

St John's Church in Stari Grad on Hvar Island

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ABSTRACT

The Church of St John in Stari Grad was built within the Greek insula, converted in Roman times, alongside the eastern gate of the city. Archaeological excavations revealed a unique heritage complex of city walls and residential architecture within which the still preserved northern Early Christian church (St John's) represents the starting point for the creation and development of the Christianity of the Hvar diocese and the island of Hvar.

Key words: *St John church, Greek insula converted in Roman times, Early Christian oratory and church, twin Early Christian churches*

Introduction

The Church of St John in Stari Grad was built within the south-east corner of Pharos and the Greek insula alongside the eastern gate of the city and the principal ancient street. This is the northern church building of a complex Early Christian compound of the sixth century. The first Christian communities in urban milieus often converted the spaces of already existing buildings for use as oratories (in Salona, Iader and Parentium, for example). This residential block was built before the middle of the fourth century BC, in the context of the formation of the new urbanistic matrix of Pharos. A great cataclysm overtook the Greek city after the defeat and flight of Demetrius of Pharos when "Aemilius, the Roman Consul, took Pharos at once by assault and razed it to the ground" (Polyb. III, 19, 1-13). When amicable relations with the Romans were established, the city underwent a renewal, about which the famed public inscription, the Pharos Psephisma speaks unambiguously. Inscribed on it are the official decisions of the polis of Pharos to send an envoy to the mother city, Paros, asking for help with the renewal of the city, which was henceforth to be under Roman protection. Although it retained to some extent the original Greek outlines and some of the characteristics, the city was gradually Romanised, particularly with the arrival of Roman citizens, and it became a Roman municipium¹⁻⁷.

Roman Times

Archaeological excavations showed that the residential block of the original Greek architecture was repaired and remodelled according to the new needs of the Roman citi-

zens. Changes to the sizes of the rooms and certain modifications can be seen, although the basic volumes and approaches to individual parts of the building would be retained. The entry into the first room in the north-east part of the insula was from the north, where a massive stone threshold was found. Here went the main city street that led from the eastern gate of the city to the central city square. Partially preserved in the room is the paved floor of irregular stone slabs and tegulae. Finds of Roman coins ranging from the Republic, early Roman emperors from Augustus and Tiberius to Aurelian and Tacitus tell clearly of the renovation of this residential unit in early Roman times and of the continued use of the space, probably put to the same purpose. This is confirmed by everyday use objects – potsherds, that is, from grey-glazed, Megarian ware decorated with various relief ornaments, to early terra sigillata and north African red slip ware (ARSW) and fragments of Roman oil lamps. A new room was built onto the north-east corner of this insula⁸⁻⁹. (Figure 1)

At that time the two central rooms of the Greek insula were remodelled; they were almost equal in width to that on the north-east corner. The first, on the south side of the entry corridor with a well, was enlarged by its front wall attenuating the original entry into the second room. Over the stone threshold, a new southern wall was put up. The room so enlarged was ornamented with frescos. This is shown by numerous fragments of wall painting found by the front wall after the collapse of the building, fragments that were discarded and collected in the space behind the apse of the Early Christian church built later. On the frescos various plant and geometrical motifs were painted.

