

# The Mosaic *Spolia* in the Narthex of the Cathedral Basilica (No. 4) in Parthicopolis, Southwestern Bulgaria

## Parthicopolis (Güneybatı Bulgaristan) Katedral Bazilikası'nın (No. 4) Nartheksindeki Mozaik *Spolia* Kullanımı

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### Abstract

*The Cathedral Basilica of Parthicopolis, also known as Basilica No. 4, the Episcopal one, is part of a complex in which in the period second quarter-middle of the 4<sup>th</sup> century and the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> century, a separate basilica has been built, supplied additionally by a narthex, a baptistery, an atrium, an Episcopaeion with chapel and scriptorium, a skeuophylakion (σκευοφυλάκιο), a kitchen and other premises. During the second building phase of the first building period, a two-armed ambo oriented along its long axis east-west has been installed in the southern part of the central nave. When it was dug into the mosaic carpet of the nave, the removed pieces and some of the red mortar with the tesserae were not thrown away. They were reused as spolia not for their original purpose, but to level out the rows of stones in the construction of the bench and the base of the staircase attached to it for the gallery on the second floor, which was built in the northern part of the narthex. Some of the fragments were also used for decoration – the base of the bench, which was plastered in height with mortar. This unusual use of the early Christian mosaic is observed for the first time among the monuments from the early Byzantine Period in Macedonia and Thrace (today on the territory of the Republic of Bulgaria).*

**Keywords:** Mosaic fragments, benches, spolia, ambo.

### Öz

*Parthicopolis Katedrali Bazilikası - diğer adıyla 4 Numaralı Bazilika ya da Episkopal Bazilika - İS 4. yüzyılın ikinci çeyreğinden 5. yüzyılın sonlarına kadar işlev gören bir kompleksin parçasıdır. Bu kompleks; nartheks, baptisterion, atrium, episkopeion (şapel ve skriptoriumla birlikte), skeuophylakion (σκευοφυλάκιο), mutsak ve çeşitli yan mekânları içeren ayrı bir bazilikayla genişletilmiştir. İlk inşa evresinin ikinci aşamasında, ana nefin güney bölümünde uzun ekseni doğu-batı yönünde konumlanmış iki kollu bir ambon (ambo) yerleştirilmiştir. Bu uygulama sırasında, nefin mozaik döşemesinden çıkarılan parçalar ve üzerlerindeki kırmızı harç ile tesserae atılmamış; spolia (ikincil kullanım malzemesi) olarak, özgün işlevlerinden farklı biçimde yeniden değerlendirilmiştir. Bu parçalar, ikinci kat galerisine bağlanan merdiven kaidesi ile ona bitişik oturma sekisinin (bench) taş sıralarını tesviye etmek amacıyla kullanılmıştır. Bazı parçalar ise dekoratif unsurlar olarak, harçla sivanmış sekilerin tabanında değerlendirilmiştir. Bu sırada mozaik yeniden kullanımı, erken Bizans Dönemi'ne ait Makedonya ve Trakya (günümüzde Bulgaristan Cumhuriyeti sınırları içinde) anıtları arasında ilk kez tespit edilmiştir.*

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Mozaik parçaları, sekiler, spolia, ambo.

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The present study is dedicated to the reuse of mosaic fragments from the mosaic panels of the central nave from the first phase of the first construction period of the basilica. We have found that fragments of this mosaic, together with the mortar base, were not reused for their intended purpose, but as *spolia* in the construction of the Π-shaped bench (with a shortened eastern arm) and the staircase in the northern part of the basilica's narthex. In order to get a clear idea of when, why and for what reasons these mosaic fragments were used as *spolia*, we should give a brief chronological overview of the construction of the basilica and its complex during its first construction period.

