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Report of archaelogical excavations in the Early Christian Church in the vilage of Kushe-in-Hoti*

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In 1908, the Austro-Hungarian consul in Scodra (Shkodra), Theodor Anton Ippen, wrote about the presence of the ruins of a church or monastery, in the village of Kushe-in-Hoti, in the place known as "*kishtza*" (Fig. 1–3). He reported that he had seen two architectural stone fragments with carved ornaments in the houses of the villagers nearby. A third fragment, located in a house near Lake Skadar's Hoti Bay, Ippen reckoned to be a part of an altar.[1]

A year later, this place was visited by the Hungarian ethnographer, Baron Franz Nopsca von Felső-Szilvás, who focused his attention here in more detail than Ippen did. He saw here ruins of walls in a very damaged condition, which were located in the middle of arable agricultural land. Nopsca also described and drew a series of architectural limestone fragments, found by locals (Nopsca 1912, Figs. 27–33), which were parts of three different column capitals (Figs. 4, 27, 28 and 32), an altar column (Figs. 4 and 29), a railing column (Figs. 4 and 30) and two railing slabs (Figs. 4, 31 and 33). In addition to these findings, he described the presence of "Roman" tiles with fingerprints visible.[2]

For about a century, no one has recorded any information about this Christian sanctuary. In the second half of the 20th century, traces of the church were not noticed by the archaeological expeditions gathering information, since they were located in the forbidden border area. Only during an expedition conducted in the spring of 2003 did we learn about the presence of a site with ruins known as the "*kirza*".[3]

A visit to the site presented us with an opportunity to ascertain once again the location of this early Christian church, and traces of its walls and some architectural fragments.[4] These findings were completely consistent with the above information from Theodor Ippen and Franz Nopsca from the early 20th century. Since that time, the environment where the ruins are located has been damaged by agricultural working, landscaping[5] and the quarrying of squared stones for use in new constructions. Also, the place has been constantly covered, even during the second half of the 20th century, as a result of its stones being misappropriated for the needs of the surrounding area. In addition, a nearby military unit on the border used this site served as an area for dumping waste.

This church site is located near the northernmost tip of the bay known as "Lake Hoti", about 200–300 metres north-west from the foot of a hill, where the late-Antique and medieval fortification known as Hoti Castle is located[6] (Figs. 1–3).

*excavations carried out in the period July-September 2019 and autumn 2021.

1 Ippen, 1908, 16.

2 Nopsca 1910, 319–320, Figs. 27–33; or in the German version: Nopsca 1912, 181–183, Figs. 27–33.

3 The announcement of this site was made by the owner of the land, the late Gjeto Pepa, of whom we still have distinct memories – because of his impressive knowledge of the terrain and generous hospitality.

4 Hoxha, 2003. Report of the information expedition of 2003. Located in the Archive of the Institute of Archaeology.

5 Locals claim that in 1974 a bulldozer was used here, which damaged the walls that had existed before, while gathering stones from the field at this site, without the operators noticing that a historical monument was being damaged.

6 Hoxha, 2004, 83–92.

Only in 2019 was further research carried out, courtesy of a financial provision made possible by a cross-border IPA project titled: **"Augmenting Cooperation – from Christian Antiquities towards Enhanced Tourism"** (Montenegro–Albania Cross-Border Cooperation Programme 2014–2020 under the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance 2014–2020 (IPA II).

Two excavation campaigns have been carried out (in July–September 2019, and in the autumn of 2021),[7] which have brought to light the complete planimetry of the church walls, and uncovered many architectural fragments with rich decorative stone carvings and some fragments of ceramic vessels for domestic usage.[8]

The first campaign of excavations brought to light most of the planimetry of the church – more precisely the southern part of the narthex, the entire nave and the approximate contours of the apse of the church (Figs. 5–9).

In the second phase, excavations uncovered the northern part of the narthex, the church's sanctuary, to a depth of about 30–50 cm, and the final contour of the apse to the level of its foundations. Unexpectedly, in front of the main entrance of the church, clear traces of the exonarthex also came to light[9] (Fig. 24).

The early Christian church in Hoti has an east–west orientation, with a slight deviation towards the east (Fig. 10). Its walls are built of limestone blocks, medium-sized and small, bound with lime mortar, and shielded with river gravel and small white and black pebbles. The thickness of the walls varies from 0.60 to 0.65 m. Throughout the length of the exposed walls, a 10–15-cm-thick *chokol* can be noticed, which rises slightly above the level of the foundations and the floor of the church. The walls of the exonarthex were built later, as they have no organic connection with the other wall of the church. The thickness of these walls – about 0.50 m – is also smaller than that of the walls in the nave and narthex.

