

CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS GEOGRAPHY IN THE MEDIEVAL AND NEW AGE PERIOD IN TODAY'S REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.18509/GBP.2018.35>

UDC: 930.85(497.7)

Snežana Filipova

Faculty of philosophy, University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius - Skopje, **Republic of Macedonia**

ABSTRACT

This paper deals with the numerous religious objects built on today's Republic of Macedonia territory from the Ancient times onwards, either well or partially preserved, or ruined, from the aspect of continuity of usage of holy space and reasons for choosing a place for a temple and the meaning of the temple for the community. Some of the Ancient temples and early Christian churches have been excavated or accidentally discovered; partly renovated, while in the period of the Ottoman rule most of the large churches were turned into mosques or put down on purpose. A few of them have been given back their primary function in the mid 20th C. Only small churches were permitted to be built by Turkish law, usually 1, 5 m. above the earth, until the first half of the 19th C. when building of new churches was allowed where such previously did not exist. There is also the phenomenon of simultaneous use of a religious object for Christian and Muslim confession.

It is obvious there is continuity in using same location for religious objects, and usually profane objects are not erected where previously temples or necropolis existed. I analyze statistically and geographically the density of religious objects from the Ancient period towards modernity, with the accent on the medieval and post byzantine period, and explain the continuity in using the same location for temples of different religions. Ancient temples had prominent place within the city acropolis or were positioned on a mountain and hill top and strategic places outside the cities, along with sites near mighty sources of water. The location chosen by Christians has been related to saint's grave, martyr's place of death, or holy water springs. Mosques used to have accompanying baths which is not the case today. Since large number of churches was turned into mosques since the 15th C., there was great decrease in their number, which continued after the world war two. The last decade shows slight increase of churches and enormous increase of mosques. This statistics indicates the political role of the religion and the religious object within a community

Keywords: temple density, cultural geography, Macedonia, shared shrines

INTRODUCTION

More than 4,700 archaeological sites have been discovered on today's territory of the Republic of Macedonia. From the Ancient times onwards there have been numerous religious objects erected and after some time devastated, put down, or ruined due to migrations, occupations, wars, earthquakes or sometimes even change of river flow, like it has been the case with the river Crna near Stobi. There have been over 1100 churches and monasteries from the middle ages up to the 19th century, and 131 Muslim sacral objects registered. The Ohrid and its vicinity itself had 365 churches for each day of the

year (today the number is 202). In the course of the civil war in 2001 twelve churches and eight mosques have been destroyed or severely damaged [1].

The official state of active religious objects has been published in 2011 by the Ministry of Culture of Macedonia and reveals the following statistics: 767 Orthodox churches, 28 Catholic churches, 12 Evangelistic churches and 579 mosques [2]. This shows increase in Muslim religious objects of 458 objects, and the largest number of objects was built in Skopje, Tetovo and Gostivar (altogether 286).

More than 400 Early Christian churches usually of basilica type have been excavated and almost every year at least one newly discovered basilica is added to this number. Some churches have been erected above Ancient theatres to publicly show the victory of Christianity (Stobi, Episcopal basilica).

Reasons for choosing a place for a temple

Most of the Medieval and late Medieval churches are built over or in the vicinity of older Ancient temples, theatres, synagogues (so far only one was discovered in Stobi) and domus ecclesiae, early Christian churches, or powerful water sources. In most cases there are nearby water sources, or the position is strategic within the city or near an important road. Ohrid has the largest number of such basilicas discovered in the old city-nine, and Stobi has eight.

Some of the Ancient temples and early Christian churches have been excavated or accidentally discovered mostly in the 20th C. starting with the excavations of Stobi in the third and fourth decade of the 20th C.; or renovated, while in the period of the Ottoman rule most of the large churches were reused again as Muslim religious objects, or put down on purpose. Only a small part of them have been given back their primary function-orthodox church in the mid 20th C. –St. Sophia, Ohrid, or in year 2000 - the old St. Clement, Plaošnik. In the socialistic period certain large churches or mosques were used as monuments of culture or touristic site, or are still functioning as art galleries and museums [3].