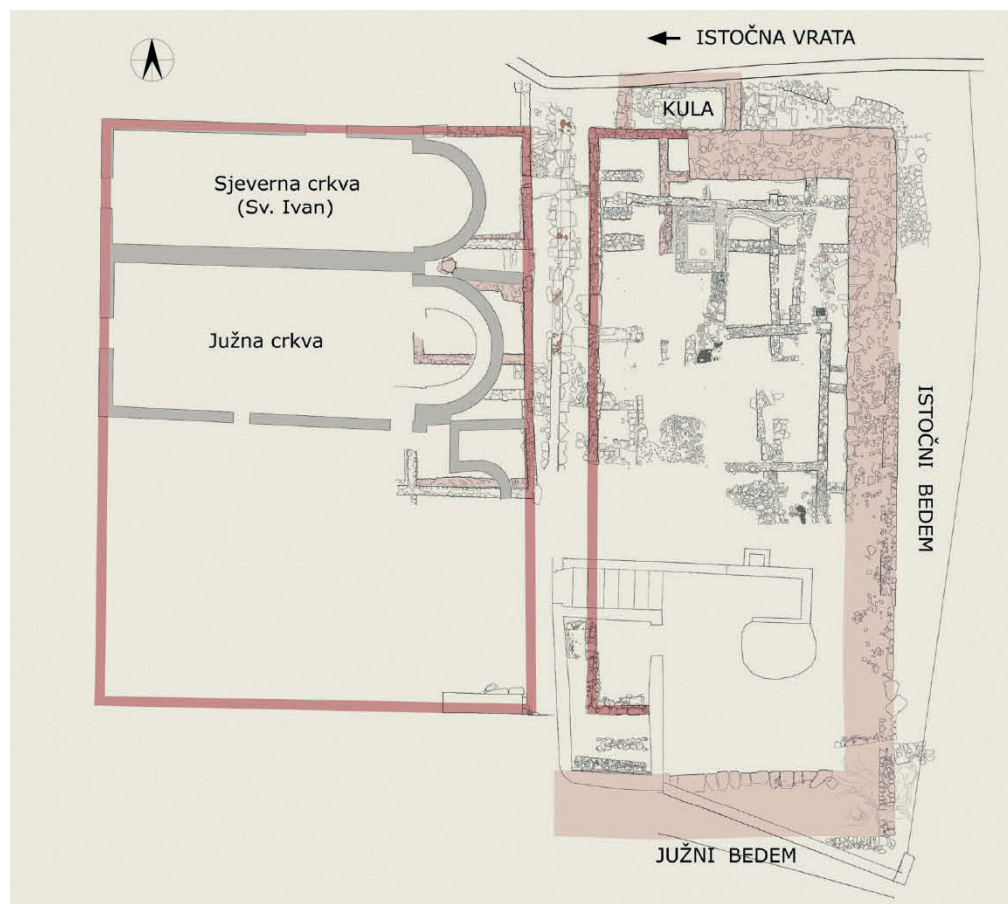


Fig. 1. Plan of residential blocks in the south-eastern corner of Pharos with complex of twin Early Christian churches.

Most of them were stylised leaf and fruit ornaments, as well as tendrils framed with varicoloured slender lines or with broad bands on a white ground. Particularly prominent is a fragment with a figural depiction of a bird on a branch. These are on the whole parts of thin partition walls, composed of a lot of fragments of brick bonded with copious use of mortar, and were painted with similar motifs on both sides. Small fragments of mortar might have belonged to the decoration of the ceilings¹⁰. Together with the collapsed part of the walls with Roman frescos mainly coins of the 4th century – Constantius II and Valentinian were found, and a few fragments of pottery. On top of this basically Greek structure, converted in Roman times, the complex of Early Christian churches was built. The specific forms of the religious buildings were incorporated into the set urban volumes. This was attended with a considerable destruction of the earlier architecture, its walls being used as foundations.

Early Christian Church

Probably the presence of a Christian tradition in the place was responsible for the creation of the first Early Christian church in the 5th century, the modest remains

of its semicircular apse and octagonal baptistry being discovered by archaeological research. The church building was erected over a lavishly arranged central space, the walls of which were covered with frescos. On the southern side was a baptistry complex with an octagonal piscina. In this context the function of the northern part of the insula alongside which the first Early Christian church in the 5th century was built can be observed. There is as yet no answer to the question of the existence of an Early Christian oratory created within the residential building, which perhaps would have determined the siting of the first Early Christian architecture in the south-east corner of the city. The parallel existence of the hypothetical oratory and the Early Christian church in the 5th century could be referred to the tradition of twin churches that was a feature of the eastern Adriatic space. This undoubtedly can be traced back to the church of Aquileia, under the jurisdiction of which the church of Salona, which also employed this feature, initially came². Tending to confirm this is the developed complex of Early Christian architecture in the mid-6th century, when at the same time a new congregational church was built with a baptismal complex and a martyr church with a