The floor of the church (Fig. 6 a–b; Fig. 9 b) emerged very clearly in the central and northern parts of the narthex and in some parts of the nave. It was built of soft pumice stones, covered at the top by a layer of weak limestone mortar.

The **planimetric shape** of the church is simple and typical of early Christian times, with the exonarthex, the transverse narthex, the nave and the apse on the eastern side all being constituent parts which join in the shape of a Latin cross (Figs. 10 and 11 b).

The **exonarthex**, whose walls are organically detached from the church base and which has an entrance from the west, measures 4.90 m × 5.90 m.

The **narthex**, oriented transversely to the nave, has a length of 20.70 m and a width of 5.80 m. It consists of three alcoves, one central and two lateral, located on the northern and southern sides respectively. The shape of these two side alcoves is quadrangular, but some asymmetries of dimensions and angles are present – features already familiar in such early Christian constructions (see these in Fig. 10, planimetry).

The **nave** of the church is 15.40 m long and of variable width, as it narrows to the east. In the west the nave is 8.85 m wide, while in the east it is 8.25 m wide, therefore 0.60 cm narrower.

Five entrances are noticeable in the planimetry of the church: the entrance to the exonarthex – 1.63 m wide; the main entrance to the church on the western side of the narthex – 2.60 m wide; the lateral entrance to the northern alcove of the narthex – 1.26 m wide; the central entrance to the southern alcove of the narthex – 0.90 m wide; and the almost central entrance on the western side of the nave – 1.60 m wide.

The **apse** on the eastern side was difficult to define – it has a visible contour only at the level of the foundations. It had an internal radius of 1.35 m and a wall thickness of 0.60 m. The designed exit from the eastern façade of the nave walls is 1.30 m.

The total length of the early Christian church of Hoti is the sum of the dimensions of the exonarthex (4.90 m), the narthex (5.80 m), the nave (15.40 m) and the apse, which together extend a distance of 27.40 m.

In terms of planimetric construction, we notice that this early Christian church in Hoti is

7 The delay in continuing the excavations was due to the emergency situation of the Covid-19 pandemic.

8 Regarding this, see the Report on the Archaeological Excavations in the Early Christian Church of Hoti (August–September 2019), which is located in the Archive of the Institute of Archaeology in Tirana.

9 The second phase of excavations were carried out by the restaurateurs, without the presence of the author of this report, who owns the official permit of these archaeological excavations. The author assisted only in the final cleaning of the sanctuary and the apse of the church.

almost identical to the early Christian church of Šipkova Glavica near Danilovgrad, in the valley of the River Zeta. (Figs. 11a–b). The name Šipkova Glavica is linguistically interpreted as *Mons Episcopi* ("brdo [našeg] episkopa [gde mu je crkva]" – or "the hill of [our] bishop [where his church is]).[10] According to the researchers of this early Christian church of Šipkova Glavica, it seems that it was built very early on, probably in the late 4th and early 5th centuries.[11] Located in the fortification's *suburbium* of Martinićka Gradina and close to a *villa rustica* in Pod Vrh (Podvrh), or other churches around, it is also conceived as a *martyrium*.[12]

The sanctuary of the church in Hoti in particular has yielded a lot of material of architectural fragments with rich decorative stone carvings with various motifs rendered in relief. Rarely have there been such archaeological findings in the area of a narthex and very few in the area of an exonarthex, where tombs with tiled construction have emerged.[13]

We present the following findings, grouped according to their function:

Fragments from the base of the templon, or railing (Fig. 12 a–b). These fragments were not found *in situ*, but placed in such a way which probably testifies to a planimetric remodelling of the church after it was burned and destroyed. It seems that we have here a small chapel in the final stage of the life of this monument, seemingly dating to the first half of the 7th century AD.

Basements and column fragments (Fig. 13 a–g). The foundations of three columns were found on the surface, mixed with stones that were piled on the ruins of the church. Yet, only one was found in the excavations in the eastern area of the sanctuary (Fig. 13 g). While most of the bases of the columns with a diameter from 0.22–0.24 m were found scattered on the surface of the church nave, this was less frequently found in the narthex area (Fig. 13 a–f).