The most famous and richly decorated basilica discovered so far in the late antique and early Byzantine city of Parthicopolis is Basilica No. 4, the Episcopal (Cathedral), which is surrounded by a complex with several rooms. The whole complex itself is well structured and consisting of different in their function rooms: a *skeuophilakion* (a sacristy), a kitchen, a *hagiasma*, a chapel, an atrium with a fountain, a well, a *praefurnium* to the baptistery and others, related to the early Christian architecture, with architectural decoration and liturgy between the 4<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries (Fig. 1). To the basilica have been additionally attached the baptistery, the narthex and the atrium, connected to a semicircular<sup>1</sup> square and the main street of the city, which became a processional street like in Constantinople. The Episcopal basilica complex was built in the north-eastern part of the fortified city, not far from the eastern fortress wall. It represents the largest concentration of early Christian cult architecture that has ever been studied in Bulgaria.

The archaeological investigations show three construction periods of the complex with several phases in between. The most important are the first (the middle – third quarter of the 4<sup>th</sup> century to the first quarter of the 5<sup>th</sup> century) and the second (after the earthquake of 425 to the second quarter of the 6<sup>th</sup> century)<sup>2</sup> when the Episcopal complex was finally built. The third construction period covers the second quarter until the middle of the 6<sup>th</sup> century when the interior of the basilica was renovated and new rooms were created – the prothesis and the diaconicon – as well as other additions around the basilica related to the liturgy held in Constantinople, which also led to new liturgical planning. In the first construction stage – the construction of the basilica as an independent building with three naves, a semicircular apse and an independent baptistery with a circular floor plan – two construction phases are distinguished, which relate to the floor plan and decoration of the basilica and its baptistery, with additional extensions – the construction of the narthex with its first and second wall decoration; the atrium; the *catechumenium* and the other rooms to the west direction – the *skeuophylakia*, the waiting room for the visitors and the donors, and the kitchen.

The archeological data showing that the beginning of first building period of this extremely representative temple is relating to 4<sup>th</sup> century<sup>3</sup>, to the direct descendants of Constantine the Great. Its construction was preceded by Basilica No. 1, established as the earliest early Christian basilica in Parthicopolis, namely

1 The square could be circular, but due to the existing contemporary town houses and urban infrastructure, it is impossible to be excavated it in an easterly direction.

2 During the archaeological investigation of nearby Heraclea Sintica, two destructive earthquakes were detected in the middle Struma valley. The first occurred in 388 and the second in 425. See Vagalinski 2019: 251.

3 Opinions on the date of the first construction period vary widely. According to some, the basilica was built in the 4<sup>th</sup> to early 5<sup>th</sup> century (Dimitrova-Milceva - Petkov 2006: 403-424), according to others – in the second half of the 4<sup>th</sup> century (Farkov 2011: 13).

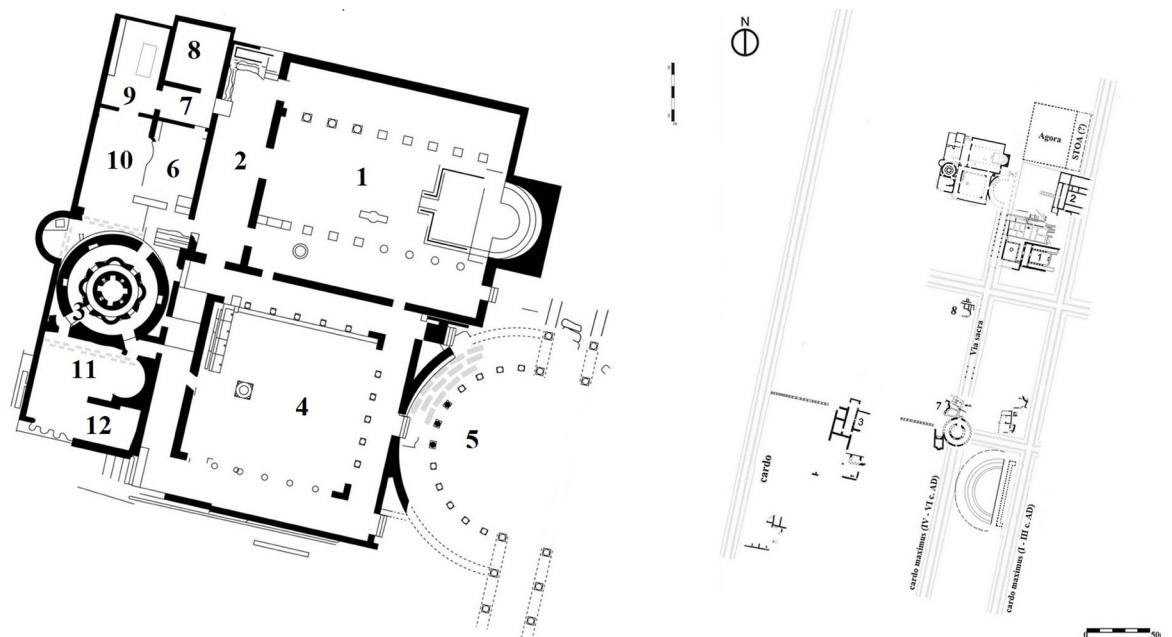
Figure 1 (left)