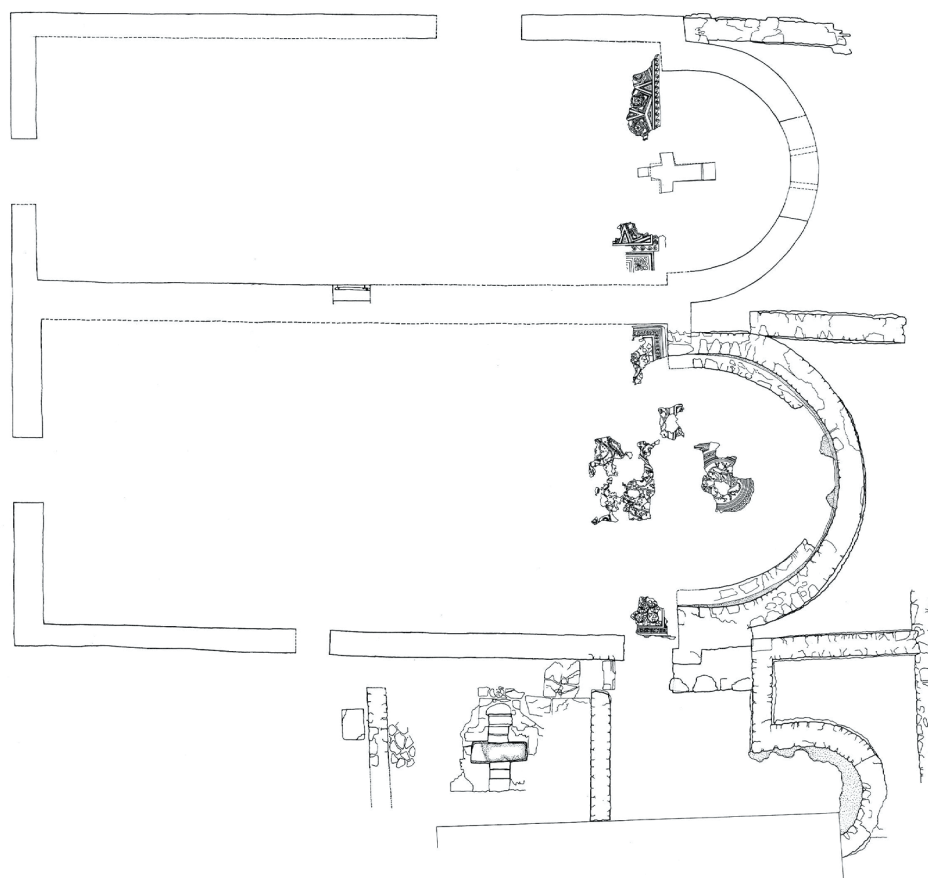


Fig. 2. Plan of the Early Christian complex in Stari Grad.

confessio just on the northern part of this residential structure. (Figure 2)

In the middle of the 6th century, then, on the site of the first Early Christian church, a somewhat larger religious building was put up, with a series of rooms on the south side, where there was a new cross-shaped baptistery with consignatory. At the same time and in parallel with this Early Christian church, another, northern, church was built, of similar dimensions, with a cruciform confessio under the altar. So was created a complex compound of twin Early Christian churches that had different functions. The main congregational church on the southern side was probably dedicated to St Mary, while the north was connected with the cult of a martyr. The same dedicatees were retained by the Early Medieval churches. It was only with the Gothic reconstruction that the northern church took on the leading role and the dedicatee of St Mary, which it had until the beginning of the 20th century, listed in the documents as the parish church or “old cathedral”. In this context, the southern church building was remodelled into a baptistery, which is why it is dedicated to St John the Baptist. The northern church is today dedicated to St John the Baptist, previously to St Mary, and it is an open question to whom it was originally dedicated.

Probably its patron was the martyr whose relics were in the confessio under the altar.

