Town and Church in Late Antiquity. Architectural and Urbanistic Dimensions

Ventzislav DINTCHEV

Abstract: In the 4th c. AD the number of Christian religious buildings in the old cities of the dioceses Thracia and Dacia is small, and their appearance rather humble. The first Christian buildings were usually erected in the necropoleis and the suburbs. When inside the cities, they are situated outside the central squares, dominated by the still functioning public buildings, symbols of the towns' autonomy of the previous centuries.

In the old centers the abandonment of the buildings related to polis autonomy happens in the end of 4th c. – first half of the 5th c. AD. Similar is the final date of the earlier structure-defining units in the large military camps of the Principate which are in the process of transformation into civic centers in the 4th c. AD. Significant is the fact that the first large bishop churches appear simultaneously with the decline of the old architecture linked to the old polis or military organization. Despite the negative tendencies in urban life around and after the mid-5th c. AD, the construction of Christian religious buildings is impressive. In the end of the 5th – 6th c. AD. Christian churches heavily dominate in the urban structures.

Key words: Late Antiquity, cities, public buildings, Christian buildings, bishops.

The political system, the social relations and the basic ideological values of a society are a direct expression of its way of life. In view of settlement life, the most developed form – the cities – are indicative for trends in social development. This article is an attempt to illustrate the trends in social development through the changes in urban planning and architecture in the Late antique dioceses of Thracia and Dacia (fig. 1).

In the time frame of Late Antiquity (AD 284-610), it would seem appropriate to make a distinction between the Late Roman and the Early Byzantine eras, the border between them being in AD 395.

In the Late Roman era (LRE) the dioceses of Thracia and Dacia were a geopolitical priority for the still united Empire. Despite the general stagnation of civic self-government, city life here prospered. This is not only true for the capitals of the new provinces, but also for most of the other cities. In many places at the end of the 3rd – beginning of the 4th century the buildings in central city squares (fora, agorai) were refurbished and reconstructed – e.g. the bouleutēria in Philippopolis (fig. 2), Serdica (fig. 3) and Nicopolis ad Istrum, the civic basilicas in Oescus and Nicopolis ad Istrum, the square porticoes and shops in Philippopolis (fig. 2), etc. At that time the square complex at the west gate of Augusta Traiana was built or at least reconstructed.

The street networks, water supply and sewage system were maintained in good operating condition. New large public baths and
warehouses were built. The amphitheaters in Serdica (fig. 3) and Marcianopolis (fig. 5) were constructed. Many of the finest buildings discovered until now in the local antique centers date from the LRE (e.g. figs. 2, 5). Probably some of them were residences (praetoria, palatia) of senior representatives of the new imperial administration.

At the beginning of the LRE military reforms were also implemented, which caused significant changes in the stationary organisation of the military units. The large military camps from the previous epoch, such as Singidunum, Viminacium, Novae (fig. 7), Durostorum, were transformed into centers of civilian habitation, in which the headquarters of the respective legions and limited military detachments still resided. At the same time, ancient towns, in which the presence of military in the previous epoch was limited, received significant garrisons (e.g. fig. 3).

In the LRE the fortresses of ancient cities and of large former military camps were refurbished, and this increased their protection capability. It is indicative that many of them significantly increased their protected areas with new walls – e.g. Serdica (fig. 3), Ratiaria, Oescus, Tropaeum Traiani (fig. 6), Odessos, Novae (fig. 7). In other places, satellite military fortresses were built – Pautalia (fig. 4), Durostorum.

In the LRE new large centers also appeared in Thracia and Dacia. Most of them were in the border provinces of the two dioceses – Iibia, Zaldapa, Abritus and others (figs. 1, 9, 10). Today there is no evidence for the existence of polis organization in them. They had powerful fortresses and architecture, pointing to their specific military role and their function as food and supply bases. In some of them, relevant
management administration was established – for example in Abritus, as the praetorium explored there shows (fig. 10). The initial presence of large open spaces in these centers suggests that they were designed also as gathering points for the population of the surroundings in case of danger.

One new large center was Diocletianopolis, which, unlike the above mentioned city, was situated south of the Haemus mountain (fig. 1) and contained an urban component in its name. In view of planning, streets (fig. 11) and water supply, it did not differ from ancient cities. For now, however, no buildings related to ancient civic autonomy have been found. The remains of luxury residences and an amphitheater have been unearthed. Large public baths that used local mineral springs have been studied. Another special feature of this center is the strong military presence in it. But the location of its big barracks along the fortress walls (fig. 11) does not correspond to the scheme of a Roman military camp.