Plan of the Cathedral Basilica of Parthicopolis (author S. Petrova). Premises: 1- Basilica; 2- narthex; 3- baptistery with *praefurnium*; 4- atrium; 5- semicircular piazza; 6- *catechumenium*; 7- waiting room; 8- kitchen 9- *skeuophilakion*; 10- Episcopaeion; 11- chapel; 12- *scriptorium*.

Figure 2 (right)

Parthicopolis. General plan of the ancient city and of the city in the middle of the 5<sup>th</sup> century (author S. Petrova).

in the period immediately after the Council of Nicaea, in the 30s of the 4<sup>th</sup> century<sup>4</sup>. This fact is witnessed by the investment architectural elements and the technique of building, as well as the interior of the basilica (Fig. 2). The central nave is covered with marble plates, and the side aisles of the basilica – with bricks. The study points to a quick and comparatively cheap way of building, without expensive mosaic pavements; with the reuse of architectural elements from the time of the Principate. We also believe that this basilica was the first Episcopal basilica at the time of the Council of Serdica<sup>5</sup> and, with the bishop's residence and reception hall attached to it, fulfilled the role of the Episcopaeion, i.e. the bishop's administrative seat. The construction of the new Episcopal basilica (Basilica no. 4, which became the cathedral of the city) must therefore have begun not long after the Council of Serdica (343-344), around the middle – third quarter of the 4<sup>th</sup> century<sup>6</sup>. This was due to the increased number of Christians and the great attention paid to the Parthicopolis of the Exarchate of Thessalonica, which in the last quarter of the 4<sup>th</sup> century was changed to a papal vicariate (Petrova 2020: 189-222; Petrova in press).



In the first construction phase of the first construction period according to the plan, the basilica has three naves with a shortened nave and a semicircular apse, without a narthex and atrium<sup>7</sup>, similar to the 4<sup>th</sup> century basilicas from Karanovo – basilica 'A'; church No 1 in Krumovo kale (*Misionis*) near to the town of Targovishte; Montana, the church at villa 1; basilica No 1 in *Storgosia*, now Pleven (Chaneva-Dechevska 1999: 247, 193, 221, 214 and ref.); The old basilica in Stobi (of Bishop Budius), dated to the first half – the middle of the 4<sup>th</sup> century (Lilcić 2003: 180 and ref.). The dimensions of the bishop's basilica (No. 4) with the apse are 34.5 x 21.95 m (Dimitrova-Milcheva 2002: 279). It is considered to be the largest early Christian basilica discovered so far in the early Christian

4 A. Dimitrova-Milcheva dates Basilica No. 1 to the middle of the 4<sup>th</sup> century (Dimitrova-Milcheva 1991: 75-84). For the arguments in favor of our chronology, namely its construction around the 30s of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, see Petrova 2012: 104-106; 2015: 161-184.

5 At the council in Serdika, Bishop Iona was the representative of the bishopric of Parthicopolis.

6 For further details in connection with the cathedral (bishop's basilica) of Parthicopolis, see also: Petrova - Petkov 2015: 425-438; Petrova 2017a: 133-152; 2018: 103-120.

