

УДК 72.033, 7.033.2...7  
ББК 85.113(4)  
DOI 10.18688/aa2414-10-55  
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## Architectural Features of the Church of St. Demetrius in Veles: An Analysis of Recent Discoveries<sup>1</sup>

The Church of St. Demetrius is situated on the rocky bank of the Vardar River in the vicinity of Veles (Ill.110). In the Middle Ages, this part of Northern Macedonia was situated at the intersection of significant trade routes, one of which traversed the Vardar River valley from the administrative center of the Byzantine theme Bulgaria in Skopje to Thessaloniki, the capital of Greek Macedonia. The other route commenced in the southern sector of Veles and proceeded along the banks of the Topolka, a tributary of the Vardar River, towards Prilep, which was a prominent city in the region of Pelagonia. From there, it continued onward towards the Adriatic and the Aegean Sea [38, pp. 125–153].

Following the defeat of the First Bulgarian Kingdom by Byzantine Empire and the establishment of the Archbishopric of Ohrid in 1019 under the auspices of the Byzantine Emperor Basil II, Veles came under the authority of the Pelagonian Bishopric [53; 2, pp. 7–9]. Towards the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, the region was once again beset by political conflicts between the Bulgars and the Greeks. The fortifications of Veles, situated at the confluence of the Topolka and Vardar rivers, had previously protected two important routes during the Roman and early Byzantine periods. However, by this point, they had become a site of frequent change and instability, situated at the crossroads of historical events and with unstable territorial borders. Throughout the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the political authority in Veles underwent several changes. In the initial decades of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Veles was governed by Dobromir Strez, the nephew of Bulgarian king Ivan Asen I, who had previously conquered portions of the southwestern territories of the Bulgarian kingdom in alliance with the Serbs and subsequently proclaimed himself ruler over the North Macedonian lands. Strez was unable to maintain control of the captured areas for an extended period. By the end of the second decade of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Epirus had assumed authority, only to be subsequently replaced by Bulgar and then Nicaeans [60]<sup>2</sup>.

A surviving account describes how the Nicaean emperor Theodore II Laskaris reclaimed the city of Veles from the Bulgar in 1255. In this period of turbulence, the ancient Byzantine fortress, constructed in the 5<sup>th</sup>–6<sup>th</sup> centuries, was encircled by a second, more imposing series of walls and towers [39]. The Church of St. Demetrius was constructed on the northeastern

<sup>1</sup> This work is supported by the Russian Science Foundation (grant 20-18-00294-P) and done at the Research Institute of Theory and History of Architecture and Town Planning — branch of the Central Research and Project Institute of the Construction Ministry of Russia.

<sup>2</sup> Troitsky I. (ed.) *Vizantiiskie istoriki Perevedennyye s grecheskogo pri Sankt-Peterburgskoi Dukhovnoi akademii (Byzantine Historians Translated from Greek at the St. Petersburg Theological Academy)*. St. Petersburg, Tipografia departamenta udelov Publ., 1863, pp. 90–105 (in Russian).