Only small churches were permitted to be built by Turkish law, usually 1, 5 m. above the earth. Sultan Mahmud in the first half of the 19th C. had let building of new churches where such previously did not exist. In the socialist period most of the churches were neglected. The first large church was designed by the architect Slavko Brezovski in 1972, erected and consecrated in Skopje only in 1990, becoming the orthodox cathedral church St. Clement of Ohrid of the Republic of Macedonia. The previous cathedral church was dedicated to the Holy Virgin, the protector of the city, situated in Pajko Malo, put on fire by the Bulgarian army when leaving the city in 1944. The catholic cathedral was designed by Blagoje Mickovski - Bajo and completed in 1977. It replaced the Old Catholic cathedral destroyed by the Skopje earthquake in 1963. The monastery life was reactivated in the late 80es and today there are 125 active monasteries [4].

Position

Ancient temples had prominent place within the city acropolis or were positioned on a mountain and hill top and strategic places outside the cities, along with sites near mighty sources of water. Roman cities and early Christian Episcopal sees had by default public baths and Episcopal baths, and there are even synagogue baths discovered in Stobi. The location for the important churches chosen by Christians has been related to saint's grave, martyr's place of death, or holy water springs. Each mosque used to have accompanying

public baths which required mighty sources of water, and continual heating, which is not the case today.

There are many sites from the prehistoric and ancient period. The most important discovered so far are:

Prehistoric observatory Kokino, 50 km east of Skopje, located on top of small volcanic mountain [5]; Ancient tetrastilos temple at the town Isar Marvinci, near Valandovo, dated in 181 year B.C., that was built or renovated by Makedoniarh, a member of the Macedonian Koinon with seat in Beroia; the Ancient tomb at village Brazda, VI/Vth C.; near Skopje, the remains of the ancient Paeonian city of Bylazora at village Knežje, Sveti Nikole, dated around 200 B.C., the geoglyph at Kanda, near Sveti Nikole; the Royal grave site and palace of the lost ancient Macedonian kingdom from the 4th century BC that was discovered in the village of Bonče, Prilep; and the theatres, temples and palaces at the Ancient cities that became later Episcopal sees: Scupi, Stobi, Lychnidos and Heraclea [6]. Ancient roman villas were discovered almost in each city in Macedonia, including those with rich mosaics in Dojran, Strumica, Valandovo, Stibera and Suvodol near Prilep etc. The excavated Early Christian basilicas and churches are over 400. Some of the churches were erected above martyr's graves or places they were put to death or were performing their mission (St. Erasmo, Ohrid, Bargala's and Stobi Episcopal basilica, Holy Fifteen Martyrs in Strumica etc). In the vicinity of several cities there are famous holy water sources and termae proved to be healing mineral water springs, some used already by the Romans in the 2nd century B.C. (Katlanovo near Skopje) [7].

There was a healing water next to the Yigit beg turbe that was part of his mosque complex, (1445), in the Skopje old bazaar, destroyed by the German bombarding of the city in 1943. It is not surprising, since he built the mosque above the church of The Holy Doctors, where we are to expect the existence of so called holy waters.

Shared shrines

There is also the phenomenon of simultaneous use of a religious object for Christian and Muslim confession. As Glenn Bowman stresses, popular assumptions about the fundamental exclusiveness of religious identities, practices and communities are thrown into question by shared shrines. In the Middle East and the Balkans these have brought Muslims, Christians and Jews together around objects, tombs and sites believed to deliver boons or spiritual protection [8].

Sharing shrines by members of two religions was common during the Ottoman period and afterwards in the Balkans. Furthermore, it is known practice in the world (Muslim and Hindu communities in India, or Palestine). It is usually related to necessity and practical solution since there is no possibility to bring back or take over a temple that once belonged to other religious group, and the members of both groups are still living in the same region and there is long religious tradition or strong religious belief related to the very place or the saint resting there.

Some Holy places in Orthodox Christianity are visited frequently by Orthodox as well as Muslims – especially Macedonian Muslims – since everyone, irrespective of confession, can pray or ask a priest for a prayer in various intentions. It is related to belief in the miraculous power of icons and relics recognized by Orthodox theology. These practices performed by Muslims are explained differently, depending on the interlocutors' religious affiliation and their theological knowledge. Sometimes it is named Crypto-Christianity or bi-confession to justify their practices of visiting churches and observing both Christian and Muslims festivities. They perceive the traditions of Islam as backward and condemn

some of their religious and customary activities. Both groups consider neighborliness as important value and try to maintain peaceful coexistence by paying and receiving visits, exchanging festive food and respecting of each other customs. On the other hand, they perceive the tradition and religion of the other group as inferior [9].

