

ACTA MVSEI APVLENSIS

APULUM LX

series *ARCHAEOLOGICA ET ANTHROPOLOGICA*

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www.revista-apulum.ro; www.mnuai.ro

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ISSN – 1013-428X

ISSN – 2247 – 8701

ISSN-L – 2247 – 8701

ACTA MVSEI APVLENSIS

APVLVM

LX

series *ARCHAEOLOGICA ET ANTHROPOLOGICA*



ALBA IULIA

MMXXIII

Tehnoredactare: RADU OTA

Traducerea și verificarea textelor în limba engleză: ADINA BOGDAN

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Materialele nepublicate nu se restituie autorilor

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LATE ANTIQUE TRICONCH CHURCHES IN THE ROMAN PROVINCE OF ANCIENT EPIRUS

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Cuvinte cheie: epoca Antichității târzii, Epir, biserici în plan triconc

Key words: Late Antique Period, Epirus, triconch churches

The Roman province of Ancient Epirus, founded under the reign of Diocletian after the division of the province of Macedonia in the early 4th century¹, covers present-day north-western Greece and southern Albania, and is bounded to the north by the Acrauceraunian Mountains, to the west by the Pindus mountain range and to the south by the course of the River Acheloos, while the Ionian Sea borders it to the east².

Ancient sources concerning the province in the Late Antique period are few in number, and are mainly limited to brief mentions in the *Synekdèmos* of Hierocles³ and in the *Buildings* of Procopius, from which we learn that the province had nine towns (**Fig. 1**)⁴. Concerning ecclesiastical history, Epirus probably received Christianity with the arrival of St Paul in Nicopolis in 63 CE, as he himself indicates in the epistle to Titus (3:12), while the disciples Jason and Sosipatre evangelised the island of Corfu⁵. From the 4th century onwards, the first bishoprics were formed, which took part in all the ecumenical councils by sending a single bishop or a larger delegation, systematically siding with Orthodox doctrine⁶. The bishops of ancient Epirus are regularly mentioned in the acts of ecumenical councils, allowing us to follow the evolution of bishoprics that split or merged over time. This knowledge of some of the Epirotic bishops has been supplemented by epigraphic sources, the most eloquent of which come from the province's metropolitan capital, Nicopolis of Actium, where the names of the donor bishops have been preserved on the mosaic pavements. However, despite the combination of these sources, our knowledge is essentially limited to

¹ Chrysos 1981, p. 12.

² Soustal, Koder 1981, p. 41.

³ HIÉROKLÈS, *Synekdèmos*, 652,4.

⁴ PROCOPE, *De aedificiis*, IV.

⁵ Romanos 1959, p. 376.

⁶ Oikonomou 1952, p. 121-126.

very incomplete lists of names, while relations between the bishoprics of Epirus or with the surrounding regions are almost completely unknown to us⁷.

Religious buildings are therefore the main source of data on the province during the early Byzantine period. Religious buildings, of which there are many both in and outside urban centres, are often the only indication of the occupation of the territory and their state of preservation, generally better than that of other types of building, makes them essential sources of information and privileged testimonies to this period marked by the spread of Christianity.

As soon as Ottoman rule came to an end in 1913, the first excavations began at the main Epirotic sites, first at Nicopolis⁸, then at Dodona⁹. In Albania, the campaigns carried out by L. M. Ugolini from 1924 on the sites of Butrint¹⁰ and Phoenikê¹¹ provide the first scientific information on the major sites in the north of the province.

These cities are home to the main monuments preserved from Late Antiquity and, consequently, those on which the majority of publications concerning the province during this period are based. The basilicas of the capital, Nicopolis, founded by Augustus to celebrate his victory at the naval battle of Actium, were among the first to attract the attention of researchers¹². These monuments, exceptional for their size, the quality of their decoration and the interest of the inscriptions they preserve, contrast with the basilicas in the hinterland, which are often more modest and less well-documented, and whose traces, often tenuous, are sometimes discovered during preventive excavations or spot surveys.