slope of the defensive structures. The church is currently surrounded by late monastery buildings. Based on the discovery of fragments of ancient masonry at the site, it can be assumed that the monastery existed in an earlier period [27, p. 69]. For an extended period, there was no available information regarding the construction date of the church or its medieval history. The evidence of the church's revival after a long period of desolation is found in the inscription on the southern wall of the naos. This inscription provides information about the work carried out in 1855 on the interior painting and the removal of earth around the building. This latter activity is likely to have been related to the landslide of the rock to which the church is closely adjoined [5, p. 148; 27, p. 77]. The Yugoslav architectural historian J. Bošković was the first to undertake a detailed study of the church. In the absence of any information about the history of the church, he proposed that its architectural solution could be dated to the second half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century [6, pp. 103–105]. This dating resulted in the church of St. Demetrius in Veles being included in the primary reviews of Balkan architecture, where it was considered to belong to the same category as the churches of Moravian Serbia [7, p. 138; 18, p. 191; 51; 53]. An alternative viewpoint, which posits the possibility of categorizing the church in Veles within the context of early Paleologian architecture of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, was initially articulated by Macedonian architectural historian Sašo Korunovski in his 2000 thesis [27, pp. 69–83]. The author highlights the lack of extant evidence regarding the church, emphasizing instead the architectural similarities between the facades in Veles and the monuments of early Paleologian architecture in Macedonia. In particular, he considers the church of St. Demetrius in a row with typologically related single-nave basilicas of the late 13<sup>th</sup> century in Prilep (St. Nicholas and St. Peter, rebuilt in 1284–1298) [27, pp. 43–70]. The typological and stylistic features of the church in Veles in the context of North Macedonian architecture of the 13<sup>th</sup> century were not traced in detail. The author limited himself to a detailed description of the monument. The Church of St. Demetrius is a modest, single-nave vaulted basilica with a narthex that extends along the west-east axis. The plan is uneven (Fig. 1), with the longest length of the facade on the northern side (13.7 m) and the greatest width of the building on the eastern wall (5.5 m). The nave and altar are covered by a single, longitudinally oriented barrel vault measuring 7.7 meters in length, which extends directly onto the northern and southern walls of the building (Fig. 2) [27, pp. 43–70]. This structural solution exhibits regional characteristics<sup>3</sup>, as a comparable vault configuration, with wall support, was previously known in northern Macedonia at the end of the First Bulgarian Empire in the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries (Churches of St. Stephan and Agioi Anargyroi in Kastoria)<sup>4</sup>. The tradition of erecting single-nave vaulted basilicas, typically of modest dimensions, with a length of approximately 7–8 meters, continued uninterrupted throughout the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries. This is evidenced by the numerous examples of small one-nave basilicas in the region of Prespa, Prilep, and elsewhere. The altar structure of St. Demetrius also shares similarities with other basilicas of a similar type. The eastern facade is formed by a single trapezoidal apse, while the niche of the prothesis is recessed into the wall of the northeastern corner. This solution is also found in Grnčari on Prespa (Fig. 3) and Prilep (St. Peter (Fig. 4) and St. Nicholas (Fig. 5)). At the same time, the architectural composition of the western section of the church in Veles, constituted by the

<sup>3</sup> Not far from the church of St. Demetrius in Veles two more very small also vaulted single-nave basilicas of St. Nedelya and St. John the Baptist have been preserved dating broadly to the 13<sup>th</sup>–14<sup>th</sup> centuries [2].

<sup>4</sup> In the three-aisled basilicas of St. Stephen and Agioi Anargyroi in Kastoria, the naves are divided not by columns, but by sections of walls with large arches between them. For more details see: [68].

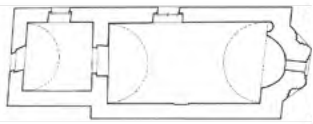


Fig. 1. Church of St. Demetrius in Veles. Plan according to S. Korunovski



Fig. 2. Church of St. Demetrius in Veles. Longitudinal section according to S. Korunovski

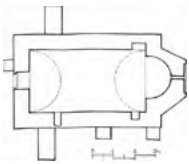


Fig. 3. Church of St. Elijah in Grnčari. Plan by S. Korunovski

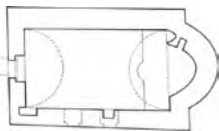


Fig. 4. Church of St. Peter in Varoš (Prilep). Plan by S. Korunovski

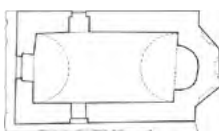


Fig. 5. Church of St. Nicholas in Varoš (Prilep). Church of St. Nicholas in Varoš (Prilep). Plan by S. Korunovski

cubic volume of the two-story narthex, markedly differentiates it from the prevailing typological series. The bell tier above the narthex of St. Demetrius was built in the form of a square tower with large arched openings on four sides (Ill. 111). The tower was originally topped with a domed or cross vault, the lower parts of which have been preserved under the modern wooden ceiling (Ill. 112). Such a composition with a tower over the narthex is without parallel in other Macedonian buildings of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The presence of this feature, in conjunction with the polychrome ceramic decoration of the facades, constituted the main arguments put forth by scholars in support of dating the basilica in Veles to the 14<sup>th</sup> century. The appearance of the tower was explained by the influence of Serbian traditions on the architecture of Macedonian territories, which became part of the Serbian state after 1330 [7, p. 138].

