

**Galina FINGAROVA, Die Baugeschichte der Sophienkirche in Sofia. Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag 2011, 209 S., 199 Tafeln mit 350 Abb.**

The cathedral of Saint Sophia in the Bulgarian capital of Sofia is one of the largest churches to survive from the Byzantine period. It features in most handbooks on Byzantine Architecture, but until recently detailed studies concerning it were published only in Bulgarian, thus remaining inaccessible for most scholars abroad. The first monograph about the building appeared in 1913 by Bogdan Filov and comprised the results of excavations and observations on the building carried out in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The current form of the building, especially its outside, is pretty much the result of heavy-handed restorations of the Communist period, which involved extensive restorations and rebuilding. Further observations have been published by Stefan Boiadzhiev in a number of studies since the 1960s.<sup>1</sup> The book under review here, deriving from Galina Fingarova's doctoral thesis at the University of Vienna, provides the first monograph on Saint Sophia in a west European language. It includes a full overview of earlier work plus a gazetteer of all the known textual sources concerning the building, quoted in full. It will therefore serve as the standard reference work for anyone wishing to study Saint Sophia, while, at the same time, parts of the book can also be used for reference by those wishing to get introduced to the history of the city of Sofia (ancient Serdica and medieval Sredets or Triaditsa) and its bibliography.

### **The predecessor buildings**

The structure of the book is very straightforward, starting with an overview of written sources, earlier scholarship and of the monument's topographical context. There follows a careful summary of the finds of the 19<sup>th</sup>- and 20<sup>th</sup>-century excavations under and around the building, where the phases of the Roman and late Roman necropolis of the site and the remains of the two churches preceding the current one are discussed in detail. In the past, considerable disagreements were expressed considering the structure or structures preceding the current building. Fingarova prefers a simple solution accepting that the

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<sup>1</sup> B. Filov (1913), *Софийската Църква Св. София*. Sofia; S. Boiadzhiev (1960), *Софийската Църква Св. София*. Sofia; idem (1996), 'Раннохристиянската църква Света София в София', in S. Boiadzhiev (ed.), *Раннохристиянски храм Света София*. Sofia, 7-41; idem (2002), 'Serdica', in R. Ivanov (ed.), *Roman and Early Byzantine Cities in Bulgaria*. Sofia, 125-80.

remains belong to two rather than four churches. I find her reconstruction more convincing than the complex hypotheses proposed by Boiadzhiev.<sup>2</sup>

The author dates the first chapel to the mid-4<sup>th</sup> century and its destruction to the late 4<sup>th</sup>, a more convincing chronology than that proposed by earlier scholarship which ascribed it to Constantine. The author makes correct use of the internal dating evidence produced by the excavations, but she could have further supported her view through comparisons with other pre-Theodosian churches known from the Balkans, especially the Basilica of Paul at Philippi and the first phase of the Episcopal Basilica at Stobi, both of which date probably from the mid-4<sup>th</sup> century. The three buildings present remarkable similarities in the style of their mosaics, their simple architecture and modest size.<sup>3</sup> According to Fingarova, this building was replaced by a new church around AD 400, which, on its turn, was destroyed in the mid-5<sup>th</sup> century. Her most interesting observation here is that the period between the destruction of second church and the erection of its successor, i.e. the current church, was considerably longer than the one separating it from its predecessor. The thickness of the layer between the two buildings, the latest numismatic finds and the level of the 6<sup>th</sup>-century tombs of the necropolis suggest that the third church cannot have appeared before the late 6<sup>th</sup> century. It is commendable that Fingarova is the first student of the monument to employ – at last – archaeological observation rather than historical hypotheses to reach a chronology.

### The current building

The main body and question of Fingarova's research consists of the recording and dating of the last, still standing, building of Saint Sophia. The author gives a meticulous structural description and discussion of the inner and outer features, which she accompanies with ample photographic material. Fundamental to her dating proposal is her thesis that the current building consists of one single phase rather than two.

Fingarova uses stratigraphy to achieve a mid-6<sup>th</sup>-century *terminus post quem* for the current structure. For the *terminus ante quem* she proposes a number of historical landmarks. The period between the conquest of Serdica by the pagan Bulgars in AD 811 and the Christianization of Bulgaria in AD 864 can be

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<sup>2</sup> Boiadzhiev's reconstruction is fully adopted and conveniently summarized by S. Ćurčić (2010), *Architecture in the Balkans from Diocletian to Süleyman the Magnificent*. New Haven and London, 67-8.