The religious constructions still preserved date from between the 5th and 6th centuries and are mostly basilicas with a regular plan, characterised by a rectangular shape subdivided into naves, ending in an apse in the centre of the eastern side¹³. This type of basilica is the most common in Greece and, more widely, in the Illyricum¹⁴.

⁷ The only surviving example of the management of ecclesiastical affairs is that between the bishops of Corfu and Euroia, documented in correspondence between the bishops and the heads of the churches of Rome and Constantinople. Krapsitis 1973; Chasiotis 1867.

⁸ Philadelphus 1913, p. 83-112.

⁹ Euaggelidis 1930.

¹⁰ Ugolini 1937.

¹¹ *Idem* 1932.

¹² A. Philadelphus was the first to take an interest in the monuments of Nicopolis when the city was liberated in 1912, and in 1916 he unearthed the remains of the first basilica, known as Basilica A. Philadelphus 1916, p. 33-45.

¹³ Sotiriou 1929, p. 174.

¹⁴ Duval, Chevalier 1996, p. 287.

Alongside the many stylistic studies focusing on mosaics¹⁵, most of these aimed to define a „Nicopolis style” that would be applicable to the entire province. This style is characterised by a sanctuary flanked by two side rooms, one to the north and one to the south, which often extend beyond the naves (**Fig. 2**)¹⁶.

Another category of basilica is also distinguished by the shape of its sanctuary, which in addition to a central apse has two apses facing north and south (**Fig. 3**).

The first is located within the famous oracular sanctuary of Dodona, which has been the seat of a bishopric since at least the beginning of the 5th century¹⁷. In its current state, the basilica measures 16.5 x 20 m and is built mainly of *spolia* from the various surrounding buildings. These were mainly used as building materials, but there were also some architectural sculptures. For example, columns with fluted shafts separate the central nave from the side naves. A fragment of a fluted shaft was also used in the sanctuary as the base of an altar table. The building was built in two phases. In the first phase, the eastern part of the building took the form of a sanctuary with projecting side rooms and a central apse. The colonnades separating the naves terminate in the eastern wall. In the second phase, the building was extended to the east. The colonnades separating the naves were interrupted at sanctuary level by two T-shaped pillars.

The rooms flanking the sanctuary end in apses to the north and south. They open onto both the sanctuary and the side naves and have the same diameter as the central apse.

The second triconch church is located in the Thesprotia region, at Veliani, south of the ancient city of Photikê¹⁸. Remains of the Protobyzantine period can be seen around the present-day Church of the Virgin. The walls are in *opus mixtum*. The building has a basilica floor plan with total dimensions of 23 x 14.50 m. It has a *narthex* accessed via a central entrance, which opens onto the three naves via three entrances. To the north and south of the *narthex* are two rooms with windows. The central space is made up of three naves separated by square pillars built on a 0.40 m high stylobate and leading to T-shaped pillars marking the entrance to the sanctuary. The south nave has a doorway in its eastern section. Three openings lead into the sanctuary, which has a trefoil plan, all three of which are of equal diameter, as at Dodona. The church built on the central part of the sanctuary makes it impossible to determine with certainty whether the sanctuary was unified or had compartments, although the excavator

¹⁵ General studies include Kitzinger 1951; Anamali, Adhami 1974; Asymakopoulou-Atzaka 1984; Dharmo, 1994; Raynaud, Islami 2018; Sodini 1970.

¹⁶ Varalis 2007, p. 595-607.

¹⁷ Evaggelidis 1932, p. 52-61; Pallas 1971, p. 239-240.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

says that he did not find any walls. The central apse is supported by two buttresses.

In these two cases, Dodona and Veliani, the side apses are located in the extension of the north and south walls and project outwards. The space thus defined is accessible from the central nave, but the side spaces are accessible, at least in Dodona, from the side naves.

A basilica with similarities to the two above-mentioned cases was found on the acropolis of the site of Butrint, one of the bishoprics of the northern province, in the present-day district of Sarandë in Albania¹⁹. The building measures 33.65 x 22.31 m, including the *narthex*, and has a three-aisled plan, the eastern part of which has not survived in its current state. While the main basilica (known as the Great Basilica) has the characteristic plan of the urban basilicas of ancient Epirus, with two annexed rooms bordering the sanctuary, the basilica on the acropolis has a sanctuary delimited by apses facing north and south. Unlike the churches of Dodona and Veliani, these apses do not protrude, nor are they strictly perpendicular (with a slight north-east-south-west inclination). They have two entrances pierced in their western wall, allowing access from the side aisles.