The incorporation of the tower resulted in a notable increase in the overall length of the structure when compared to the basilicas of Prilep, with which the church in Veles shares significant similarities not only in terms of typological parameters but also in stylistic features. The decoration and morphological set of elements on the facades of the Prilep and Veles churches demonstrate notable similarities in terms of both theme and composition. The study of medieval architecture of Prilep has been a significant area of interest for scholars from Yugoslavia and North Macedonia [3; 24; 26; 27, pp. 48–61; 29, pp. 1630–1631; 40]. The current understanding of the nature of church building in this town during the medieval period has been supplemented by new publications that convincingly show that the main role in the construction and rebuilding of several churches in Prilep was played by the artels from Epirus, who arrived there in the latter third of the 13<sup>th</sup> century [67]. Historiography has already traced the specificity of the Epirus architectural tradition, which became widespread in the North Macedonian region starting from the last third of the 13<sup>th</sup> century [16; 71; 73]. Before proceeding to a more detailed consideration of the design of the facades of St. Demetrius in Veles in the context of North Macedonian architecture of the late 13<sup>th</sup> century, it is necessary to define the date of the construction with greater precision.

This opportunity has recently emerged as a result of the restoration works carried out between 2018 and 2022 by a team of specialists from the State Center for Monument Protection in Skopje. During this period, an original mural

painting was discovered beneath the lime plaster on the eastern and northern walls of the narthex (Ill. 113)<sup>5</sup>. A subsequent analysis of the iconography of the murals and their stylistic peculiarities will be presented separately. The present study will focus on the aspects that clarify the time and circumstances of the church construction. Among the discovered fragments of the fresco decoration on the eastern wall of the northeastern corner of the narthex is a ktitor composition depicting a large figure in stature with a model of the church in his hand (Ill. 114). The ktitor is depicted wearing rich purple robes embroidered with gold braid and decorated with two-headed eagles. The aristocrat's appearance is imbued with a sense of elevated status and grandeur. The model of the church depicted in the ktitor's left hand is presented in a realistic manner, with particular attention paid to the composition and architectural details (Ill. 115). The architectural features of the Basilica of St. Demetrius are clearly discernible in the image of the church. The fresco provides clear evidence of a tower with a bell and dome, and accurately depicts the northern facade, thus enabling the reconstruction of the appearance of poorly preserved parts of the building. The ktitor portrait is accompanied by a lengthy dedicatory inscription (Ill. 116). Despite the considerable damage, the majority of the text could be read<sup>6</sup>. Thus, the date of construction and the name of the ktitor have been clarified (Fig. 6).

The hypothesis proposed by Korunovski, namely that this basilica was constructed at the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, has been confirmed by the historical inscription on the ktitor portrait, which indicates that the date of construction was 1297. Additionally, historical documentation exists regarding the ktitor, identified as the eminent stratopedarch Leo Kotanitzes<sup>7</sup>. It is likely that he can be identified with the Byzantine dignitary Kotanitzes Tornikios. The Tornikios family was described by the Byzantine historian Gregory Acropolites (1217–1282/83)<sup>8</sup> as a member of the House of Palaiologos<sup>9</sup>.

Another Byzantine historian George Pachymeres repeatedly mentioned Tornikios in the context of the history of relations between Byzantium and the Serbs at the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century<sup>10</sup>. The Byzantine historian characterizes Tornikios as a traitor and provides evidence of

<sup>5</sup> The restoration work was carried out by a team of specialists from the NI National Conservation Center – Skopje, led by Mr. Darko Nikolovski, a monument protection inspector; the restoration work was supervised by Mr. Vlado Mukovski, a monument protection inspector; the team members were Zarie Amdiu and Momcilo Trajkovski, a senior restorer and a monument protection inspector.

<sup>6</sup> We thank Andrey Vinogradov, who was able to read this inscription. The inscription is given in his translation.