<sup>3</sup> On Philippi, see: *Prakt Arch Et* 1978, 70-72 (St. Pelekanides); on Stobi: B. Aleksova (1986), 'The early Christian basilicas at Stobi', *Corsi* 33, 27-32. Also: Ćurčić (2010), 61-2, 67 (surpa n. 2).

excluded, because the city was not in Christian hands. After 864, Serdica was under Christian Bulgarian rule until 1018 when it was taken back by the Byzantines. Fingarova excludes a date to those periods on the grounds that Saint Sophia's architecture differs from the traditions of Christian Bulgaria and that burials dating from the period of Byzantine occupation have been found in the building. Her most important dating argument relies on the enigmatic inscription "πολλὰ τὰ ἔτη τοῦ πατριάρχου" ('[...] many be the years of the patriarch [...]') which was painted, almost dipinto-like, on the mortar of a bare joint connecting the south transept vault with the adjacent wall. Fingarova believes that this inscription can only have been painted during the construction of the vault and it is therefore indispensable for dating. Since it is in Greek, she excludes a date to the period of Christian Bulgaria which adopted Slavonic as its official language. Thus 811 remains a strong *terminus ante quem*, which leads to the conclusion that the current structure of Saint Sophia is to be dated to the period of Early Byzantine domination, between the late 6<sup>th</sup> century and AD 811.

The inscription "πολλὰ τὰ ἔτη τοῦ πατριάρχου" provides further evidence for dating, of which the author might take even more advantage. The fact that it is Greek provides a strong argument not only against the 9<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> century, but also against the 6<sup>th</sup>: Greek was the language of administration in Serdica during the early Roman period, while the city belonged to the officially graecophone province of Thrace, but it was replaced by Latin after Serdica was transferred to the late Roman civil diocese of Dacia which was the only officially Latin-speaking part of the Eastern Empire. Greek, of course, never disappeared in the city, but the great majority of inscriptions between the late 3<sup>rd</sup> and the 6<sup>th</sup> centuries, especially official ones, were Latin. Latin was the predominant language of ecclesiastical inscriptions and we may reasonably assume that it also prevailed in the liturgy. A comparison of Serdica's early Roman and late antique inscriptions, as published in the corpora of Mihailov and Beshevliev respectively, demonstrates a clear shift of preference towards Latin.<sup>4</sup> Greek probably returned as the only language in Serdica's life after the permanent dissolution of the civil diocese of Dacia and the official abolition of Latin in the Eastern Empire in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. If our inscription in Saint Sophia was to be dated to the 6<sup>th</sup> century, one would expect it rather to be in Latin.

Besides the language, we also have the commemoration of the patriarch. Despite the fact that patriarchal jurisdictions were clearly established by the 6<sup>th</sup> century, the practice of commemorating patriarchs in provincial epigraphy was very

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<sup>4</sup> G. Mihailov (1964), *Inscriptiones graecae in Bulgaria repertae*. 4 volumes. Sofia; V. Beševliev (1964), *Spätgriechische und spätlateinische Inschriften aus Bulgarien*. Berlin.

rare in Late Antiquity – if attested at all. Late antique inscriptions normally commemorate emperors and local bishops. Patriarchs start being mentioned in provincial inscriptions from the Middle Byzantine period onwards. Furthermore, we must remember that Serdica and East Illyricum belonged to the Patriarchate of Rome until the 730s. Now, from that period no inscription mentioning a pope has ever been found in Illyricum, and, to my knowledge, the popes are never styled in epigraphy as mere patriarchs. Our inscription most probably refers to the Patriarch of Constantinople, in which case it can only postdate the subjection of Serdica to his jurisdiction. To sum up, a Greek inscription about a patriarch in Serdica is most likely to date from after AD 730, which now provides us with a historical *terminus post quem* and with a narrower chronological framework between 730 and 811. Given the position of the inscription, this date can be unreservedly applied to the vaults. Fingarova sees close structural similarities with the mid-8<sup>th</sup>-century vaults of Saint Eirene in Constantinople and, based on her theory that the building of Sofia is of one single phase, she dates it entirely to the 8<sup>th</sup> century.