The last church with a three-apse sanctuary is located in the Drin valley, in the north-eastern part of the province, on the site of Antigonée²⁰. The church is located at the south-eastern end of the ancient site, far from the old urban centre but surrounded by other buildings whose function is unknown. Tombs have been discovered behind the sanctuary. The building measures 13.8 x 10 m. Only the central nave has been excavated. Only part of the east wall of the north nave remains, while the foundations of the south and west walls of the south nave are almost entirely preserved. The building ends with a trefoil choir, covered with a mosaic pavement. The sanctuary is an extension of the central nave and communicates only with it; the eastern ends of the side naves end in flat walls.

The four buildings presented here are located in apparently completely different contexts: Dodone is an urban basilica located on an ancient sanctuary, Veliani is a rural church located a few kilometres from the town of Photikê, Butrint is a secondary church in the town of Butrint and Antigonea is a non-urban site located at the north-eastern end of the province. The churches also differ in size, Antigonea being a church of modest dimensions whereas Dodone and Butrint are imposing constructions. Their geographical location also makes it impossible to group these buildings together and make their layout a local feature. Two of them are located in the south of the province and two in the

¹⁹ Greenslade *et alii* 2013, p. 47-76.

²⁰ Budina 1977-1978, p. 225-235; Meksi 1985, p. 14-44.

north, with the nearest at least 20 km apart. So how can we explain this peculiarity? Is it an architectural fantasy? And if so, is it appropriate to group them together in a single category?

Varalis, in his article on two churches with trefoil choirs in the eastern Illyricum, includes the basilicas of Dodona and Veliani in the same category, that of "basilicas with a transversal nave and an inverted Π chancel"²¹, and separates them from the other triconch basilicas in the province. The first question is whether or not we can actually speak of a basilica with a transept, at least for the Basilica of Dodona, since there is no information on the Basilica of Veliani²².

In his analysis of the architecture of Nicopolis, Varalis rejects the term „basilicas with transversal nave” used by D. Pallas to designate the plan of the basilicas²³, because he considers that an oblong room divided into three parts cannot be designated by the term *nave*²⁴. Consequently, if we consider that the basilicas of the capital cannot be called „basilicas with transversal nave”, then the same applies to the Basilica of Dodona, since it also divides the eastern space into three parts²⁵. Secondly, Varalis attributes to these basilicas „an inverted Π chancel”, yet the stylobate of the presbytery enclosure at Dodona is rectilinear, and there is no indication that it is otherwise at Veliani. Buildings with a similar plan can be found elsewhere in the Balkans. The closest parallel to the Basilica of Dodona is the Basilica of Arapaj (Albania), which also has projecting side apses delimiting rooms adjoining the sanctuary and accessible both from the side aisles and from the outside²⁶. The basilica of Synaxis (Thrace) has a plan more similar to that of Veliani, with a unified sanctuary whose north and south ends are occupied by apses. The spaces thus formed in the eastern part of the building communicate with both the central part of the sanctuary and the side naves²⁷.

The only church that could be dissociated from the homogeneous group formed by the above-mentioned buildings is the church at Antigonea, whose sanctuary was only accessible via the end of the central nave and whose side naves terminate on a straight eastern wall before the sanctuary. The side conches do not delimit any adjoining rooms, as there was no physical division of the sanctuary into several rooms. However, the mosaic pavement covering the

²¹ Varalis 1999, p. 197.

²² A modern church has been built in the sanctuary and central nave of the basilica, making the eastern part of the monument impossible to study.

²³ Pallas 1987, p. 226-228.

²⁴ Varalis 2007, p. 595-607.

²⁵ Although the Veliani sanctuary is presented as being unified, the presence of entrances to the north and south of the central apse makes it likely that it was subdivided internally, in which case the side rooms would also protrude.

