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THE CONVERSION OF THE NYPHEUM OF THE GYMNASIUM INTO A CHURCH

Observations from the wall mosaic

Elisabetta Neri

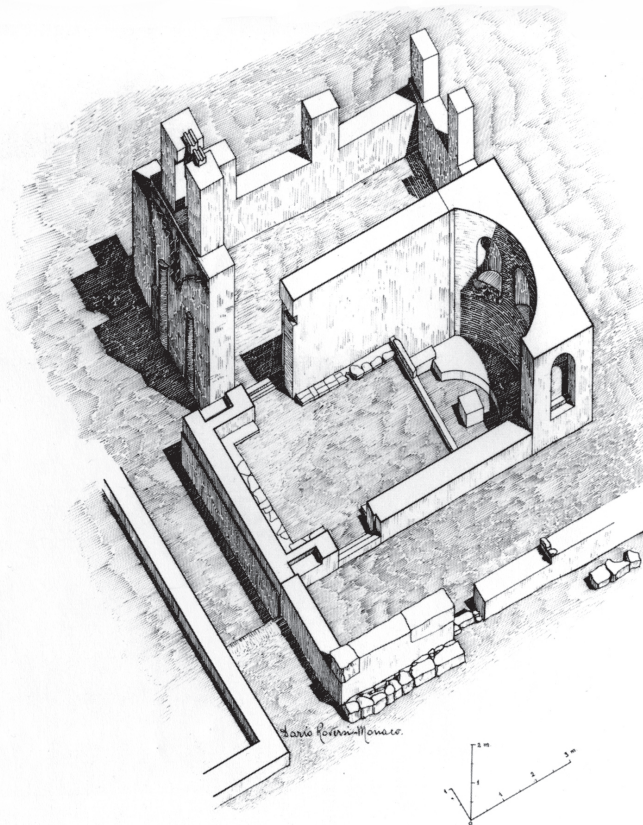
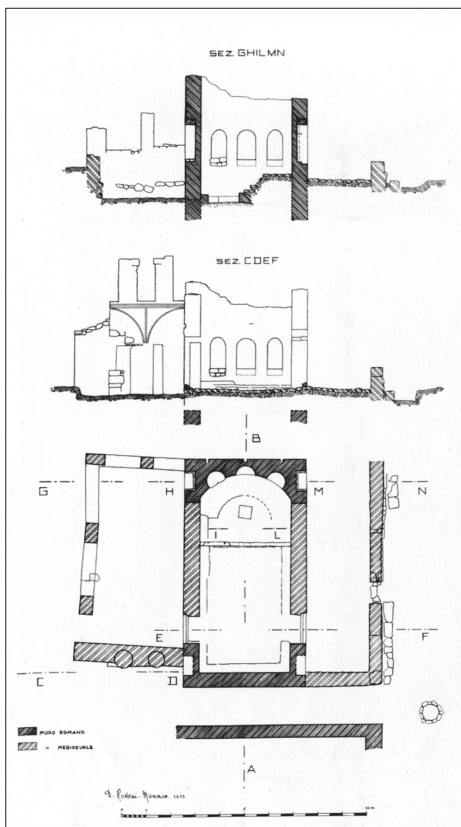
Studies on the Christian topography of Butrint have shown convincingly that from the 6th century onward the Church had control of the public spaces of the city and manipulated the urban landscape, by Christianising the important places in the management of the space. Public places thus are occupied by religious buildings, such as the baths on which the Baptistery of the episcopal complex was built, or the *Columbarium* near to which a small church was founded. Some holy places in the ancient city were also preserved, transformed and Christianised: a small church occupies the *stoà* of the Asklepeion; the well of *Iunia Rufina* was Christianised with a painted decoration; a great Basilica was built on the acropolis where a Temple it

has been argued once stood; and the Nymphaeum of the 'Gymnasium' was converted into a Church.⁴⁶⁴ We will dwell here on the context of the conversion of the latter, presenting first the available information on the building's transformation and its phases, and secondly focusing on the destiny of the mural mosaic with niches and its effacement. Finally a possible context for the obliteration will be put forward.