In terms of religion and ideological values, the LRE was a special time. With the Edict of Milan of AD 313 Christianity was officially recognized, but did not gain monopoly on religion and social
ideology. New laws passed in the next decades affirmed Christianity at the expense of pagan cults, but its enforcement as the only official religion, respectively—the permanent incrimination of pagan cults, became irreversible and uncompromising policy only during the reign of Theodosius I (AD 379–395). This ideological specificity of public life in the 4th century can be illustrated well by the synchronous architecture and design of cities and other major centers of Thracia and Dacia.

In the 4th century the number of Christian religious buildings in the cities was relatively small, and their appearance—comparatively modest. The first urban Christian buildings were erected usually in
cemeteries and suburbs – e.g. the “Dzhendem tepe” basilica to the west of the fortress of Philippopolis (fig. 2), or the single-nave church near the east gate of Serdica and the first religious building under St. Sophia basilica in the most significant necropolis of the same city (fig. 3). Built in protected areas, they were away from the central city squares with public buildings, symbols of the civic autonomy of previous centuries, still in use – e.g. the presumed Basilica under the modern-day St. Petka church in Philippopolis (fig. 2), basilica # 3 in Pautalia (fig. 4), and the single-nave church set up in a former water tank in the western sector of the Late Roman Tropaeum Traiani (fig. 6). Limited in number, of modest size and at a peripheral location were the first Christian buildings of the new Late Roman centers – for instance, those of Diocletianopolis (fig. 11). So far in Thracia and Dacia, not a single Christian religious building is known to have been erected upon
a ruined city pagan temple before the last quarter of the 4th century.

At the end of the 4th – the first half of the 5th century the leading trends in urban development changed. The class of *curiales* – the economic and social mainstay of the ancient *polis*, declined and disappeared as a major social factor. *De facto*, the authorities of the old civic self-government disappeared as well (e.g. Jones 1994, 242-247; Liebeschuetz 2001, 104-109). The last legislative acts connected with the old city councils in the dioceses of Thracia and Dacia were from the end of the 4th – the beginning of the 5th century. The laws incorporated the dwindling number of *curiales* in the imperial administration and aimed to keep them as implementors of certain service obligations, but apparently these regulations were not met with success (e.g. Велков 1959, 69-70, 214-216).

Meanwhile, at the end of the 4th – the first half of the 5th century the territorial-administrative organization of the church, which doubled that of the state, became fully developed. The bishoprics were established primarily in the cities and were grouped according to the existing provinces and dioceses. Already in the year AD 409, the Emperor Honorius declared the bishop as a leading figure in the election of *defensor civitatis* (*Cod. Iust.* 1.55.8). The respective edict was the first step in the implementation of post-curial city management (Liebeschuetz 2001, 110, 149-150). Among the important decisions of the Fourth Ecumenical Council of AD 451 was the establishment of Episcopal chairs in the newly constituted cities (Jones 1994, 253). The well-known law of Emperor Zeno (*Cod. Iust.* 1.3.35) that decreed “every town ... to have at any price a separate and own bishop”, and yet,

---

**Fig. 7.** The Late antique Novae (after Сарновски 2014, 92, фиг. 1; with my – V. D., additions)

**Fig. 8.** The episcopal complex of Novae in the 5th c. (above) and the 6th c. (below) (after Biernacki 2013, 45, fig. 10/II, V; Czerner 2013, 85, 88; with my – V. D., design)
not anybody ... can be allowed even by imperial order to deprive any city of the right to own bishopric, of the right of its assigned territory or of any other right”, testifies clearly to the leadership of the bishop in city life and demonstrates the importance of the Episcopal institution as a major factor in the legitimation of urban status at the end of the 5th century.

Legislation of the 6th century affirmed this role; the functions and rights of bishops in the worldly affairs of the cities expanded. Thus, in AD 505, Emperor Anastasius ordered the ubiquitous establishment of an urban government body headed by bishops who must elect a curator (λογιστής) and a sitona (σιτώνης) – magistrates, involved in the management and subsistence of the city (Cod. Iust. 1.4.17). Unlike the edict of AD 409, the one from AD 505 did not mention curiales. In AD 545 Emperor Justinian issued a novella that confirmed and expanded the power of that governing body, including the bishop and
the so called notables – *primates* (πρωτεύοντες), *possesores* (κτήτορες) in it (*Iust. Nov. CXXVIII*). At that time, the bishops had some control functions over representatives of the imperial administration, such as metropolitans over provincial governors (e.g. Liebeschuetz 2001, 110-111, 150-153; Rapp 2005, 274-289).