²⁶ Hidri, Pillinger 2011.

²⁷ Ćurčić 2010, p. 156.

sanctuary defines three distinct compositions, the two sides of which follow the shape of the north and south apses²⁸. There is therefore a tripartition in the sanctuary, although it is not materialised by architectural structures.

From a typological point of view, the basilica at Antigonea can be compared with that at Knossos (Crete), which, although larger, also has a three-aisled sanctuary extended by a basilical plan with three naves²⁹, or with that at San Martino di Copanello (Squillace, Calabria), which dates from the middle of the sixth century. The latter is the one that bears the closest resemblance to Antigonea's three-aisled sanctuary; it too is smaller (less than 20 x 15 m) and its side aisles are separated from the central nave by walls rather than columns or pillars³⁰.

So, over and above the minimal formal differences that we have highlighted, what links these buildings with a truncated choir? It is probably in Rome that we should look for the origin of this plan, where triconch plans were used as the architectural type for martyria, originally consisting simply of a triconque, to which one or more naves were later added³¹. There are many parallels, particularly within the Illyricum. Among them, the funerary complex at Sremska Mitrovica (Sirmium, Serbia)³², and the basilicas of Saint Titus at Gortyne (Crete)³³ and Tigani (Mani)³⁴ are all associated with burials.

In its first phase, the Basilica of Dodona included tombs located in the side rooms of the sanctuary, which were preserved in the central nave when the basilica was enlarged³⁵. The basilica on the acropolis of Butrint also contains three tombs in the western part of the north nave, one outside the north wall and another in the room to the south of the *narthex*. Because of its monumentality and location at the entrance to the basilica, it is likely that this last tomb was the burial place of the church's donor³⁶. Finally, the church of Antigonea is surrounded by tombs, so it also served a cemetery function³⁷.

Consequently, the churches with a triconch sanctuary actually reveal a funerary function and were influenced by a long tradition of multi-conch monuments for martyria (places of worship for martyrs) or, more generally, buildings with a funerary vocation.

²⁸ Dhamo 1994, p. 491-525.

²⁹ Megaw 1984, p. 321-329.

³⁰ Varalis 1999, p. 205.

³¹ Duval, Cintas 1976, p. 917.

³² Duval, Popovic 1980, p. 371.

³³ Pelekanidis 1974, p. 112; Volonakis 1982, p. 857-859.

³⁴ Pallas 1977, p. 200.

³⁵ Euaggelidis 1957, p. 76.

³⁶ Greenslade *et alii* 2013, p. 87.

³⁷ Dhamo 1994, p. 496-499.

In conclusion, the study of this group of buildings, until now considered to be isolated particularities within the religious monuments of Ancient Epirus, highlights the link between a specific plan and function, which calls into question the apparent uniformity of basilica-plan buildings. But even more than that, these buildings bear witness to the links that existed between the province of Ancient Epirus and the surrounding regions. Unsurprisingly, Rome plays a key role as the birthplace of these models. But a review of the triconch churches shows that these models spread throughout the Balkans, creating a common architectural vocabulary linking forms and contexts.

LATE ANTIQUE TRICONCH CHURCHES IN THE ROMAN PROVINCE OF ANCIENT EPIRUS

ABSTRACT

The late antique province of Epirus Vetus, now divided between Greece and Albania, witnessed a proliferation of religious buildings. Some of these are well documented and have led to the establishment of a highly uniform architectural typology, characterised by the predominance of the basilical plan. Nevertheless, there are a number of particular cases within this group, including basilicas with a triconch choir, which we propose to examine in this contribution, in order to distinguish whether and to what extent they differ from other religious buildings, and what the reasons are for this architectural choice.