Church St. Nicholas/H'd'r Baba Tekke in Makedonski Brod is a special example of a religious shrine shared by Christians and Muslims. According to Christian belief, the shrine was originally built as a church of Saint Nikola. The Muslims, on the other hand, believe the shrine was founded as a tekke (dervish lodge) by the mythical Bektashi saint, H'd'r Baba, and that his tomb (turbe) lies in the southwestern part of the structure. The largest number of Christian visitors is on 6th of May - Saint George's Day, also called H'derlez. The shrine serves both as a church and a turbe, each order visits it separately. The carpets, as well as the Muslim pictures of saints and tapestries that are hung on the walls and around the tomb, are removed on 5th and 6th of May and temporarily stored elsewhere. Rugs and other items are put back in place by custodial personnel of the church prior to visits from several dervish orders, such as the Bektashi, Halveti, and Sunni, who come to celebrate the H'derlez festival.

The present-day church of the monastery of St. Naum near Ohrid was erected on the foundation of the church of the Holy Archangels, built by Saint Naum around AD 900. The frescos were painted in 1806, and the frescos in St. Naum chapel containing the tomb of Saint Naum in 1800 representing the life and miracles of Saint Naum [10]. Here a working hospital existed around 1662. The extraordinary popularity and large number of visitors during the whole year, especially on the Feast Day of St. Naum (July 3), is due to the Christians' deep faith in the miraculous and healing power of Saint Naum. Numerous presence of Muslim visitors at this shrine, and at the tomb of Saint Naum, is due to their belief that in the fresco composition "Saint Naum Reins in a Bear Instead of an Ox," the face of St. Naum represents Bektashi saint Sar' Salt'k, dervish with a conical hat. The two-wheeled chariot in which St. Naum sits is pulled by a deer and a lion are traditional Bektashi animal symbols.

Density of religious objects

It is interesting to notice how does the density of religious objects, no matter which period of time and religion in the past coincides. It is usually related to two main reasons: the sources of water, when Ancient temples and Christian churches are considered, and related to the graves of the martyrs in the case of Christian temples. In the Antique period, different gods required different settings. Mountain surroundings were reserved for gods of the son or thunder (Apollo, Zeus, and later St. Elia). Here in the mountains are situated also the most important Medieval and post byzantine monasteries (Zrze, Prilep, Holy Archangels, Prilep, Holy Virgin and St. Nicholas, Matka, St. Panteleimon, Nerezi, all in the vicinity of Skopje; St. George and Holy Virgin near Kičevo, St. John Bigorski near Rostuše etc.).

Usually each Roman or Hellenic city had the temple to the Emperor or to the main deity. So far, only Stobi has rich excavated Roman period objects, including a forum, palaces and a temple. The sporadically found statues of an emperor in Stobi, gods, and citizens in Scupi, Heraclea, Lychnidos, Stobi, show we are to expect much more religious objects to be unearthed. Related to the density are the maps of the ancient, medieval and later cities. Still, most of the ancient cities are not yet located. What we have are the archaeological findings of the rare ancient Paeonic and Macedonian cities, than some Roman cities and castles and a few early Christian cities and medieval fortresses. Most of the discovered

early Christian churches are not yet related to a certain city since it is not yet discovered or it is not known which city it was, or they are suburban and sometimes monastery churches. Today mosques are built everywhere where no Islamic religious objects existed ever before.

When analyzing the separate regions of our country, it can be noticed that the number of churches prevail in the south-eastern, south western and north-central regions, in the Early Christian period. The most important Early Christian basilicas and their large concentration are to be found in the once ancient cities, capitals of the later Roman provinces and Episcopal sees of the provinces, in Stobi (Veles), Heraclea (Bitola), Scupi (Skopje), Lychnidos (Ohrid), Bargala (Štip), Astibo (Vinica? or Štip) Zapara, Tranupara (Krupište or Konjuh). Skopje and its vicinity will be important cultural center, or better to say region for fulfilling spiritual art projects since the 2/2 of the 12th C. until 14th C. Before that it was almost with provincial rural character.

