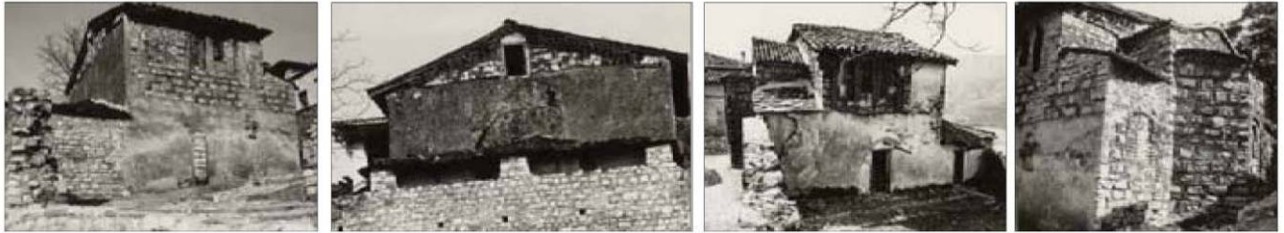


Fig. 18: Archive photos that show the state of the church prior to restoration (Archive of the Institute of Cultural Monuments 1970s)

6.5 Phase 4 (1980 – nowadays)

The church was subject to restoration in 1980. The restoration works focused on:

1. Removal of the plaster visible in the archive photos of the '70s in the south, west and north fronts. In some parts the older plaster found beneath was left visible.
2. The walled door in the south front was opened.
3. The slope of covering structure in tiles of the diaconicon was changed to towards south (based on the byzantine typology).
4. Since the roof of the naos was damaged it needed a restoration. This was done by conserving the three wooden beams of the 1578 structure and by constructing over these beams a light weight wooden truss structure.
5. In the south-east corner the access to the diaconicon was found walled, and the entire area of the diaconicon was filled prior to 1578 probably to reinforce the whole structure. During the restoration works this area was freed by the fillings and re-opened to access. Traces of frescoes were discovered inside the diaconicon area. Its datation is not clear but based on its technique it is not attributable to Nicholas Onufri. Some hypothesis date it to a phase before 1578.
6. Based on the traces found in the west front the roof of the narthex was changed from hip roof to a light weight shed roof.

After these restoration works the church got the present architectural form and view (fig.19).



Fig. 19:View of present state of conservation of the church (elevations and structure of the roof)

7 CONCLUSION

The hypothesis and facts regarding the phases of construction of this church presented in this article are the results of a detailed study of the present architectural structure and masonry, comparative studies with other churches of the same period, geometrical and proportional study of the structure as well as research of historical documentation. Based on all research and study made, identification of phases and reconstruction of transformations in time of this church is possible. Four main phases of transformation of St. Mary Vllaherna were identified in this article (fig.20). The identification of a preexistent, probably paleochristian building over the ruins of which the byzantine church was built, is a new hypothesis introduced by this article. Given the high similarities in plan and section, between St. Mary Vllaherna and the 11th century church of St.Mary in Apollonia, it can be assumed that both of them may have been constructed in close periods from one-another.