THE PALEOCHRISTIAN AND MEDIEVAL CHURCH OF THE 'GYMNASIUM'

The account, designs and plan of the Ugolini excavations⁴⁶⁵ state that a Medieval Church once stood on the site of the Nymphaeum (fig. 290), which was dismantled during the dig to restore the original appearance of the Nymphaeum.⁴⁶⁶ Several phases detected by the excavators and four floor levels paved in local stone show the building stood and was maintained over a long period.

The shape of the '*a camera*' type Nymphaeum, rectangular with an apse to the east, facilitated its conversion into a Church.



290. Plan of the Nymphaeum and the Church of the Gymnasium, from the documentation of the Italian archaeological expedition.

464. Bowden & Mitchell 2004; Sebastiani 2007.

465. Ugolini 1934.

466. Ugolini 1937; Mustilli 1941; Monaco 1934.



291. Church of the Nympheum before the excavation and restoration.

In a first phase, the Church had a rectangular plan with apse and façade which used and incorporated the walls of the Nympheum (fig. 291). The north and south walls of the building built at this time show two access points about 1.50 m from the west façade. The apse with *synthronon* had an altar that reused a cippus with a Greek inscription, while two stone benches against the north and south walls flanked the nave and presbytery. The marble facing of the

292. Bell of the medieval Church (phase 2).



Nympheum must have already been partially in place at this time and the Church had a floor in thin flags of local stone.

During a second phase, a belfry was built in the north-west of the rectangular Church (fig. 292). It had on the façade decorative arcatures in brick placed sideways on, which overhung the masonry, two grey granite columns and an ionic capital at the base of the wall. The *spolia* were placed deliberately in the important and visible places, highlighting how the space had been transformed and recalling the continuity of the building since Antiquity, as emphasised in other Medieval Churches (13th to 14th century) of the Despotate of Epirus (for example St Theodora at Arta).⁴⁶⁷

In a third phase, the Church was extended by adding an aisle in the south and a portico with a funerary purpose in the north. This little space bounded by the belfry in the west was covered with the Church roof, supported by a series of pillars mounted on the peripheral wall. At that time the apse was defined by chancels and probably by an iconostasis (figs. 293 and 295), of which the high scaffolding holes are today still visible 2.50 m from the ground (fig. 294). A stone bench 35 cm high ran along the two side-walls of the central nave. The pavement of this latter phase was laid 80 cm higher than the Roman floor.

The Church was decorated with several layers of paint layers, which was obliterated by white plaster laid during a final phase (fig. 295). The photographs and descriptions of the preserved documentation concern especially the most recent phase of the apse decoration. The paint, organised in panels with geometric motifs (particularly combinations of octagons) or in medallions outlined by a very simple Greek fret, used a fairly classic four-colour scheme in Byzantine churches: yellow, black, red and white. On the north and south walls paintings of a *velarium* and geometric motifs were also documented, as well as more sporadic remains on the west side.

Though no chronological aspect was given by the excavators, the first phase of the Church is generally agreed to date from Late Antiquity and the second from the Middle Byzantine period.⁴⁶⁸

Indeed, the transforming of the Nympheum into a Church fits well with the dynamics of 6th-century Butrint, where several public buildings were subsumed into the Church.⁴⁶⁹ This scenario is well in

467. Sodini 2002, pp. 140-142.

468. Sebastiani 2007.

469. Bowden & Mitchell 2004, pp. 122-124.

line with the more general institutional framework which invited sacred pagan edifices to be converted into churches,⁴⁷⁰ often with forced conversions under Justinian, during whose reign orthodoxy was imposed.⁴⁷¹

The belfry could also supply chronological clues about the second phase. Indeed, the use of bells to call people to prayer was rare in the Byzantine Empire before the establishment of Latin kingdoms. If the extraordinary gift by the Venetian Doge Orso Parteciaco of twelve bells to Basil I⁴⁷² dates back to the 9th century, the effective use of bells during the liturgy is attested only by the Carillon of Bethlehem, dated 1167-1169, with thirteen tuned bells which were produced in the West and linked to the Latin ritual.⁴⁷³ Bells are thus rarely seen in Byzantine churches and only from the 13th century onward.⁴⁷⁴