7 Then the free-standing baptistery was built with a round shape, which finds its analogy in the Lateran. For details, see Petrova 2017a: 133-152.

city. The architectural and sculptural decoration of the basilica consists mainly of reused architectural details from pagan buildings built between the beginning of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries: marble bases in the Attic-Ionic style, columns and capitals in the Roman-Corinthian style<sup>8</sup>. The decoration of the Episcopal basilica is very lavish, with mosaic pavements in *opus tessellatum* in combination with *opus vermiculatum* in the central and lateral aisles (Figs. 3-4); the baptistery: the cupola was covered with polychrome decoration, including golden *tesserae* in *opus tessellatum*. The bottom of the *piscina* is covered with mosaic in *opus sectile*. The floor of the presbytery is cover with mosaic in *opus sectile* too. The walls of the basilica, narthex, baptistery, waiting room, *skeuophylakia* and other rooms are also covered with wall paintings, and architectonic decoration. The basilica possesses unique chancel screens with figural decoration from the Old and New Testaments.



Figure 3  
Parthicopolis, Cathedral Basilica - naos.  
Panoramic picture (photo V. Vasilev, AM Sandanski).

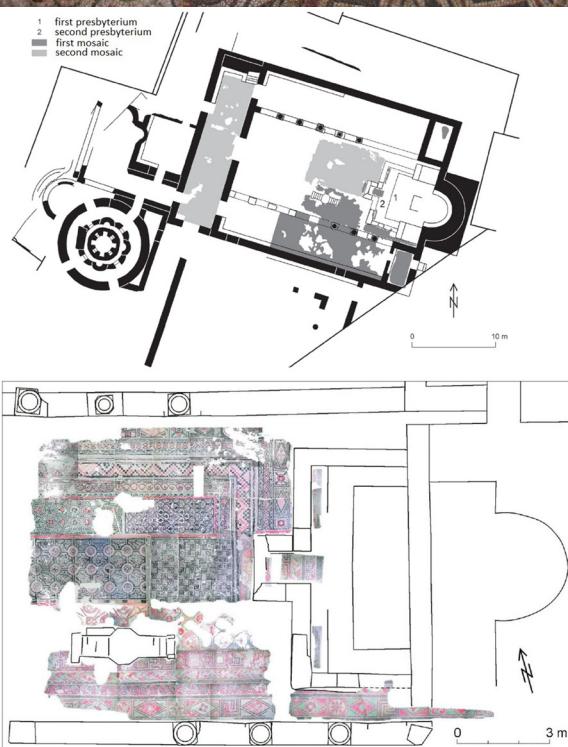


Figure 4  
Parthicopolis, Cathedral Basilica: above - plan of the basilica with the first and second mosaics (after M. Hofbauer); below - plan of the central nave with outlines of the first and second mosaics (have drawn: B. Asamer - M. Hofbauer - B. Zimmermann) (Pillinger et al. 2016: taf. 277 abb. 669, 670).

<sup>8</sup> On the reused architectural details in the basilicas of Parthicopolis and especially in the cathedral basilica, see Petrova 2017b: 137–176.

During the first construction period and its two construction phases (from the middle – third quarter of the 4<sup>th</sup> century to 388, the first destructive earthquake and the second phase - between the two earthquakes: from 388 to 425) and the second construction period (after the earthquake in 425 to the second quarter of the 6<sup>th</sup> c.); the interior of the basilica and the narthex were richly decorated with wall paintings in the ‘al fresco’ technique – laid out in two layers. They show an exuberant pictorial decoration of panels imitating marble decoration, as the panels are separated by colonnades that reproduce the so-called ‘pseudo-column style’. The panels on the walls feature floral motifs – branches and flowers are depicted in red, green, black, blue and white. Imitation marble veins, spots and texture are in ochre, blue, green, red and orange and copy a certain look and color of marble and breccia (Figs. 5, 6a-b, 9g).