BISERICILE ÎN PLAN TRICONC DIN EPOCA ANTICHITĂȚII TÂRZII DIN PROVINCIA ROMANĂ A EPIRULUI

REZUMAT

Provincia antică târzie Epirus Vetus, împărțită în prezent între Grecia și Albania, a fost martora unei proliferați a clădirilor religioase. Unele dintre acestea sunt bine documentate și au dus la stabilirea unei tipologii arhitecturale extrem de uniforme, caracterizate prin predominanța planului bazilical. Cu toate acestea, există o serie de cazuri particulare în cadrul acestui grup, inclusiv basilici cu un cor triconc, pe care ne propunem să le examinăm în această contribuție, pentru a distinge dacă și în ce măsură acestea diferă de alte clădiri religioase și care sunt motivele acestei alegeri arhitecturale.

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Fig. 3. Triconch churches of Epirus Vetus (N. Bloch – M. Noussis)

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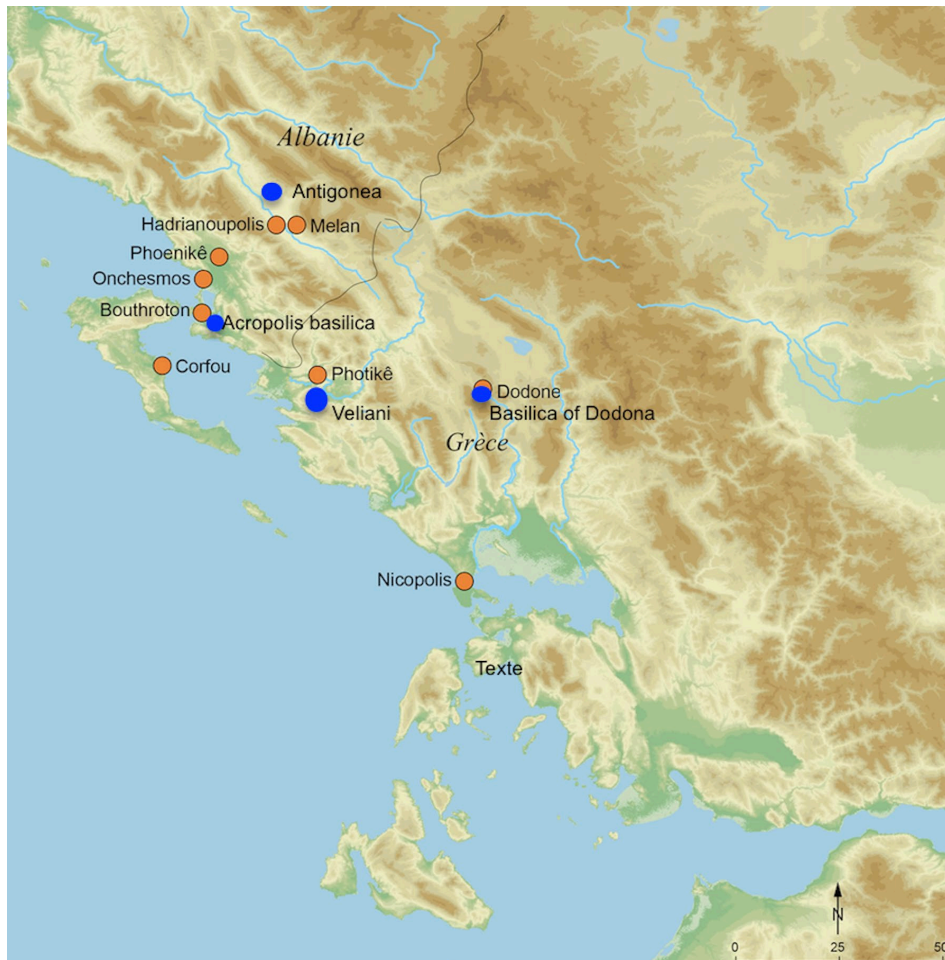
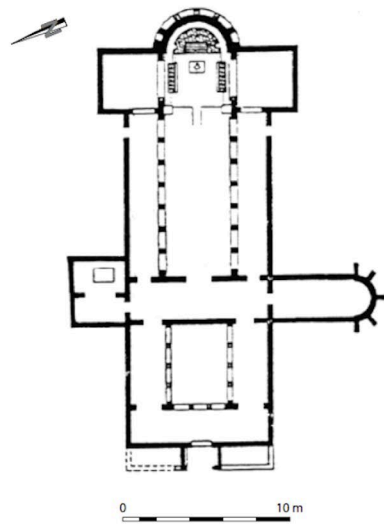
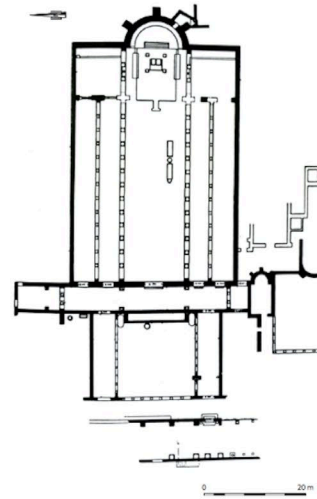