The presented trends are illustrated well by the data on urban architecture and townscape in Thracia and Dacia. The first decades of the Early Byzantine era (EBE) were the last for the functioning of most public complexes and buildings from the previous epochs. In the old centers (figs. 2-6) the abandonment of buildings related to city autonomy and other monuments symbolic for the *polis* status took place at the end of the 4th and the first half of the 5th century. Similar is the final date of the formerly significant structures in the large military camps from the Principate. For instance, the archaeological and epigraphic evidence for the use of the *principia* in Novae (fig. 7), the most explored among these centers, do not go beyond the middle of the 5th century.

At the same time, in the first decades of the EBE began the actual Christianization of the architectural landscape of the old civic
and military centers of Thracia and Dacia. Significantly, at the time of abandonment of complexes and buildings associated with the old *polis* or military patterns, the first large episcopal temples appeared. These were basilicas erected away from the old squares. With proven or supposed identification today are the first episcopal basilicas in Philippopolis (fig. 2), Pautalia (fig. 4), Tomis, Marcianopolis (fig. 5), Odessos, Tropaeum Traiani (fig. 6), Istros, etc. The identification becomes irrefutable when an episcopal residence (*episkopeion*) has been ascertained near the basilica – for example in Novae (figs. 7, 8). The episcopal complex replaced the *polis* square (*forum, agora*) as a structural urban core and this replacement is a clear indicator of changes in the governance and the social organization of cities.

In the development of most of the old centers of dioceses of Thracia and Dacia in the second half of the 5th – 6th century there are certain negative trends resulting from the deteriorating political situation. Thus, the standard of private housing gradually declined. The state of the road networks, water supply and sewage facilities decreased in quality. Fortification became priority in utilitarian public works. A clear indicator of the general state of the old centers towards and after the middle of the 5th century is the fact that many of them significantly reduced their protected areas – e.g. Viminacium, Singidunum, Nicopolis ad Istrum (fig. 1), Philippopolis (fig. 2), Serdica (fig. 3), Pautalia (fig. 4), etc. On this ground, the intensive construction of Christian religious buildings was impressive and no less indicative of the development of urban life. Examples are provided by the provincial capitals – Philippopolis (fig. 2), Serdica (fig. 3), Tomis, Marcianopolis
(fig. 5), and other old centers – Odessos, Pautalia (fig. 4), Tropaeum Traiani (fig. 6), Novae (fig. 7), etc. At the end of the 5th – 6th century the Christian temples strongly dominated in the cities and were almost the only kind of lavish public architecture. The known basilicas and episcopal residences with an earlier inaugural date experienced construction periods in the 6th century (fig. 8) that enhanced their architectural value and their importance as structural urban cores.

The large Late Roman centers, in principle alien to the ancient polis organization, gained city status in the EBE notably through the church. The construction of Christian temples there was also of growing intensity in the course of the 5th – 6th century. The best example till now is Diocletianopolis, where nine religious buildings with different foundation dates, but synchronously functioning in the 6th century, have been excavated. Most of them were out of the city ramparts, but the largest and most representative – Basilica # 2 – was in the central zone (fig. 11) and it could be assumed that it was the cathedral of the local bishop. Large Christian basilicas, likely episcopal cathedrals, were found recently in Zaldapa (fig. 9) and Abritus (fig. 10). Christian basilicas were the most presentable Early Byzantine buildings discovered in other Late Roman centers like Ibida, Tzoida (fig. 1), etc.

A special case is presented by the old Greek colonies Messembria and Apollonia (Sozopolis) (fig. 1), politically neglected during the Principate. In the EBE, however, they were again flourishing centers.
Today we know more about the Early Byzantine Mesembria, which possessed a solid fortress and water supplies. There were also large public baths. Definitely prominent, however, were the Christian cult buildings. Already in the 5th century, the St. Sophia basilica was erected, also known as “the old metropolitan church”, i.e. the local episcopal cathedral. Better or worse preserved remains of representative religious buildings of the 5th – 6th century have been discovered in all areas of this large city (fig. 12).