Figure 5  
waiting room with wall-painting in the  
'pseudo-column style' (photo S. Petrova).



Figure 6a (left)  
Cathedral basilica: wall-painting from north  
aisle (archive of AM Sandanski).

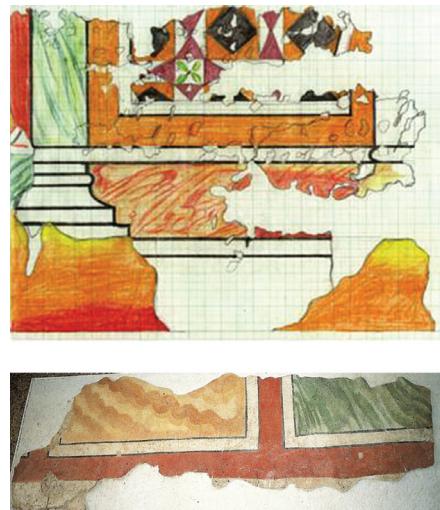


Figure 6b (right)  
Cathedral basilica: wall-paintings in two  
layers (archive of AM Sandanski).



The central nave of the basilica has three periods of mosaic decoration, executed in the *opus tessellatum* technique with small including in some more special places of *opus vermiculatum* for some geometric and ornamental motifs. In the first construction phase - until the earthquake of 388 - the central nave has mosaic panels with geometric decoration with small carpet-like panels with various motifs, swastikas and others (Pillinger et al. 2016: 350-351 taf. 278-279 abb. 675, 676, 679). The interior consists of several decorative panels in

which various geometric grids are depicted - meandering connected swastikas forming square fields between them in which a Greek cross is inscribed (Figs. 3, 4, 7,); connected swastikas with an irregular hexagons (Fig. 7a, f); lozenges and squares with fillings inside of the four-leaf rosettes (Fig. 7b-d), squares, circles with inscribed rectangles, finishing with a conch shape, etc. (Fig. 7d-e) The outer border is of the 'running wave' type, followed by a wide edging with a border and an outer border of white and black edging (Fig. 7a).



Figure 7

a-f: Motifs and elements of the mosaic in the central nave from the first building period, first phase (photo S. Petrova).

c-e: The ambo, on the mosaic of the first phase, details (photo S. Petrova).

The examination of the basilica shows the sinking of the floor, which destroyed the oldest mosaic in the central nave, due to the earthquake of 388. The second construction phase of the basilica is associated with the last decade of the 4<sup>th</sup> century and the first quarter of the 5<sup>th</sup> century until the second destructive earthquake (425). At that time, the presbytery was enlarged and steps on to part of the mosaic from the first period, the first phase (Fig. 7f). The altar barrier was redesigned. New mosaic panels were installed in the northern part of the central nave (Fig. 3 left). The baptistery is enclosed in a square building, connected to the *catechumenium* and the narthex of the basilica. During the second phase of the first construction period - the 90s of the 4<sup>th</sup> century-the first quarter of the 5<sup>th</sup> century, when the restoration works were carried out after the destructive earthquake in 388, the plan of the central nave of the basilica was supplemented with a new element, connected with the liturgy in the temple - was built the ambo<sup>9</sup>. The pulpit is dug into the partially destroyed mosaic (Fig. 8). To provide

<sup>9</sup> Of all the basilicas discovered to date with varying degrees of preservation, the cathedral basilica (the bishop's basilica or basilica no. 4) is the only one with a registered ambo in its liturgical furnishings. The ambos in the basilicas of the relatively nearby *municipium* of Stobi and the Roman colony of Philippi are similar in shape and location.



