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A MAJOR MONUMENT — FAR TOO OFTEN UNDERESTIMATED — AND ITS COMPLEX ISSUES: SAINT SOPHIA OF SOFIA (BULGARIA)

Although being one of the largest churches possibly of Protobyzantine era currently standing and in liturgical use, the Basilica Saint Sophia in Sofia is still — except in Bulgaria itself — too little taken into account in specialized historiography. The building indeed poses complex issues. We will first revisit its initial function. And, to the extent that, following a partial destruction, it underwent a radical reconstruction in the 20th century, we will re-examine its original design — especially its rather unique elevation. This obviously involves reconsidering the various proposals that have been made regarding its dating; and insofar as the hypothesis of a construction in the 6th century appears to be the most plausible, we will attempt to place this church within the broader architectural context of the period.

Keywords: Saint Sophia, Sofia, Early Byzantine architecture, 6th-century churches, vaulting techniques, Late Antique Balkans

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ЗНАЧИТЕЛЬНЫЙ ПАМЯТНИК, ЧАСТО НЕДООЦЕНИВАЕМЫЙ, И ЕГО СЛОЖНЫЕ ПРОБЛЕМЫ: СВЯТАЯ СОФИЯ В СОФИИ (БОЛГАРИЯ)

Несмотря на то, что базилика Святой Софии в Софии является одним из крупнейших сохранившихся и действующих храмов, возможно, протовизантийской эпохи, она до сих пор — за пределами самой Болгарии — остается малоизученной в специализированной историографии. Это сооружение действительно ставит перед исследователями сложные вопросы. Вначале мы вновь обратимся к его первоначальной функции. А учитывая, что после частичного разрушения здание подверглось радикальной реконструкции в XX в., мы заново рассмотрим его первоначальный облик — особенно его весьма своеобразную вертикальную структуру. Естественно, это требует пересмотра различных предложенных датировок; и поскольку наиболее правдоподобной представляется гипотеза о строительстве в VI в., мы попытались вписать этот храм в более широкий архитектурный контекст той эпохи.

Ключевые слова: Святая София (София), ранневизантийская архитектура, храмы VI века, сводчатые конструкции, позднеантичная архитектура Балкан

The basilica of Saint Sophia in Sofia (fig. 1, 2) is one of the few churches from the possible Proto-Byzantine era still standing and in use for worship today. However, it occupies little — if any — space in the major syntheses on the architecture of this period: thus, to stick to the main ones, Cyril Mango has completely overlooked it (*Mango* 1981); Richard Krautheimer and Slobodan Ćurčić have only mentioned it briefly (*Krautheimer, Ćurčić* 1986: 255–257), and the same is true in the book by Slobodan Ćurčić specif-

ically dedicated to architecture in the Balkans (*Ćurčić* 2010: 204–207) — these latter presentations not being without certain approximations, or even inaccuracies. It is true that the damage suffered by the building during the Middle Ages and later, particularly its transformation into a mosque in the 16th century, then the collapse of its apse and of part of its western façade caused by earthquakes in the 19th century, seriously altered the structure and led to a radical reconstruction between 1927



Fig. 1. Sofia, Saint Sophia. General view

and 1930; all this, tending to discourage too much consideration of a monument whose approach seemed burdened by too many uncertainties, and for which, also, very few textual sources were available.

It is therefore only in Bulgarian historiography that, as could be expected, Hagia Sophia has received the attention it deserves, and we will recall here the main contributions. First, the one of Bogdan

Filov (*Filov* 1913), who published the results of his archaeological investigations conducted in 1910/1911, which remain fundamental; Filov was the first to propose a dating to the time of Justinian. Then several contributions of Stefan Boâdžiev (*Boâdžiev* 1958; *Boâdžiev* 1967; *Boâdžiev* 1994; *Boâdžiev* 1996; *Boâdžiev* 2002), who considered a completely different reconstruction of the original layout, notably with