The 13th to 14th centuries are on the other hand centuries of renaissance for the Church at Butrint: the restoration of the Cathedral, the paintings in the Church of the *Stoà*, and the paintings of the western Gate are the most important examples. As has been mentioned,⁴⁷⁵ during the Despotate of Epirus (1204-1339) the need to reform the Orthodox identity led, on the one hand, to a revival of Paleo-Christian architectonic forms and to the display of their *spolia*. On the other hand, the presence of a Latin bishop at Butrint from the 1310 may have introduced western elements such as (in the case considered) the belfry.

EFFACEMENT OF THE MOSAIC

When the building was being used as a Church, the wall mosaic with a dionysiac subject (no. 10) which occupies the apses of the three niches of the previous Nymphaeum (cf. catalogue pp. 57-63) was covered in a rich lime mortar on which several layers of paint were applied, probably corresponding to different periods, restorations and redevelopments of the building, as suggested, too, by the pavement's many levels. Traces of this bonding plaster for the paint layer are still seen at the points where



293. Interior of the Church before restoration.



294. East wall of the Nymphaeum after the paint restorations: between the north and the central niche, the presence of a circular hole for a post of the iconostasis of the medieval church.



295. Apse before restoration with paint remains, slab paving and altar.

470. Caillet 1993; Caseau 2004; Goddard 2006; Margutti 2013.
 471. Blaudeau 2013.
 472. *Jean Diacre*, *Chronicon Venetum*, ed. Luigi Andrea Berto, MGH. *Scriptores*, t. VII, Hanover, Hahn, 1846, p. 21; see also Bowden & Mitchell 2004, notes 38 and 39.
 473. Neri 2012; Castineiras 2014; Rodriguez-Suarez forthcoming.
 474. One of the most ancient examples is the Church of Saint Sophia at Trabzon.
 475. Rodriguez-Suarez forthcoming; Nicol 1984; Bowden & Mitchell 2004.

296. South niche before restoration: circular-shaped lacunae, filled with mortar at the location of the leaves.



297. Lacuna at the location of the leaves, partially filled with mortar; we note remains of tesserae with incision marks.



298. Tessera with traces of incisions with a pointed implement, observed with the optical microscope Dino-lite 500.



the water came in, which were blocked when the Church was built, and where the lacunae of the mosaic were seen.

Before spreading the plaster in the lateral niches, the tesserae of the leaves of the racemes sprouting from the *kantharos* were removed by making a circular incision around the leaf, which allowed the blue, green and brown glass tesserae to be extracted (figs. 296 and 297). Certain tesserae well fixed in the preparatory mortar of the mosaic remained on the wall and show surface traces of incisions made with a pointed instrument, which would have allowed extraction (fig. 298). A similar dynamic was noted in the Mosaic of Masks in the Triconch Complex, where the tesserae of the masks were probably removed to be used elsewhere.⁴⁷⁶

In the two niches of the Nymphaeum, the aim of this action was to efface the part that gives meaning to the figuration and to recuperate the tesserae to reuse them or melt them down, a practice well documented by the sources and the archaeological remains.⁴⁷⁷

The central niche with the mask of Dionysos was subject to a later effacement: a layer of black paint is spread over the tesserae, to form squares and rectangles which partially cover the mosaic and combine with the black serrated file of the border (fig. 299). The layer of paint is quite thick and rests on a white preparatory layer (fig. 300).

THE CONTEXT OF THE EFFACEMENT

This deliberate effacement of images before applying mortar to cover them remains a gesture whose sense is yet to sound out. Indeed, if in the lateral niches the glass tesserae are removed too for practical purposes, more problematic are the reasons for applying paint before plastering over the image.

There are two possible reasons: either the mosaic was still in position in the first phase of the Church, and therefore the images had been modified and disfigured as to cease to convey the pagan message; or else this effacement had been carried out in a ritual context before the plastering and paint were applied, during the renovation of the Nymphaeum into a Church.