Fragments of window columns (Fig. 14 a–c) were found less frequently. Their massiveness testifies to the massiveness of the windows located in the eastern apse, which are currently preserved only as traces of the foundation.

Impost column capitals and column capitals (Figs. 15, 1–14). Impost column capitals are a frequent find in the architectural material of this church. They have mainly trapezoidal shapes, slightly rounded, and are decorated with relief carvings with motifs such as: spiral stripes or *ova* (Figs. 15, 1, 10–14), with a Latin cross on the sides (Figs. 15, 2–5), or even without ornaments (Figs. 15, 7–9). In the impost column capital (Fig. 15, 7) we notice the Greek letter beta (β), etched onto its upper part. A column ends at the top with a capital joined to the column (Figs. 15, 6). This capital has four spiral volutes at its ends and stylised leaf motifs in the shape of a cross, located on its four lateral sides.

Parts of the railing columns (Fig. 16 a–c) testify to a typical early Christian sanctuary rich in relief ornaments. There we clearly see the channels and the holes for fixing the railing slabs. On their front faces, there are various relief ornaments such as: vertical grooves, combined with columns of sloping lines and crowned with a stylised cross-shaped motif (Fig. 16 a). Also, there are such columns decorated with grapevine motifs, with stylised leaves and bunches of grapes. Among these motifs, bird (Fig. 16 c) or deer figures are located, which seem to have been particularly preferred, as they appear more often (Fig. 16b).

Railing slabs, in different sizes and embellishments in relief (Figs. 17 and 18), are classified into two main groups:

The slabs in the first group are those with geometrical, plant motifs or resembling a cross. There we notice motifs such as overlapping lunules (Fig. 17 a), triple lily leaves, combined with a Latin cross and a Greek alpha (A), which also presupposes the presence of the other letter omega (ω) on the other symmetrical side of the cross (Fig. 17 b and i). A trio of lily petals, inserted in a conical cup shape appears in the fragment (Fig. 17 g). Another decorative geometrical motif is a combination of lines radially distributed from a centre, reminiscent of the shape of the sun (Fig. 17 d–e), while the motif of a central rosette surrounded by a "*krizma*" appears in the fragments (Fig. 17 c and f).

10 Veljković 2013, 13–25.

11 Iković 2016, 69–70; Jovanović 2019, 24; Zagarčanin 2019, 116 (dated to the 5th century AD).

12 Iković 2016, 70.

13 In the 2021 campaign, during the excavations in the northern part of the narthex and in the exonarthex, for which the author of this report was absent, some new architectural fragments were found, such as some parts of the columns and the altar table, fragments of tiles and railing columns with carvings of typical early Christian motifs.

The railing slabs in the second group have mainly plant motifs combined with animal representations (Fig. 18). In addition to the grapevine branch with leaves and bunches of grapes, or radial lines, there are animal figures. We noted that deer (Fig. 18 a) or various cattle (Fig. 18 b–c), or even the figure of a goat's head (Fig. 18 d) were preferred. We can also distinguish the figure of a very stylised bird (Fig. 18 e).

g. Altar table slabs and columns (Fig. 20).

As early as 1908, Theodor Ippen noticed that a fragment of a slab, located in a house near Lake Skadar's Hoti Bay, looked like part of an altar.[14] Our excavations confirmed this assertion from the finding of some fragments of the altar slab (Fig. 20 a–c) and some of its columns (Fig. 20 d–j).

The altar table slab was not found in the sanctuary, but in the northern space of the church's narthex. It is made of relatively soft, beige sandstone which is not of local origin. There are clearly visible holes for fixing the altar columns and traces of metal clips, for fixing special parts of the slab (Fig. 20 a–c).

The altar pillars were found scattered mainly in the sanctuary and in the nave of the church. They are cylindrical in shape with a diameter of 10–12 cm. At their bases or heads there are carved ornaments with motifs of circular or spiral lines (Fig. 20 h–i).

h. Ambon base with holes for fixing the columns (Fig. 21.)

This monolithic limestone base in the shape of a slab 18–22 cm thick seems to have been extracted from the massive limestone rocks which are located near the church. This ambon pedestal was found in three separate parts, forcibly broken up and scattered in the sanctuary in a clearly collapsed environment. The three found parts have on their upper surface a circular hole with a diameter of 0.24 m for fixing columns. The part with the fourth hole was not found. The massiveness of this slab leads us to think that it served as the base of an ambon. Above this pedestal, this ambon seems to have been mounted on four columns fixed in the four holes of the massive stone pedestal. The pulpit must have been located in the area between the temple and the nave, where the congregants would have stood.