### **One single phase or two?**

Fingarova's theory that Saint Sophia consists of one single building phase rather than two aims to refute the earlier proposal of Stefan Boiadzhiev who examined the building during its postwar restorations. Boiadzhiev distinguished between two major phases of masonry and proposed that the clerestory and vaults were built later than the arcade and the walls. He dated the original construction to the late 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> century and its rebuilding to the Middle Ages, between the 9<sup>th</sup> and the 12<sup>th</sup> centuries. Fingarova, on her turn, argues that the slight differentiations of the brickwork, which Boiadzhiev interprets as different phases, are actually the result of the normal progress of vault-building rather than of chronological distance. Her suggestion is a theoretical hypothesis relying on visual observation rather than on hard evidence, e.g. scientific analysis of bricks or mortars.

Having visited Saint Sophia a number of times, I would like to agree with the author that in most parts the brickwork presents no substantial visible disruptions from the vaults to the bottom. One of the striking features about the brick-walls of Saint Sophia is the presence of archivolt and blind arches in the interior, which create a sense of surface articulation in the walls and pillars, especially in the side-aisles and the transept. Byzantine architecture frequently employs such elements on exterior façades, but almost never inside the buildings, where the surfaces are left as flat as possible in order to receive painted decoration. Interior surface articulation is left to a minimum, unless structural

necessity dictates the addition of strengthening arches, archivolts etc. The archivolts of Saint Sophia seem to betray a general strengthening of the walls with a relatively thin layer of brickwork – probably no thicker than the width of one or two bricks. A good example of such an intervention can be seen in Basilica 1 of Madenşehir-Binbirkilise in Lycaonia: pictures by Gertrude Bell and plans by Semavi Eyice show how the nave of the vaulted late antique basilica was strengthened, possibly in the 8<sup>th</sup> or 9<sup>th</sup> century, through an inner cell of masonry.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Saint Sophia may have had its walls strengthened in the 8<sup>th</sup> century through the addition of a layer of brickwork all over its interior. The blind arches and archivolts must have been constructed in the course of that work. If true, this means that the currently visible brickwork of the inner surfaces, on which Fingarova's observations are based, covers a core of earlier masonry, at least in the lower parts of the building. After the last restoration, the possibility of exploring this is very limited, but as a working hypothesis it should be taken into consideration.

### Can we exclude Late Antiquity?

The author shows conclusively that, based on the excavated evidence, the current building cannot have been built before the late 6<sup>th</sup> century. This is an important observation, because it means that we must reject earlier dating proposals for the 5<sup>th</sup> century or the Justinianic period. For historical reasons, Fingarova excludes the possibility that it was built in the tumultuous times of the late 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries, her argument being that the building is extramural and unprotected, which appears to be improbable a choice in that troubled era of invasions. Consequently, the only possible option remaining is the 8<sup>th</sup> century. Her conclusions here, however, are a bit hasty.

Regarding the last decades of Late Antiquity as a monolithic period of warfare reflects our general presumptions about the state of the Balkan provinces in the late 6<sup>th</sup> century, but it does not follow closely enough the local situation in Serdica and its region. Referring to the Avar attack against Singidunum (Belgrade) in 582, Theophylact Simocatta says that the invasion was preceded by an interval of peace which had caused laxity in the defence of the Balkans.<sup>6</sup> There is evidence that during this quiet period – however short – substantial rebuilding took place in various cities, including Serdica: a Latin inscription commemo-

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<sup>5</sup> W.M. Ramsey and G. Bell (1909), *The Thousand and One Churches*. London, 41-50 (reprinted with a foreword by R.G. Ousterhout and M.P.C. Jackson. Philadelphia 2008); S. Eyice (1971), *Recherches archéologiques à Karadağ et dans la région de Karaman*. Istanbul, 20-23, figs. 19-21; M. Restle (1966), 'Binbirkilise', in *RbK* 1, 698ff.

<sup>6</sup> Theoph. Simoc. 1.4.1

rates the construction of several buildings and of an aqueduct with funds provided by the emperor Tiberius II Constantine (574-582), under the supervision of the Archbishop of Serdica Leontius.<sup>7</sup> Besides confirming that substantial building projects were carried out in and around the city in that period – aqueducts are extramural, like Saint Sophia – this inscription also witnesses the extraordinary ambitions of the local ecclesiastical authority: Leontius is styled archbishop, a title which at that time could be legitimately used only by the primate of Justiniana Prima. Serdica had been the capital and metropolitan see of the province of Dacia Mediterranea and probably capital of the whole civil diocese of Dacia down to the times of Justinian, when it lost these dignities to Justiniana Prima. However, it seems that its bishops took every chance to express their rivalry against their new primate. In the late 590s, Pope Gregory the Great reprimanded bishop Felix of Serdica for refusing to recognize the election of Archbishop John of Justiniana Prima.<sup>8</sup> Briefly, in the late 570s, we find in Serdica an archbishop who manages public building projects with money sent by the emperor Tiberius II Constantine. Saint Sophia could very well have been one of them.