Figure 8  
Cathedral Basilica, south part of the central nave, first mosaic floor and pulpit (Pillinger et al. 2016: taf. 278 abb. 671).

sufficient space for its construction, fragments of the surviving mosaic were also removed, along with the mortar base, with the pulpit positioned on an east-west axis. The base of the ambo is octagonal, with stairs from both sides, now with preserved only the first step, together with the lead joints for the parapet small columns (Fig. 7d-e). The ambo was built of bricks bonded with pink mortar. It is clad with fine polished marble slabs of Proconnessian marble, which suggests not only the craft-making there, but also trade and import from there to Thessaloniki and from there by the road alongside the river of Strymon to Parthicopolis, situated on half the way between Thessaloniki and Serdica.

In the bench, the mosaic fragments are set among the river boulders, some of the mosaic fragments are plastered over with mortar, but others are visible and are as a low plinth of the bench, partially also on the base of the first step of the staircase (Fig. 9c-f). The mosaic fragments are used both as a base and as a filler and to level the construction joint of the granite block staircase. Also very interesting is the fact that visitors sitting on the bench can place their feet on a special mosaic stripe in front of the bench, which is a relatively narrow stripe of red brick tesserae, in which stepped white triangles are represented in succession (Fig. 9b). The craftsmen of the Cathedral Basilica of Parthicopolis amaze us with the original design of the mosaic in front of the bench, on which visitors step with their feet when they sit on the bench and enjoy the interior of the basilica.

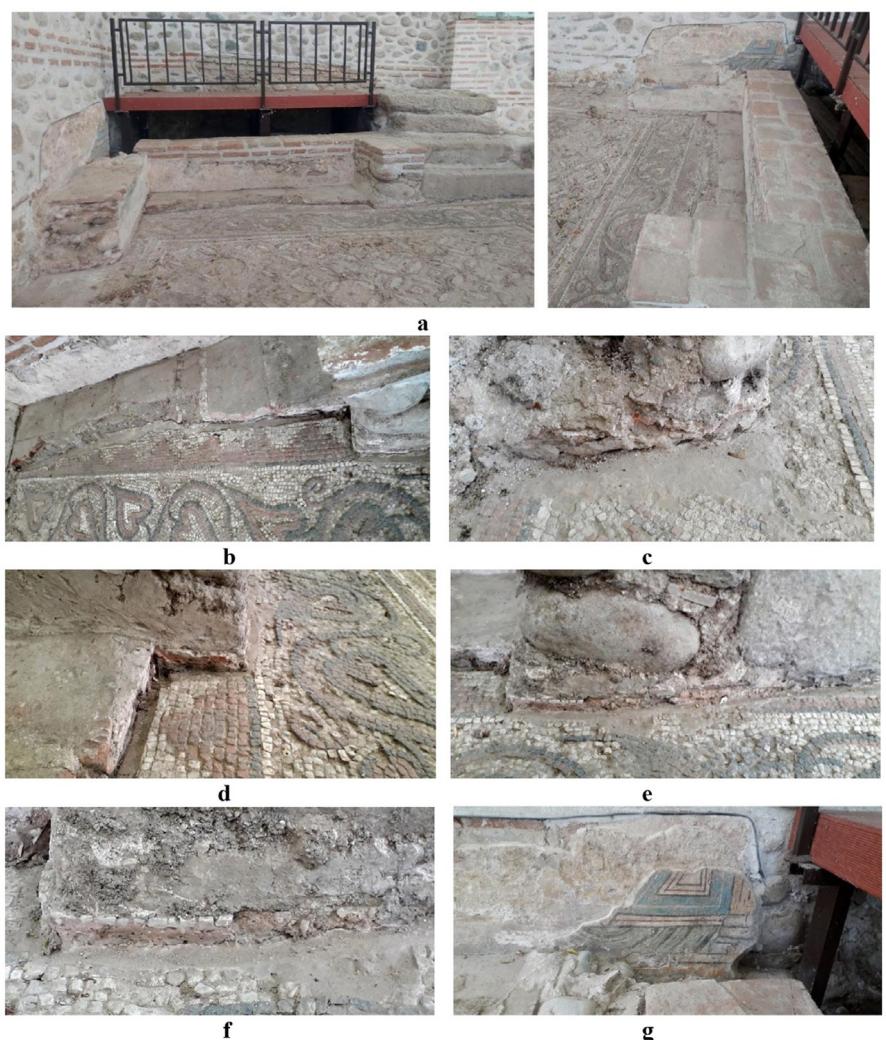


Figure 9  
a: Narthex of the basilica. View from the south.  
b-d: Red mosaic stripe with staggered white triangles.  
c-e: Embedded spolia of mosaic fragments, details.  
f: The plinth made of mosaic spolia.  
g: Narthex of the basilica. Fragment of a wall painting in two layers.