In the dioceses of Thracia and Dacia there were new Early Byzantine cities as well. Some of them were also on the western Black Sea coast, but the relevant studies so far are too limited in scope. New significant, but still unidentified centers are the so-called Gradina on the ridge Jelica in today’s western Serbia (province of Moesia prima), and the so-called Golemo gradište at the village of Konjuh in present-day northern Macedonia (province of Dardania) (fig. 1). They date to the 6th century. These cities were located on the hills and included several
fortified areas. In and around them, certain buildings and facilities have been explored. Undoubtedly outstanding in number, location, size and decoration are the Christian cult buildings (fig. 13).

Among the best examples of new towns within the borders of the Empire in general were Iustiniana Prima (so-called Caričin grad near Lebane, in present-day southern Serbia) and Zikideva (on Tsarevets hill in Veliko Turnovo, in present-day northern Bulgaria) (fig. 1). At the same time they demonstrate different approaches in the founding of new cities in the EBE.

According to the novels of the years AD 535 and 545 (Nov. Iust. XI, CXXXI) and the records of Procopius (Proc. De aedif. 4.1), Iustiniana Prima was a city founded by Justinian I in order to perpetuate imperial glory, but also as the capital of the northern part of the prefecture of Illyricum, including the diocese of Dacia. Longtime archaeological research proved it as a "ville byzantine importante ... qui soit une foundation du VIe siècle, parfaitement artificielle" (Bavant 1984, 272). It was situated on a hill dominating the surroundings. The solidly fortified area of its three separate zones – the so-called acropolis, the upper and the lower town – amounts to a total of about 8 hectares. In its design and its original form the urban structure included primarily public buildings and complexes, and luxury housing. At that time the ordinary population behind the fortress walls was sparse. Among the public buildings there were baths, "principia" (probably the residence of the imperial magistrate), utilitarian buildings and facilities, but most
numerous were the cult buildings (fig. 14a). Undoubtedly prominent was the so-called acropolis, where the complex of the archbishop of Iustiniana Prima was arranged, including a cathedral (a large and richly decorated basilica), a residence and other components (fig. 14b).

The invasions of the 5th century in the province of Moesia secunda, and in the territory of the ancient Nicopolis ad Istrum in particular, stimulated the flow of people to the previously small settlement Zikideva on the inaccessible Tsarevets hill. Its transformation into a real city, i.e. the construction of the main fortress on the hill, the first public buildings and part of the houses, took place at the end of the 5th – the beginning of the 6th century. By the middle of the 6th century, the plan and structure of the city acquired their finished state. The smaller lower fortress ensured the water supply. The total area of both fortresses was about 15 hectares. In the main upper fortress there were separate areas with different public and/or housing buildings. Unquestionably, its cult complexes and buildings were dominant in the structure and the general architectural silhouette of the city. A solid basilica stood at the front of the main gate and served as an ideological support for this key place of the urban stronghold. Another monumental basilica rose on the top of Tsarevets hill. A great cult ensemble occupied the most suitable for construction downtown area (fig. 15a). In its final phase, it contained three interconnected complexes, including the episcopal residence and a monastery with a large basilica which probably served also as an episcopal cathedral (fig. 15b).

Iustiniana Prima and Zikideva are excellent examples of the emergence of Early Byzantine towns at the initiative, respectively, “from the top” and “from the bottom”. Studies there have shown that, despite differences in their origins, they had similar structures, dominated by religious buildings. The undeniable structural cores in both cases were the bishop complexes (archbishop in the case of Iustiniana Prima). These centers reflected in the purest way the most important trends in urbanization and the role of the church in urban life in the EBE.

**Bibliography**


Cârstoiu, M. / Apostol, V. 2016. La fortification romaine de Tropaeum Traiani. – Lansarea revistei anuale de arhitectură, restaurare şi arheologie (Caiete ARA) 7, 33-94.


Ангелов, А. 1999. Марцианопол. История и археология. Варна.


Велков, В. 1959. Градът в Тракия и Дакия през късната античност (IV-VI в.). Проучвания и материали. София.


Кацарова, В. 2005. Паутилия и нейната територия през I-VI век. Велико Търново.


Летописът на Сердика. Т. I. София.


Марков, Т. / Гюзелев, М. / Гостодинов, К. 2014. Спасително археологическо проучване в границите на НААГР „Старинен Несебър“, УПИ III-278, кв. 6, УПИ III-217, кв. 8 и УПИ VII-204, кв. 12 по плана на гр. Несебър, област Бургас. – Археологически открития и разкопки през 2013 г., 233-235.

Велков, В. 1959. Градът в Тракия и Дакия през късната античност (IV-VI в.). Проучвания и материали. София.