In addition to the above-mentioned architectural fragments, very fragmented parts were found from the frames of the slabs or columns of the railing, from the spiral volutes of the column capitals, etc. (Figs. 15, 10–14).

All these fragments are decorated with crosses, spiral-shaped volutes, floral motifs or bucolic figures, which fit the decorations of the late Paleo-Christian period of the late-5th century and the first half of the 6th century AD (Fig. 35 c and i). A more detailed analysis will be made through further study and comparison against the most specialised literature on the topic.

However, we noticed two slab fragments and a column fragment of the sanctuary railing, with embossed ornaments, typical of the early Christian period. The fragment of the railing slab (Figs. 17 b and 19 a) has combined the appearance of a Latin cross, with three stylised leaves as a symbol of the tree of life, with the letter alpha (A), which also presupposes the presence of the letter omega (ω) on the symmetrically opposite side of the cross. Such decorative representations, combined with the first and the last letters of the Greek alphabet, are very typical of the early Christian period.

On the other hand, in the fragments of the slab and the column of the railing (Figs. 18 a–c and 19 b–c) symbolic figures, such as a grapevine with leaves and bunches of grapes, are presented as symbols of the Eucharist. Meanwhile, the appearance of a deer reminds us of Psalm 42:2 in the Old Testament: "*Quemadmodum desiderat cervus ad fontes quarium, ita desiderat anima mea ad te, Deus*" – "As the deer longs for running streams, so my soul longs for you, o God!"

It is interesting that most of the architectural fragments with decorative carved stonework in relief are made of limestone and not of imported marble. Thus, it is very likely that these carvings of early Christian symbolic figures were made in local workshops. The beige sandstone railing slabs or altar table slabs appear to have been imported. Most likely they were transported by water across Lake Skadar, which is very close to the northern extension of Hoti Bay.

Finds of mobile archaeological material have been scarce (Figs. 22, 1–14).

From the repertoire of ceramic vessels, we can mention some fragments of amphorae, handle edges (Figs. 22, 1, 3–9) and walls decorated with a

14 Ippen, 1908, 16.

comb (Figs. 22, 2), which typologically belong to the late Antique period. Also, among these finds there are some fragments of pitchers (Figs. 22, 10–11) or *vorbas* (Figs. 22, 12–14). The typical comb decoration is not missing even in this category of typical dishes of late Antiquity (Figs. 22 and 12).

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In conclusion it can be said, that we are dealing with a paleo-Christian church, built in an environment with already massively Christianised populations. This is evidenced by the traces of other early Christian churches in the vicinity of Hoti, or in the geographical area of the Lake Shkodra basin, such as in Upper Lohe and Maçovilë (north of Koplik), and in the territory of Montenegro, in Ploçe (near Vuksanlekaj/Vuksanlekići) and in the town of Dinosha/Dinoša.

The first construction phase of the church in Hoti includes the narthex, the nave and the sanctuary of the church, including the apse. This construction phase can be dated to the end of the 5th century and the first half of the 6th century AD.

The discovery of the exonarthex with walls unattached to the church base indicates that this is from the second phase of construction of the church, probably in the second half of the 6th century AD.

At the end of the 6th century or the beginning of the 7th century AD, the church suffered massive fire damage and collapses, falling into disuse.

A third construction phase is evidenced by the reorganisation of the architectural elements of the church, which shows perhaps the improvisation of a small chapel above the church, now disused. This third construction phase may also include the performance of some funeral rites in individual graves with a slab construction, found in the space of the exonarthex. This weak phase of the church's resurrection can be dated to the first half of the 7th century AD.

In addition to the construction of this church in Kushe-in-Hoti, in the late Antique period, a fortification known as "Hoti Castle" was also built on top of a nearby hill. This castle, located only about 300 m south of the church, served as a fortified defensive and control point on the important main road which ran north from Scodra (Shkodra) to Narona.

The position of this early Christian church and its architectural and historical values make it a very attractive building for tourists to visit (Figs. 23 and 24). Therefore, this building has been consolidated and restored, it has been surrounded by metal railings, it is connected by road to the main regional road and it is equipped with the appropriate tourist information signs.

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