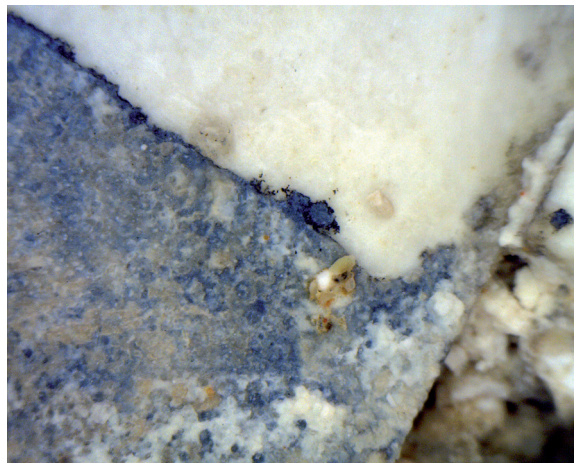
476. Cf. supra catalogue, mosaic 12.

477. Neri 2016, pp. 124-128.

This second assumption finds its roots in the official prescriptions and in the normative literature about the conversion of temples into churches. In particular, an edict of 435 disseminated by Theodosius II orders that the temples be 'destroyed and purified with the apposition of a venerable sign of the Christian faith'.⁴⁷⁸ Among the temples must also be counted the nymphaea, although examples of conversions of these into churches are rarer, even if we can cite the Church of Saint Mary at Albano Laziale⁴⁷⁹ and the Church of the Holy Apostles in Athens,⁴⁸⁰ both built on nymphaea.

Exorcism was already mentioned by Eusebius of Caesarea⁴⁸¹ regarding the building of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem and subsequently became mandatory before any conversion of a pagan building into a Church.⁴⁸² The most obvious archaeological traces of this ritual were uncovered in the Temple of Aphrodite at Aphrodisias before its transformation into a Cathedral in the 6th century: crosses are marked on the external perimeter of the Temple and the figures of the carved blocks are obliterated.⁴⁸³ This practice also seems frequently attested on the reclaimed architectonic elements from pagan buildings in Christian contexts, where eradication of pagan images is coupled with the apposition of Christian symbols. A new example of this ritual seems to have been carried out in the Nymphaeum at Butrint and the effacement of the mosaic could be evidence of this.

The anti-pagan law of 435, which ordered the destruction of the temples and their conversion into churches, was not the final word on the destiny of pagan sanctuaries. In fact the re-opening of closed temples was outlawed in the middle of the 5th century⁴⁸⁴ and the destruction of Justinian edifices showed how difficult it actually was to enforce these new rules.⁴⁸⁵ In fact, in an archaeological



299. South section of the central niche; remains of black paint covering the tesserae.

300. Layer of black paint, observed with the optical microscope Dino-lite 500.

examination of the phenomenon,⁴⁸⁶ conversions of temples into churches became commoner from the 6th century on. And it was during this century that a unifying programme seemed to redefine the city of Butrint as a Christian city. Acts of effacement seen on the mosaic of the Nymphaeum could therefore have been carried out in a more general context of the reconversion of the town and its (such connotative) ancient cults.

478. Codex theodosianus, XVI, 10, 25. (14 November 435): 'cunctaque eorum fana templa delubra, si qua etiam nunc restant integra, praecepto magistratum destrui conlocationeque venerandae Christianae religionis signi expiari praecipimus'.

479. Heiden 2015.

480. Frantz 1971.

481. Eusebius of Caesarea, Vita Constantini, II, 52.

482. See the sources collected in Caseau 2004.

483. Hebert 2000.

484. Cod. Iust. I 11,7 (452): 'Nemo venerantis adorantisque animo delubra, quae olim iam clausa sunt, reseret: absit a saeculo nostro [...] redimiri sertis templorum impios postes' and also Novell. Iust. 4 (11 July 458).

485. Blaudeau 2013.

486. Caillet 1996; Cantino Wataghin 1997; Cantino Wataghin 1999; Van Andringa, dir. 2014.