Fingarova's attempt to date the whole building to the 8<sup>th</sup> century creates problems with broader architectural history. Saint Sophia is a hybrid combining the nave of a three-aisled vaulted basilica with the east end of a cruciform church. The closest parallel to this plan is the basilica of Rakitovo, a 6<sup>th</sup>-century monument excavated on Mount Rhodope not far from Serdica, which repeats the plan of Saint Sophia in nearly every detail, though on a smaller scale. A deep sanctuary like Saint Sophia's can also be seen in the 6<sup>th</sup>-century basilica of the settlement of Gamzigrad.<sup>9</sup> Beyond the Balkan region, the building can be compared to the cruciform late antique churches of the area of the Hasan Dağı in Cappadocia, especially the Red Church (Kızıl Kilise) near Sivrihisar. The elevation of the nave, with its lofty clerestory and vaults strengthened by strong arches, is unique in the Balkans, but it has close similarities with Basilica 1 in Madenşehir-Binbirkilise.<sup>10</sup> Despite the different scale – the Anatolian monuments are smaller – and building material – dressed stone in Anatolia, bricks in Sofia – the plan of Saint Sophia is more similar to these monuments than anything postdating the 6<sup>th</sup> century. Typological comparisons, of course, cannot provide a date on their own, but, unless we look at the parallels

<sup>7</sup> Beševliev (1964), Nr. 3 (supra n. 2).

<sup>8</sup> C. Pietri (1984), 'La géographie de l'Illyricum ecclésiastique et ses relations avec l'église de Rome (Ve-Vie siècles)', in *Villes et peuplement dans l'Illyricum protobyzantin*. Collection de l'École française de Rome 77. Rome, 53, 57, 59.

<sup>9</sup> On both Rakitovo and Gamzigrad, see: Ćurčić (2010), 225, 231-234 (supra n. 2).

<sup>10</sup> On the cruciform churches of the Hasan Dağı: Ramsey and Bell (1909), 370-390 (supra n. 3); M. Restle (1978), 'Kappadokien', in *RbK* 3, 1014ff. On Binbirkilise: supra n. 5.

mentioned here, we risk staying under the false impression that Saint Sophia is an architectural unicum. And Fingarova does not refer to them at all.

The author argues that the current building does not follow the aesthetic rules of late antique church building, especially the effort to disguise the volume of structural elements through the use of marble incrustation and sculpture that distinguishes 6<sup>th</sup>-century churches in Constantinople, Ravenna, Thessalonike and elsewhere. Yet the features that she takes as representative of late antique architecture, i.e. marble, sculpture and mosaics, pertain to aristocratic buildings in areas and cities that were more prosperous than Serdica and the northern Balkans. Here marble decoration becomes rare already in the 5<sup>th</sup> century. 6<sup>th</sup>-century buildings like the Red Church of Perushtitsa, the Church of the Stag near Pirdop, the basilica of Goliamo Belovo or the Basilica of the Sea in Mesembria, feature masonry piers and very little or no marble.<sup>11</sup> What the author regards as representative of the Middle Ages is actually representative of most ecclesiastical building in the northern Balkans during the 6<sup>th</sup> century.

In conclusion, if we can unreservedly accept Fingarova's 8<sup>th</sup>-century date for the vaults, the ground plan and scale of the church fit better with a late 6<sup>th</sup>-century historical and architectural context. The author's effort to exclude the possibility of a late antique phase causes problems of interpretation and underplays important parts of the evidence.