In the medieval period, Prilep, Kumanovo and Ohrid are the most important cultural centres. Ohrid is most frequently populated with medieval churches due to the seat of the Ohrid Archbishopric, with 365 churches, one for each day of the year.

While under Turkish rule, the western region including Skopje has dominant Islamic objects. Each city had main church and it was by default turned into mosques during Turkish rule, starting with the 15th C. This religious geographical statistics can be combined with the cultural statistics. Bitola, Prilep and Skopje seem to be local Turkish government centers for enriching the region with religious and trade objects.

The elegant 15th-century Mustafa Pasha Mosque used to have the largest diameter of the main dome in the region. The finale of Turkish rule building activity was the first rail line in 1873 from Skopje to Bitola and Thessaloniki and later the First telegraph in Skopje. All this buildings turned Skopje into the most important city in Macedonia, and Bitola comes close to it with the opening of foreign countries consulates in the 19th C.

Today the new built mosques without or with building license are concentrated in Skopje Tetovo, Gostivar, and secondly in the villages on the motorway towards Ohrid, Kičevo, Struga, Debar. According to Zoran Mateski, each church or mosque demarcates the territory of the people. While in the last decade over 350 mosques were built with the financial help of foreign states like Saudi Arabia, the number of the new built churches is no more than approximately 50 [11]. The new mosques visually mark western Macedonia from Skopje to Gostivar, and further Kičevo to Debar.

New churches are very rarely built, related to the socialist period politics, which did not stop building many mosques in the villages in western Macedonia and Skopje. During the 2nd half of the 20th century, a large number of village churches were devastated or robbed, some neglected and thus ruined since a lot of people migrated towards the cities or abroad. The early 20th century church in village Mavrovo was sacrificed when the artificial lake was constructed yet it is still standing there in spite of the damages suffered. St. George church in Krivodol has been erected after the previous church on the same place has been put down by the earthquake in 1963.

The modern ktetors of churches are rich businessmen who started to build new churches in the 21st century. In 1990 the cathedral church in Skopje was consecrated. In 1945 due to the fire put on purpose by the Bulgarian army, Holy Virgin church near MANU was put down. In 2011 it was rebuilt after the original plan by the ex city mayor and businessman Trifun Kostovski.

The church of Holy Trinity in Radoviš, financed by Risto Gušterov, consecrated in 2003, is a unique new church completely decorated by mosaics with iconostasis painted by

Dančo Kalčev. The much smaller church of Dormition of the Mother of God at Mavrovo Lake financed by Marjan Stojmenov is built in Russian style in 2016. For the most recently built church St Constantine and Hellene in Skopje the money were raised at three pledging conferences when politicians, businessmen and priests donated together. There are examples when founders are suspended. For instance, Bishop Hilarion suspended two founders on the grounds that they illegally and non-canonically got rich at the expense of the believers.

What used to be cultural geography with the beautiful ancient classic works of art, or Roman copies of famous sculptures, continued with the leading artist engaged at St. Panteleimon Nerezi, and Paleologian style ensembles in Ohrid, Kumanovo and Skopje, has turned into political geography. The above mentioned statistics of enormous enlargement of 350 new mosques and only barely 50 churches within the last decade indicates the political role of the religion and the religious objects within the community or the misuse of religion for political purpose.

Unfortunately a few modern churches and not a single recently built mosque show real artistic qualities. There are mostly imitations of byzantine style when internal decoration of the modern churches is concerned or literal copies of famous fresco ensembles (Radoviš church of Holy Trinity being the exception). Mosques are competing only to have the highest minaret and strangest colour of the facade, and their shape is usually a single square room construction rarely using a dome. They are very far away from the beautiful Sultan Murat Mosque built above the famous medieval St. George Gorgos church (1436), Mustafa Pasha Mosque (1492), or The Jahja Pasha Mosque (1504) in Skopje, or the Unique Decorated Mosque in Tetovo (1495). The artistic element seems to be of little or no importance for the modern Macedonian religious authorities that look after or initiate the erection of new temples. Only the catholic cathedral church and the orthodox cathedral in Skopje with Byzantine domed church inspiration have modern design. Orthodox Christian authorities actually insist on repeating the byzantine era church models and famous fresco ensembles from Macedonian medieval churches.