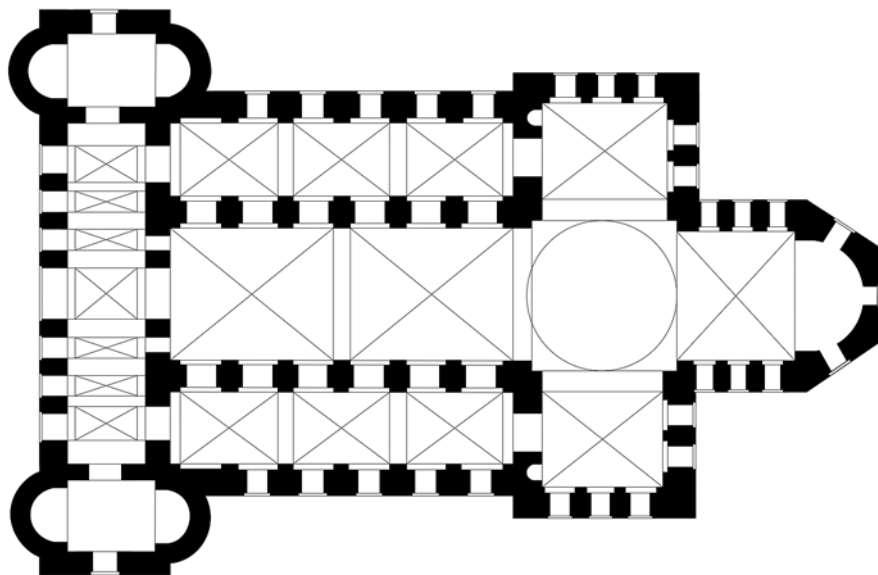


Fig. 2. Sofia, Saint Sophia. Plan

a narthex with three levels, galleries above the aisles, and the covering of the nave by two domes; according to him, all of this dating back to the aftermath of the Hunnic raids and thus to the third quarter of the 5th century, followed by the reconstruction of the upper parts of the nave and its vaults between the 9th and 12th centuries. Then comes the book of Galina Fingarova (Fingarova 2011), who carefully examined the structure and opted for a dating of the 8th century — which was challenged by Euthymios Rizos in his review of Fingarova's book (Rizos 2013), where he reverted to a dating of the end of the 6th century, with, due to an earthquake, repairs of the upper parts in the 8th century. Also, we have the contributions of Konstantin Šalganov (Šalganov 1989; Šalganov 2002; Šalganov 2005), preferring a dating of the end of the 5th century or the beginning of the 6th century, in particular to avoid delaying the moment of the construction of the current Hagia Sophia in relation to the underlying or nearby structures. Also, the contribution of Stanislav Stanev and Zarko Ždrakov (Stanev, Ždrakov 2001), again advocating for a dating in the 6th century, and particularly including a remark on the use of the transept for devotional purposes. Let us also mention the position of Vencislav Dinčev (Dinčev 2014), in favor of a realization around the middle of the 6th century in relation to the religious policy of Justinian in Illyricum. Finally, two articles by Julia Valeva (Valeva 2015; Valeva 2016), primarily focused on the churches that preceded the current one on the same site, but not neglecting this last one either; in both papers, after recalling the contributions of previous studies and the hypotheses successively put forward, Valeva herself has expressed support for a dating to the reign of Justin I or the beginning of that of Justinian, that is to say in the second and third decades of the 6th century; this, by placing the Basilica of Sofia in a sort of preliminary phase of the development of dome architecture of which Hagia Sophia in Constantinople would mark the full maturity.

It is necessary to say a word, first and foremost, about the title of cathedral, to which the building is associated in the synthesis of Krautheimer and Čurčić — a title concerning which Čurčić, afterwards, expressed serious doubts. Recently, in fact, Valeva emphasized that the establishment in a necropolis outside the walls of the ancient city was

already sufficient to designate a funerary basilica. Furthermore, the introduction of relics as early as the late 4th century in the single-nave church — the first having preceded this one — could well encourage the preference for the hypothesis of a specifically martyrial sanctuary; obviously, the current absence of an inscription or textual source naming the possible martyr leads to caution regarding this interpretation. It can, however, be argued that the cruciform plan and the impressive dimensions of the current basilica (about 50 × 25 m) would fit such a function well. Also, Stanev and Ždrakov's remark about the accessibility of the transept from the aisles, possibly indicating a flow of pilgrims towards the venerated place, goes in the same direction: for it should be noted that this system has been postulated, with a high degree of probability, for the transept of Saint Peter's in Rome and for what corresponded to it in the anterior part of the rotunda of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem. Let us add that in this case, and contrary to what has sometimes been proposed, the term "Hagia Sophia" would not date back to the Proto-Byzantine era: it is rather the dedication to the saint martyr whose relics were preserved here that would have initially prevailed — just like in the multiple more or less contemporary examples, starting with Saint Peter, Saint Paul, or Saint Lawrence in Rome, Saint Demetrius in Thessaloniki, Saint Babylas in Antioch, Saint John in Ephesus, etc. It would therefore only be in the Medieval period, and by actually drawing inspiration from the great eponymous church of Constantinople, that the Divine Wisdom invocation would have been adopted.