Later alterations and recent conservation work

The historical sources are confirmed by conservational and archaeological research in which the numerous remodelling operations of the Early Christian churches were discovered. In the 11th century the buildings were reconstructed only in the eastern part, completely preserved in the Church of St John. Then inside the apse and nave of the church pylons were added that supported the new semi-calotte and new barrel vaulting. In the 15th century the church was remodelled in Gothic style and extended to its original size. In the western part it obtained a new blunt arch, the façade on which there was a rosette was renovated, and a new altar was installed. At that time, because of the digging of graves, the floor level of the whole church was raised. The last alterations were done in the Baroque, which can clearly be seen on the façade, when the level of the floor was also raised, and accordingly also the rose window. Hence we can see in St John's Church the complex and rich history

of Christianity in Stari Grad, Greek Pharos, one of the oldest ancient cities on the eastern shores of the Adriatic².

The complex conversation works in the Church of St John started in 1979 were carried out with interruptions until 2016. Still surviving from the Early Christian time is the basic body of the church, the apse with the chancel arch and elements of Early Christian furnishing and parts of the floor mosaics. Recently, an altar was installed into which some of the original parts of the Early Christian altar were incorporated; it was consecrated by Mons. Slobodan Štambuk, Bishop of Hvar, Brač and Vis, in the presence of the clergy of Hvar, thus restoring the church to its original function. The placing of the church furnishing – two pilasters and capitals on the base of the altar screen contribute to the significance of the Early Christian church, even if they have been slightly shifted from their original positions, but in the immediate vicinity of the reconstructed Early Christian altar. Also belonging to this early period are the conserved geometrical mosaics of the chancel, a simple pattern of a sequence of square fields with interwoven circular ornaments. Figural mosaics from the southern church have been presented in front of the altar screen. A mosaic medallion with a depiction of cantharus and doves drinking water is directed towards the chancel, as this symbol of the Eucharist was originally positioned. In the opposite direction, towards the congregation in the nave, are mosaics, also with symbolic depictions of the source of life in the form of a cantharus. The central mosaic with a pair of peacocks facing each other by a cantharus and two smaller lateral mosaics with canthari from which wind ivy tendrils, also belonged to the space of the presbytery.

The presentation of the mosaics below a specially constructed glass floor and the placing of elements of stone furnishing on the base of the altar screen by the reconstructed altar have united the Early Christian elements found during research into the twin church complex in the south-east part of Pharos. (Figure 3). It was with protective conservation works on the Church of St John that archaeological research into the ancient city started; the excavations revealed a unique heritage complex of city walls and residential architecture within which the still preserved northern Early Christian church (St John's) represents the starting point for the creation and development of the Christianity of the Hvar diocese and the island of Hvar.

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Fig. 3. St John's Church in Stari Grad.

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CRKVA SV. IVANA U STAROM GRADU NA HVARU

SAŽETAK

Crkva sv. Ivana u Starom Gradu podignuta je unutar jugoistočnog ugla Farosa i grčke insule uz istočna gradska vrata i glavnu antičku ulicu. Potom, pod rimskim patronatom, grad zadržava izvorne grčke obrise i karakteristike, ali se postepeno romanizira, osobito dolaskom rimskih građana te postaje rimski municipij, a stambeni se blok prvobitne grčke arhitekture popravljaju i preuređuju prema novim potrebama rimskih građana. U 5. st. podiže se na lokalitetu prva ranokršćanska crkva čiji su skromni ostaci polukružne apside i oktogonalne krstionice nedavno pronađeni. Sredinom 6. st. se istovremeno podižu nova kongregacijska crkva sa složenim krstioničkim sklopom i ona martirska s konfesijom upravo nad sjevernim dijelom navedenog stambenog objekta. Konzervatorskim i arheološkim istraživanjima (1979.- 2016.) otkrivene su brojne preinake ranokršćanskih crkava. Jedinstveno sačuvana ranokršćanska crkva sv. Ivana predstavlja ishodište nastanka i razvoja kršćanstva Hvarske biskupije i otoka Hvara.