Thus temples from work of art turned into building for political gathering and misuse of religion, and visual symbol to mark the territory.

REFERENCES

- [1] For details see Filipova, Continuity in choosing cult objects' locations in the Ancient and Medieval period in the Republic of Macedonia, Proceedings from the Symposium of Antika held in Skopje, Aeternitas Antiquitatis, Faculty of Philosophy in Skopje, institute of Classical Studies, Skopje 2010, 67-83.
- [2] Јелена Павловска, Наташа Никифоровиќ, Огнен Коцевски, Карта на верски објекти во Република Македонија, Скопје: Менора 2011. According to the published list of churches and mosques, plus 1 synagogue, there 767 orthodox churches, the largest no. being in Bitola and its neighbourhood -169.
- [3] For details see Filipova, Continuity in choosing cult objects' locations, 67-83.
- [4] Aneta Serafimova, Viktorija Korobar, Mirjana Mašnić, Julija Tričkovska, Hristijanski spomenici, Makedonsko Kulturno Nasledstvo, Skopje 2008
- [5] The Megalithic Observatory Kokino was discovered in 2001. It is a special Bronze Age mountain sanctuary, and also an older observatory for observation of celestial objects with positions for observation. See Gjore Cenev, Archeo Astronomical Characteristics of the Kokino

Archaeological sites, Astrophysical Investigations, Institute of Astronomy at BAN, no 9, Sofia 2007.

[6] Viktorija Sokolovska, The ancient town at Isar-Marvinci, Valandovo, *Porta Archaeologica Skopje* 2012, 52; Ivan Mikulčić, Viktorija Sokolovska, The tomb at Brazda, *Skopje, MAA* 11, Skopje 1990, 79-92; Viktor Lilčik, Antonio Jakimovski, Visoka and Staro Bonche: Center of the Kingdom of Pelagonia and the Royal Tomb of Pavla Chuka, Skopje 2016.

[7] Many ancient tribes in Europe often used water springs as open air sanctuaries, or they built wooden or stone temples in their vicinity. And the beliefs in holy water are not Ancient history, rituals associated with wells and springs persist into the 20th century. "Holy wells were often regarded as places of healing, with certain wells associated with particular afflictions. The 'cloutie wells' are a survival of this belief." See http://www.forteanimes.com/features/articles/5548/holy_waters.html and Filipova, Continuity in choosing cult objects' locations, 73.

[8] Mustafa Z. Ibrahimgil, *Balkanlar'da Sarı Saltuk Türbeleri*, Sempozyum Bildiriler kitabı, *Balkanlar'da kültürel ve Türk Mimarisi Uluslararası Sempozyumu Bildirileri 1*, Ankara: Atatürk Kültür Merkezi Başkanlığı 2001, 375–390, 380. Cited in: Elizabeta Koneska, *Shared Shrines*, http://www.eefc.org/folkloristika_2-2.shtml; Glenn Bowman, "Identification and identity formations around shared shrines in West Bank Palestine and Western Macedonia" as "Processus Identitaires Autour de Quelques Sanctuaires Partages en Palestine et en Macedoine" in Albera, D., Couroucli, M. (editors) *Lieux saints en partage; Explorations anthropologiques dans l'espace méditerranéen*, Arles: Actes Sud 2009, pp. 27-52.

[9] Karolina Bielenin Lenczowska, *Visiting of Christian Holy Places by Muslims as a Strategy of Coping with Difference*, *Anthropological Notebooks XV* (3), Bielenin, 2009, 27-41

[10] Aleksandar Stojanovski, *Edno potvrdeno predanie*, *Muzejski glasnik* 4, Skopje, Istoriski muzej na Makedonija, 1979, 53-57; Цветан Грозданов, Свети Наум Охридски, *Култура* 2004, 8, 69.

[11] <http://www.vesti-online.com/Vesti/Tema-dana/363012/Novi-zaduzbinari-u-ExYu-4-Ikonostas-od-premijera>; approached on 18.2.2018;