<sup>7</sup> For historical sources on Leo Kotanitzes, see: [31, pp. 184–185]

<sup>8</sup> George Acropolites in the Chronicle of the Grand Logothete repeatedly mentions various representatives of the Tornikios dynasty, representing the imperial cronies and relatives of the Nicaean military aristocracy [Akropolites, Chapters: 40, 49, 50]. Demetrius Tornikios is mentioned in connection with the campaign of John III Doukas Vatatzes (Nicaean emperor 1222–1254) in the Balkans (1246), which ended with the annexation of part of Macedonia and Thessalonica state. Among the most famous Byzantine dignitaries, first of all Demetrius Tornikios Comnenus is mentioned, who was vested with the supreme civil authority and ruled over public affairs. He was extremely beloved and respected, so much so that in his letters the emperor called him brother. Michael Tornikios, who was granted the dignity of the great Primmikirus under Emperor John III, appears. He took part in the Byzantine military campaigns of the Byzantines in the Rhodopes [Acropolites, Chapter 57]. Already under Michael VIII Palaiologos (from 1259 – the Nicene emperor, from 1261 to December, 11, 1282 – Byzantine emperor) Constantine Tornikios is mentioned, the father-in-law of the emperor's brother John, who received the title of Sevastokrator [Akropolites, Chapters: 82–84, 89. See: George Acropolites: The History ed. and trans. R. Macrides, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. 400 p.].

<sup>9</sup> Nestor's writings on the wall of the church in Gornji Koziak [57].

<sup>10</sup> For detailed comments see: [19, pp. 160–161; 30; 31, pp. 183].

+ Ἀνυγέρθη ἐκ βάθρου καὶ ἀνυστορήθη ὁ θεῖος καὶ πάνσεπτος  
 ναὸς οὗ[τος τοῦ ἁγίου] μεγαλομάρτυρος καὶ μυρο-  
 βλύτου Δημητρίου διὰ συνδρομῆς καὶ ἐξόδου τοῦ παν[ευγενε]  
 στάτου  
 μεγάλου στρατωπαιδᾶ[ρχου] κύρου Λέοντος Κωτανητζίου Ζόνη[.],  
 μηνὶ Ἰουλίῳ, ἰν(δικτιῶνος) ι´, ἔτ(ους) [ ,ς]ωε´. [Ο] ναὸς ἀ[ν]ε(...)  
 δηὰ δώρησ[ι]ν τοῦ Γουρρί[ου πατ-]  
 ρὸς Κωτανητζίου μεγάλου στρατωπαιδάρχου [Α]νν[α]τολ[ῆ]ς].

Fig. 6. Church of St. Demetrius in Veles. Inscription from the ktitorial composition in the north-eastern part of the narthex. Translation: A.Yu. Vinogradov

his betrayal of the Byzantine emperor. In contrast, at the Serbian court, Tornikios was regarded as a Byzantine defector. It seems reasonable to posit that he belonged to the military aristocracy of the troubled period of confrontation between opposing factions, who attempted to assert their claims to power in a complex political environment [31; 30]. The 13<sup>th</sup> century was a time when those who were willing to take considerable risks were typically unable to maintain their power or independence for extended periods. Kotanitzes Tornikios was involved in the course of events in northern Macedonia in coalition with the Serbs and Bulgar until 1280, when he was captured and returned to Constantinople. There, Michael VIII sought to punish him for his betrayal by attempting to blind him, as he did not believe it was possible for a traitor to repent. Kotanitzes' descent from the noble Byzantine family played a role in his rescue and subsequent placement in the monastery of Perivleptos in Constantinople. Following three years of imprisonment, Kotanitzes was encouraged to escape from the monastery of St. John the Baptist in Prusa (Bursa) [23, p. 175; 31, pp. 186-187] by the military successes of the brothers Dragutin and Milutin, who were successfully advancing south of the Serbian borders. He fled in late 1283 or early 1284 and took refuge at the Serbian court, where he was appointed military commander and hypostrategist [31, pp. 186-190]. From this point onward, Kotanitzes continued his cross-border attacks against Byzantium until 1299. However, in contrast to the previous period, when he used Serbian forces for his own purposes, he was now in the service of King Milutin. In all probability, it was then, in 1297, that Kotanitzes constructed the Basilica of St. Demetrius by the fortress walls of Veles. The building glorified God and the noble Byzantine family of the great stratopedarch, as the inscription on the wall of the narthex states. Kotanitzes remained in the service of the Serbian kingdom until 1299, when King Milutin extradited him to the Byzantines as a fulfillment of one of the conditions of the famous peace treaty with Andronicus II Paleologos. This was followed by the marriage of the Serbian ruler to the Byzantine emperor's daughter, Simonis [13; 36; 37]. In 1306, Kotanitzes Tornikios'

whereabouts became unknown following his imprisonment [31]<sup>11</sup>.