As for the configuration of the building, many aspects have been clarified by the analysis of the structure conducted by Fingarova. Essentially, it should be noted that Boâdziev's suggestions have become outdated; this is particularly true regarding the possible existence of galleries above the aisles and the complete reconstruction of the upper parts of the nave. In this regard, a simple look at the photographs taken before the 20th century intervention — particularly the photograph from 1915 (fig. 3) — clearly shows that very substantial components of the elevation had still been preserved. Therefore, we can be assured that the vaults of the crossing and the arms of the transept (fig. 4, a, b), as well as those of the nave (fig. 5), have indeed been restored to their original appearance; moreover,



Fig. 3. Sofia, Saint Sophia. Photograph of 1915

the considerable thickness of the walls (from 1.60 to 1.90 m), with foundations 4 m deep, and a masonry clearly made of a single unit indicates that a complete vault was indeed planned from the outset.

However, there are still some points to be focused, particularly the issue of the two rooms with opposed minor apses, located at the ends of the narthex, where it has

been readily suggested that these could be the bases of two towers. It is true that, although not the most common, this solution is evidenced in other areas of the Mediterranean region. Thus in Syria, where we notably have the example of Qalb Lozeh (Krautheimer, Čurčić 1986: 151, 152). In Greece and Italy too, for giving access to galleries above the aisles or the narthex: so, in Thessa-



Fig. 4. Sofia, Saint Sophia. Vaults of the crossing and transept

loniki for the Acheiropoietos Church (*Krautheimer, Čurčić* 1986: 99–102)¹, and in Ravenna for San Vitale (*Krautheimer, Čurčić* 1986: 232–237); but in these last case, the top of the staircase towers doesn't reach the level of the roof of the nave. We can therefore also consider the possibility for the basilica of Sofia; this, especially, since a view from 1878 (fig. 6) shows that a minaret from the time of its conversion into a mosque was installed on one of these rooms, so reusing the staircase that was eventually housed there and originally served to access the upper level of the narthex. But we must also consider other possibilities, which are not necessarily incompatible with the existence of stairs (or scales?) and the elevation into a — low, at least — tower. Indeed, it has long been noted that many Late Antique churches in the Balkans had annexes at the ends of the narthex, sometimes equipped with at least one minor apse; for Greece, Gordana Babić (*Babić* 1969) and, more recently, Athanasios Mailis (*Mailis* 2011) have determined that these annexes may have functioned as “sacristies” (for the deposit of offerings or storage of liturgical objects), as well as for receiving burials, housing a baptistery, or forming real chapels; the small apses of the an-



Fig. 5. Sofia, Saint Sofia. Vaults of the nave

nexes of the basilica of Sofia could therefore also have served some of these purposes.

The other and even more crucial question is that of the vaulting of the nave (fig. 5). It