The use of the mosaic fragments in the construction of the gallery staircase and in the bench in the narthex has two aspects. One is of utilitarian importance, namely that the mosaic *spolia* should not be thrown away, but should serve as building material. The other aspect is the opposite - the mosaic fragments are part of the consecrated building of the basilica and should be preserved.

If we assume that the early Christian floor mosaics with the usual decorative-geometric motifs have no symbolic meaning, are not sacred and sanctified, then their remains, in the case of replacing the old mosaic with a new one, should be discarded as useless. The builders are often very careful, so in order to save labor and avoid the need for new material, they often use spolia. This is evidenced in the many *spolia* of architectural elements used in the Cathedral Basilica. Such *spolia* are attested in almost all early Christian basilicas in the Balkans, and not only there, but also in the eastern and western provinces. Since we are establishing the use of mosaic *spolia* for the first time, and due to the lack of information about such reuse, we can call the case unique. Many basilicas in the eastern and western provinces - in the circle of Constantinople and in that of the pope in Rome have mosaic floors of several layers of mosaics on top of each other, from their different construction periods and phases. A striking example of this is the Metropolitan Basilica in Philippopolis, where three different mosaics are superimposed on each other without discarding any of them.

These facts raise the questions: "is the mosaic part of the lit elements of the basilica"? If the consideration of the builders of the bench in the narthex of the cathedral basilica of Parthicopolis was to use the well-shaped and leveled mosaic blocks as filling and building material in the plinth of the bench and at the base of the staircase leading to the second floor gallery, why at the base of the floor was the mosaic red stripe made with the stepped white triangles that seem to mark the place for the feet of the Christians attending the liturgy?

If we reflect on the second aspect related to the mosaic *spolia* - the mosaic fragments are part of the consecrated building of the basilica and must be preserved! Both the altar; the altar barrier, the ambo, and the mosaic floors with their images are united in a sacred space and should be part of the liturgical planning of the early Christian basilica<sup>10</sup>. Their construction, as well as the basilica itself, is connected with their consecration. I believe that the mosaic fragments that were removed when the pulpit was installed and possibly part of the presbytery were also consecrated. This fact did not allow the builders; to the bishop and presbyter of the basilica that they be thrown out. As they were consecrated, they became part of the sacred things in the basilica and as such were used to build the bench, also an element of the liturgical planning of the basilica, and the staircase - leading to the gallery of the basilica.

It can be seen that the builders of the bench and the mosaicists of the narthex did not ignore the fragments destroyed by the earthquake, from the construction of the pulpit and the new presbytery, and did not discard them as holy and sacred. In the motifs there are also images of small Greek crosses, which, in our opinion, did not allow the builders and mosaicists to deface them, because they are the most sacred symbol for Christians and the Christian liturgy.

The monochromatic fragments of the mosaic panels were separated and used for the plinth of the bench and partially for the staircase to create a smooth

<sup>10</sup> For early Christian liturgical planning in the Diocese of Thrace and Macedonia (part of today's territory of Bulgaria) see: Stanev 2011: 313-345; 2013: 3-9; Dosseva 2011: 139-160; 2017: 50-68; Popova 2018: 135-160.

transition to the mosaic strip with the stepped triangles and the mosaic carpet of the narthex, also part of the liturgical planning - the place where Christians place their feet, when they sit down. We hope for the possibility of finding mosaic *spolia* in other places and in other early Christian basilicas, which would give an answer as to whether these fragments are building *spolia* or have a sanctity that demands their preservation, even as *spolia*.

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