The fate of the ktitor on the portrait in Veles is consistent with the broader historical context of the era in the Macedonian territories.

Following the defeat of the First Bulgarian Kingdom in the early 11<sup>th</sup> century, Byzantium succeeded in reuniting the territories of Northern Macedonia and other northern Balkan areas within the broad borders of the Byzantine theme Bulgaria with its administrative center in Skopje [35; 32]. However, a new stage of political instability began at the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century. Subsequently, following 1185, the northern territories of Macedonia became incorporated into the Second Bulgarian Kingdom. Following the capture of Constantinople by the Crusaders and the collapse of the Byzantine Empire in 1204, and throughout the reign of Ivan II Asen, the Bulgars consolidated their position in the region, displacing the rulers of the Despotate of Epirus, who also attempted to expand their borders towards northern Macedonia [53]. During the first half of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, neither Ohrid nor other areas of the region under Bulgarian control saw any significant construction projects. In 1246 the lands of the Ohrid Archbishopric came under the control of the Nicaean Empire. The latter sought to consolidate Greek territories in the Balkans under its rule from its centers in Asia Minor [60, pp. 319–325]. In 1259, the Battle of Pelagonia saw the Niceans, led by John Paleologos, emerge victorious against a coalition of Epirus, the Kingdom of Achaia, and the Kingdom of Sicily. Following the return of Constantinople, the Paleologos dynasty assumed the role previously held by the Niceans in the Balkans. Gradually, Epirus declined. Its builders, who had combined various architectural techniques from the arsenal of the Old Helladic school and refined their skills during the heyday of Arta and its subordinate territories, relocated to the adjacent territories of the Archdiocese of Ohrid at the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century in search of orders [16; pp. 58–59; 63; 71]. In the 13<sup>th</sup> century, a shift in artistic paradigms occurred in the regions of Northern Macedonia. The traditions of the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries, during which patrons and artisans, with the support of the Archbishopric of Ohrid and the participation of the Byzantine military aristocracy, facilitated the dissemination of Constantinopolitan concepts in Macedonia, although not in their most traditional manifestations (Veljusa) and in notable adaptations by local building arts groups (Sophia in Ohrid, Vodoča, Nerezi) have since become a historical phenomenon [35; 32; 69].

The architectural history of the North Macedonian regions in the 13<sup>th</sup> century provides a vivid illustration of the political turbulence that characterized the era. The first churches erected during the 13<sup>th</sup> century were dated to the 1240s and attributed to the work of Nicaean masters [8; 27, pp. 153–166]. However, such edifices were scarce and unremarkable, even when Michael VIII Palaiologos in 1259 gained practically the whole of Pelagonia [1]. The Church of St. Demetrius in Varoš (Ill. 117 and 118), located in the historic district of Prilep, serves as a case in point. Its construction history has been extensively documented in numerous publications dedicated to this complex and multifaceted architectural ensemble [27, pp. 153–166; 67]. In this section, we will merely provide an overview of the most significant events in the construction history of the monument. It can be divided into four distinct phases. It is assumed that around 1246, the one-nave basilica of the 12<sup>th</sup> century was enlarged and decorated in accordance with the traditions of Nicaea. The final two phases of the monument's history, during which it underwent a change in typology and received the most vibrant and diverse decoration, are correctly identified by scholars as occurring in the 1270–1290s and

<sup>11</sup> Prosopographisches Lexikon der Palaiologenzeit. Wien 2001. P. 2141, 2401.

are associated with the work of the Epirus masters [27, pp. 153–166; 55]. In the Palaiologan period, the Epirus trace is first and foremost evident in Prilep, as early as the 1270s (Church of Archangels in Varoš) [28; 27, pp. 107–133]. Other studies posit that the same craftsmen who were involved in the decoration of the facades of the large church of St. Demetrius in Varoš were also responsible for the reconstruction of the Prilep single-nave basilicas. The decorative motifs on the facades of St. Demetrius in Veles exhibit significant stylistic similarities to those of the Prilep basilicas [67] (Ill. 119–120).