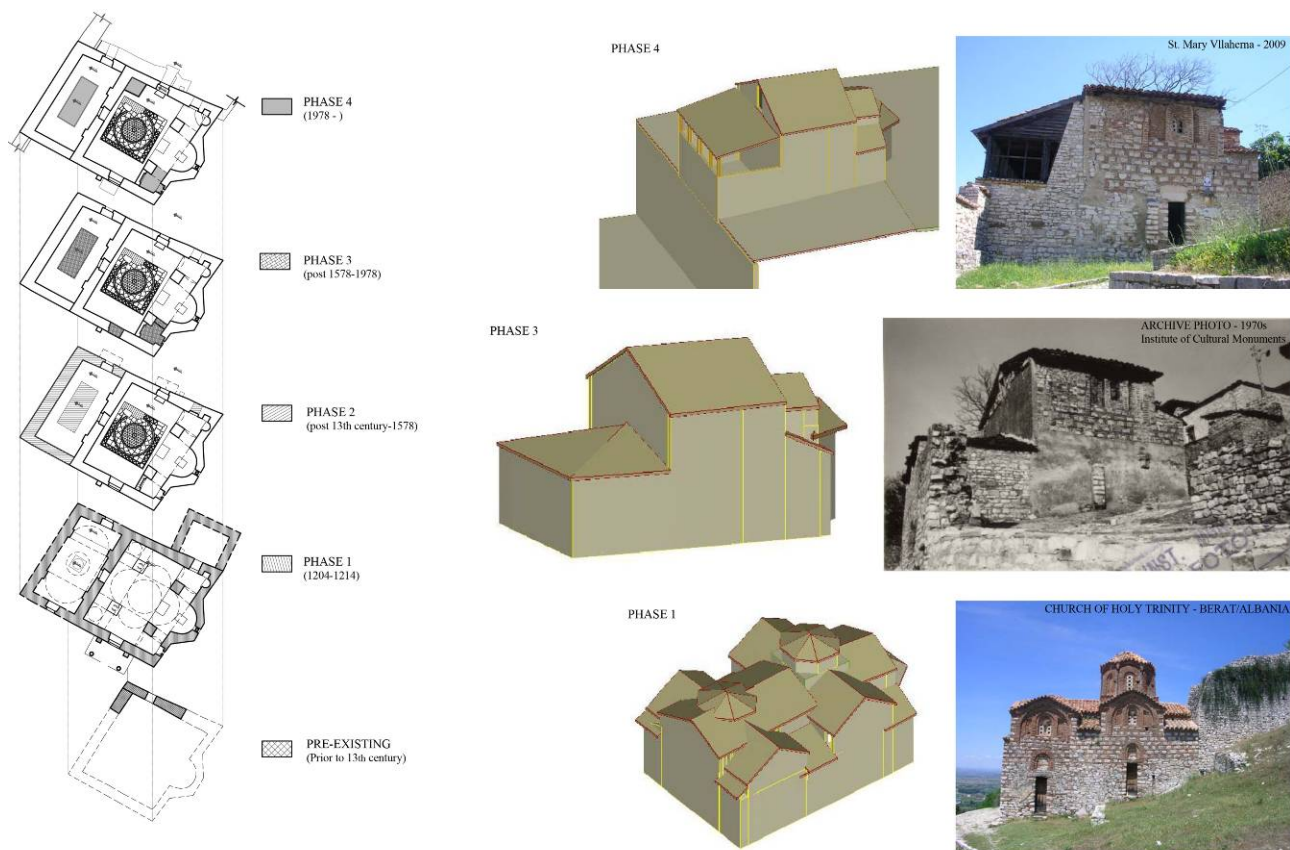


Fig. 20: Identification of phases of construction of St. Mary Vllaherna and reconstruction of main phases

8 REFERENCES

- ARAPI, Arben: Mbi disa aspekte të restaurimit në asambltet e qytetit muze të Beratit; "Monumentet"; Tiranë; 1989/2.
- FIORANI, Donatella – COMPOSTELLA, Chiara: Heritage in Albania (Centre of Restoration of Monuments in Tirana); Petruzzi Stampa; Citta di Castello; 2011.
- KALLAMATA, Kliti: Ikona (Kuptimi dhe simbolizmi); Wisdom Palace K.&P. SBILIAS S.A. Athens; 1998.
- KRAUTHEIMER, Richard: Architettura paleocristiana e bizantina, Einaudi, Torino 1986 (original title: Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture, Penguin Books Ltd, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England 1981 (4^o ed.).
- MANGO, Cyril: Architettura bizantina, Electa, Milano 1974.
- MEKSI, Aleksandër: Tre Kisha Bizantine të Beratit, "Monumentet"; Tiranë; 1972/4
- MEKSI, Aleksandër: Dy kisha bizantine në rrethin e Gjirokastrës; "Monumentet"; Tiranë; 1975/9
- MEKSI, Aleksandër: Disa kupola bizantine të vendit tonë; "Monumentet"; Tiranë; 1975/10
- MEKSI, Aleksandër: Probleme dhe aspekte të restaurimit të kishave bizantine; "Monumentet"; Tiranë; 1976/12
- MEKSI, Aleksandër: Disa probleme të kishës së Apollonisë; "Monumentet"; Tiranë; 1982/1
- MEKSI, Aleksandër: Të dhëna për tekniken e ndërtimit të kishave të shekujve VII - XV në Shqipëri, "Monumentet"; Tiranë; 1987/2
- MEKSI, Aleksandër: Kishat Bizantine të Beratit, "Monumentet"; Tiranë; 1990/2
- MEKSI, Aleksandër: Arkitektura e Kishave të Shqipërisë (shekujt VII- XV), Uegen, Tiranë 2004.
- OUSTERHOUT, Robert: Master Builders of Byzantium, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1999.
- PUZANOVA, Viktori: Mbi artin Bizantin dhe Post-Bizantin Shqiptar; Shtëpia Botuese nr.55; Tiranë; 2005.
- THACI, Fatmir – DEVOLLI, Adrian: Restaurimi dhe vlerat e pikturës murorë të kishës së Shën Mëri Vllahernës Berat, Monumentet, Tiranë; 1990/2
- THACI, Fatmir: Të dhëna rreth pikturës murale në kishën "Fjetja e Shën Mëri Vllahernës në kishën e Sinjës; Monumentet; Tiranë; 1990/2
- THOMO, Pirro: Kishat pasBizantine të Shqipërisë së jugut; Tiranë; 1998