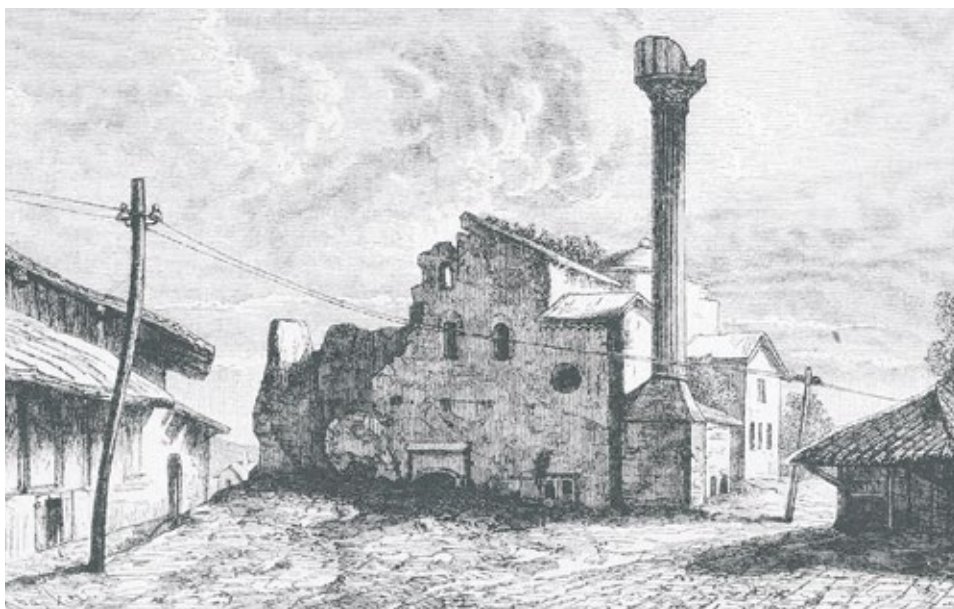


Fig. 6. Saint Sofia, Sofia. Drawing of 1878

¹ A look at what remains of an exonarthex reveals the original structures of low towers, now missing. Let's add that for St. Demetrius, also in Thessaloniki, the two towers actually in façade only result from the modern reconstruction.

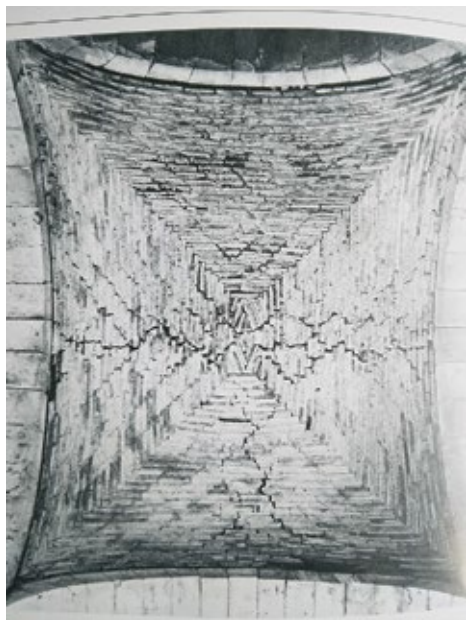


Fig. 7. Zenobia/Halabiye, praetorium. Vault

involves two groined vaults, with a very particular configuration: indeed, the bricks files are initially arranged, alternately, parallel to the arcades of the nave and the transverse arch separating the bays, as is always the rule; but towards the apex, they organize into smaller and smaller rectangles. How-



Fig. 8. Constantinople, Yerebatan Saray ("Cistern Basilica"). Vaults

ever, we have the almost exact equivalent of this system — and with, moreover, also the use of bricks — in the barracks (so-called *praetorium*) of Zenobia/Halabiye on the Euphrates in Syria (Mango 1981: 16, fig. 12; Lauf-fray 1983: 121–123) (fig. 7), as well as in the Yerebatan Saray cistern (known as the "Basilica Cistern") of Constantinople (Mango 1995: 16) (fig. 8). These two buildings are mentioned in the work of Procopius of Caesarea dealing with Justinian's constructions. For the Constantinople cistern, it is specified that the layout was carried out on the site of another building destroyed during the *Nika* insurrection of 532. And for the barracks of Zenobia, the same author indicates that the architects employed by the emperor were a John of Byzantium and an Isidore from Miletus, the nephew of the Isidore previously engaged with Anthemios for the construction of Hagia Sophia in the capital — both this John and this Isidore, Procopius adds, then being relatively young. This implies that these undertakings are in any case later than 532, possibly a decade or more later. This in turn encourages, as for the basilica of Sofia, the preference for an edification in the same years of the second third or mid-6th century: that is to say, at a time already quite advanced in the reign of Justinian, and not at the beginning of his reign — and even less so, therefore, under the reigns of Justinian's predecessors, as suggested by Šalgarov or Ivanov. On the other hand, Fingarova's position in favor of a construction under Constantine V in the 8th century cannot be supported by any valid comparison: this, because for Saint Irene of Constantinople, a rare building from this time, another type of vaulting was used, with two domes; and an inscription at the base of one of the vaults of the transept of the basilica of Sofia, invoked particularly by Rizos in favor of a renovation of the upper parts in the 8th century, is by no means decisive due to the imprecision of its terms. Finally, it should be noted that the groined vaults made of bricks which are clearly later, such as those of the Christ Pantocrator complex in Constantinople from the early 12th century (fig. 9), no longer exhibit the particular feature mentioned above at their apex: the hypothesis of such a late vaulting in Sofia, defended by Boădzîev, therefore appears even less acceptable. Furthermore, let us add that a dating to the second third or middle of the 6th century aligns well with the politico-religious context of that peri-