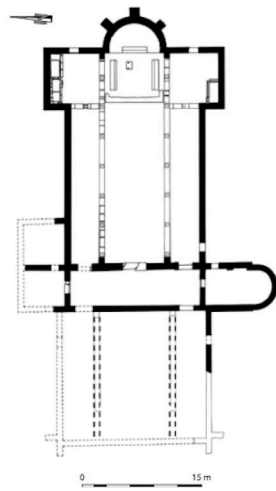
Fig. 1



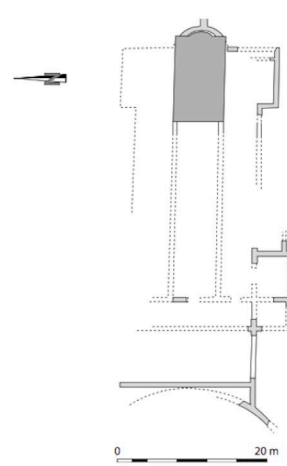
Nicopolis - Basilica A



Nicopolis - Basilica B

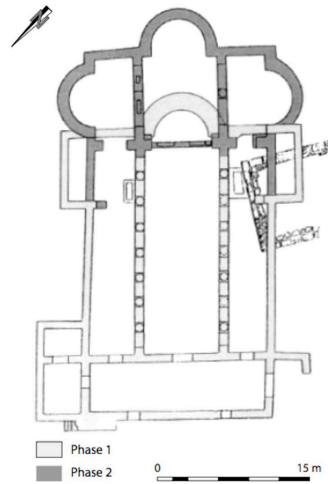


Nicopolis - Basilica D

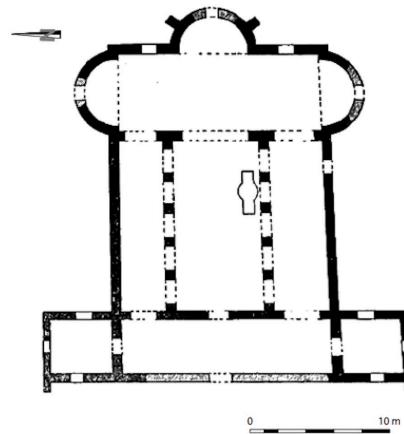


Nicopolis - Basilica E

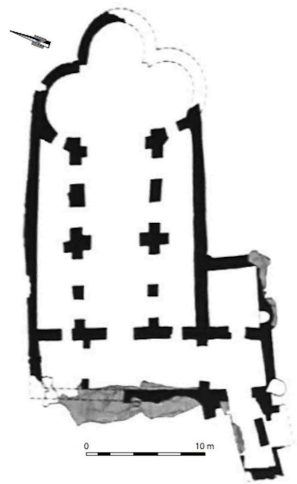
Fig. 2



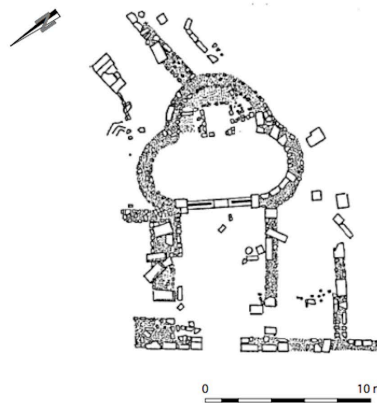
Basilica of Dodona



Basilica of Veliani



Acropolis Basilica of Butrint



Church of Antigonea

Fig. 3