### **Historical problems: why Serdica?**

Finally, whether we accept a full or partial building of Saint Sophia in the 8<sup>th</sup> century, it is a work of imposing scale, which raises an historical issue: why, of all places in the Balkans, was it at Serdica that such a monumental building project took place in the middle of the Dark Ages? The author argues that the period was less dark than we usually think and also points to the general recovery of the empire under the Isaurian emperors, especially Constantine V. Yet it is hard to deny that during the 7<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> centuries, important Byzantine cities like Philippopolis (Plovdiv), Beroe (Stara Zagora) and Mesembria (Nesebur) produce extremely scarce and poor archaeological finds and it is quite clear that the historically documented crises of that period did precipitate a dramatic collapse of material culture. In the 6<sup>th</sup> century, Serdica was still a notable city with several churches and a densely built settlement; its inhabitants used money in their everyday business and we happen to know quite many of their names and professions, because they carved them on tombstones. In the 8<sup>th</sup> cen-

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<sup>11</sup> Ćurčić (2010), 232-33, 241-42 (supra n. 2).

ture, Serdica was an outlying Byzantine town in the northwest extremities of the empire. It kept its walls without visible changes, but they probably protected only poor huts made of mud and wood. Money was hardly used by the population and no one carved inscriptions. How are we to explain the appearance of the fine and massive pure-brick structure of Saint Sophia in this context? Fingarova is probably right in assuming that it was the result of imperial funding, but then what was so special about 8<sup>th</sup>-century Serdica to attract such an interest from the capital?

The construction of cathedrals like Saint Sophia is better understood if associated with important periods and events in the history of bishoprics. Serdica was a major metropolitan see in the Latin Balkans and it probably even had the primacy of Dacia before it was lost to Sirmium, Thessalonica and finally Justiniana Prima. After the decline and abandonment of Justiniana Prima in the Dark Ages, Serdica was left as the only major city and bishopric of Dacia and of the Latin Church of the northern Balkans remaining in Byzantine hands. In the 730s, Serdica's bishop became a metropolitan of the Patriarchate of Constantinople – then under Iconoclast control – which meant the permanent annexation of this last remnant of Latin Christianity in the Balkans to the Greek Church: conceivably, the Greek rite of Constantinople was introduced, as it happened in Sicily and Calabria, while the old Latin liturgy was forgotten.<sup>12</sup> These developments are probably the most significant aspects of Serdica's life in the ecclesiastical domain during the Dark Ages and they provide a convincing framework to explain both the extraordinary building project and the mysterious inscription about the patriarch. The renovation of Saint Sophia can be seen as a part of the ecclesiastical policy of the early Isaurian emperors in their European provinces.

## Conclusions

With the data and arguments the author sets forth, we can make significant corrections to earlier theories and get as close as possible to a convincing reconstruction of the history of this great building. We can fully accept Fingarova's suggestions concerning the two predecessor churches of Saint Sophia. For the current church, however, it seems preferable to recognize two

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<sup>12</sup> M.V. Anastos (1957), 'The transfer of Illyricum, Calabria and Sicily to the jurisdiction of the patriarchate of Constantinople in 732-33', in *Rivista di Studi Bizantini e Neoellenici* 9, 14-31 (reprinted in: M.V. Anastos [1979], *Studies in Byzantine Intellectual History*. London, no. 9); J. Darrouzès (1981), *Notitiae Episcopatum Ecclesiae Constantinopolitanae*. Paris, 32, notitia 3.49; E. Kountoura-Galaki (1996), 'Η εικονοκλαστική Notitia 3 και το λατινικό πρότυπό της', in *Byzantina Symmeikta* 10, 45-73.



phases of building rather than one. For the original construction a dating can be suggested to the late 6<sup>th</sup> century, possibly under Tiberius II Constantine (574-582). Fingarova's 8<sup>th</sup>-century chronology can be securely ascribed only to the upper parts and vaults of the church. It seems likely that the monument was extensively rebuilt between AD 730 and 811, perhaps after earthquake damages and temporary abandonment. This grand rebuilding can be compared to a number of similar projects in the same period, notably the rebuilding of Saint Eirene in Constantinople. Whether we choose to associate it with the significant changes in the ecclesiastical regime of Serdica under the Isaurian dynasty or with the general recovery of the empire under Constantine V, the 8<sup>th</sup>-century rebuilding of Saint Sophia is a major event in a Dark Age provincial context. In a period when Constantinople appears to have lost control of its inland European provinces, Serdica remains a bastion of imperial sovereignty at the heart of the Balkans and it continues to maintain its most hallowed shrine.

Despite my disagreements with some of the author's views, my criticism would have been impossible without her informative, richly illustrated and well-written book at hand. Galina Fingarova has opened this great building in its fullness to international scholarly debate and she must be warmly congratulated for her contribution to the study of Byzantine Architecture.

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