od; Vencislav Dinčev favored this moment to the extent that, in 535, the establishment of *Justiniana Prima* (most likely present-day Čaričin Grad in southern Serbia) as the metropolitan see of the province, concomitantly leading to the loss of this status by Sofia, could have provoked a reaction from the latter with, precisely, the construction of a building — perhaps martyrial — of a decidedly prestigious nature; with now the consideration of the previously valued criterion of construction technique, this simple hypothesis is now supported by a decisive argument.

Consequently, one cannot adopt Valeva's viewpoint, who interpreted the vaulting of the basilica of Sofia as a sort of preamble to the full affirmation of dome architecture, and in this, relied notably on a comparison with Saint Polyeuktos of Constantinople, founded by Princess Anicia Juliana before 527. But recently, Jonathan Bardill (*Bardill* 2011) has convincingly challenged the reconstruction of Saint Polyeuktos previously proposed by Martin Harrison (*Harrison* 1989): through a meticulous re-examination of the existing structures, he was able to demonstrate that it was a church with a wooden roof, and not a dome. In fact, we must consider the design of the basilica of Sofia as a strictly contemporary alternative to what was chosen for Hagia Sophia in Constantinople. Moreover, one can envision more or less divergent orientations of vaulted architecture in this same phase. Thus, while it seems assured that in Canosa di Puglia, a church in southern Italy built at the initiative of a bishop returning from Constantinople, it was indeed the dome design that prevailed without contest (*Falla Castelfranchi* 2014), it may have been different for several other 6th century buildings. So, we can revisit the case of certain buildings in Asia Minor and, first of all, Saint John of Ephesus. For if Nikolaos Karydis has restituted dome vaults both over the nave and over the crossing of the transept (*Karydis* 2013), he only took into account the two solutions — without contest, well distinguished by him — of the dome articulated on distinct pendentives, and the dome prolonging itself into pendentives; but this, without at all considering the possibility of groined vaults; however, the very few elements of covering still remaining on which Karydis bases his restitution rather make hazardous determining the exact nature of the vaults from which they orig-

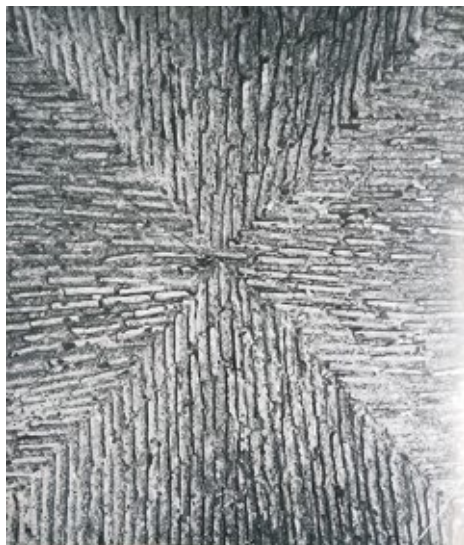


Fig. 9. Constantinople, Christ Pantocrator. Vault

inate; this, if not for the transept and its crossing, especially for the nave, for which it seems that no element at all survive. A reasoning of the same order could also apply to the church referred to as “urban” of Hierapolis/Pammukale (*Karydis* 2011: 18–23), where the three square bays of the nave could have supported groined vaults just as well as domes. Of course, these last remarks do not outright refute Karydis's proposals; but at least, they invite us not to dismiss the possibility of other solutions either; and precisely, the case of the basilica of Sofia, associating domes for the transept and groined vaults for the nave, illustrates this very well.

In any case, it emerges from all these considerations that the basilica of Sofia fits perfectly within the context of vaulted constructions from the time of Justinian — but in a context marked by more diversity, it seems, than is usually thought. It should also be emphasized, ultimately, that it is one of the best-preserved major buildings from this period: because, in fact, the restoration that took place in the 20th century has clearly not betrayed the original design — including, moreover, the layout of the apse, which has been rebuilt on what remained of the 6th-century foundations. Under these conditions, and contrary to what we noted here at the very beginning, it will be from now on absolutely essential to restore this monument to a prominent place in the overall presentations of Late Antique architecture.

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