Let us now direct our attention to a more detailed examination of the decorative elements of the basilica in Veles. The northern and eastern facades of the church are the most well-preserved, while the western and northern facades, which face the rock, display evidence of multiple interventions, including the installation of a large arched opening that previously served as the entrance to the narthex on the western side (Ill. 121). The preserved portions of the building clearly illustrate that the facade program in Veles, including a substantial amount of ceramic embellishment, aligns with the principles of decoration in Epirus and adheres to the general stylistic conventions of the period [15, pp. 600–605; 14, pp. 127–128; 71; 72]. The basilica is constructed using the *cloisonné* technique, a traditional method in Epirus. This technique involves the use of single or double rows of horizontally placed bricks between rows of rectangular stone blocks, with each stone separated from the neighboring one or two vertically placed bricks (Ill. 122). In comparison with the masonry of the Prilep buildings, that of St. Demetrius in Veles displays a greater degree of alignment and regularity. Furthermore, the horizontal arrangement of decoration along the facade, which is characteristic of the Epirus system, is also evident. In Veles, this solution serves to accentuate the basilica's longitudinal orientation. The facade is divided into tiers articulated with dog-tooth frieze and strings of horizontally placed bricks. Another well-preserved decorative frieze, crafted in the “opus reticulatum” technique, is accompanied by a narrow band of pseudo-meander. It is situated along the entire length of the southern facade, approximately in the building's midpoint. In addition to the ceramic ornaments, the upper section features arched windows and a niche, while the lower section is distinguished by two tall portals that lead separately to the naos and narthex. The arrangement of the windows on the southern facade adheres to the horizontal system, yet its character diverges from that observed in the articulation of the longitudinal facades of the Church of St. Nicholas in Varoš, where the niches are positioned in a row and pressed tightly against each other over bands of large ornaments, merging with the wall arcade. In Veles, the windows and niches are positioned at wide intervals. Additionally, the apse of the church is encircled by a band of “opus reticulatum” and pseudo-meander. The combination of these ceramic ornaments constitutes the dominant motif in the decoration program in Veles. In the architecture of Prilep, while the decoration is characterised by a high degree of variety and density, the use of the “opus reticulatum” is almost non-existent. In the Church of St. Nicholas, four “checkers” are observed in the tympanum of the altar window, while on the longitudinal facades, other types of ornamentation are employed, enriching the surface with large rhombuses, textured triangles, and zigzags.

Additionally, the facade is enhanced by a fence inlaid with *phialostomia*, which are absent in Veles. The visual impression of an overloaded pictorial composition and richness of details in Prilep contrasts with the less rich, but more organized, and rather graphic principle of distribution of facade decoration in Veles. The similarity of certain motifs serves to highlight the significant divergence in the approach to the decoration of the churches of Prilep and the

basilica in Veles. The same motifs are employed, but in a manner that differs from the aforementioned examples, thereby revealing a disparate logic of grouping the decoration, particularly on the eastern facade, where the greatest concentration of elements is observed (Ill. 123).

It can be concluded that, with the exception of typological similarity, in other parameters, compositional and stylistic, the church in Veles falls outside the range of monuments proposed by Korunovski [27, pp. 43–83]. The facades in Prilep and in Veles were decorated by different Epirote masters.

There is a greater degree of similarity in the principles of decoration and a more precise alignment in the morphology of details in the monuments of Ohrid, where Epirote masters were also engaged in construction work. However, the creations of these masters differ from the Prilep churches in terms of their elevated level of technical proficiency and the distinctive set of decorative elements that they employ. The design program of the facades of the Holy Mother of God of Perivleptos (St. Kliment) in Ohrid is the most closely related to the one in Veles (Ill. 124). This is the largest structure erected in Ohrid at the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, and it is strongly associated with the artel from Arta, which constructed the “Red Church” in Vulgareli (1295/1296). In his analysis of both buildings, H. Hallensleben identified a notable instance similarity between the morphology of facade decoration of Perivleptos in Ohrid characteristic of the Epirus tradition and the facades of the church of St. Demetrius in Veles [22, pp. 315–316]. This aspect has not been yet subjected to detailed analysis; rather, the scholar merely indicated the existence of similarities.

The repertoire of decoration of Perivleptos is certainly richer and more elegant, which is largely due to the large size of the monument. In addition to the “opus reticulatum” and “pseudo meander” motifs, which are also the basis of the decoration in the Ohrid monument, the commonality with Veles can be traced in the character of the profiling of the stepped arches of the windows and niches, the crowns of which are filled with the same characteristic filling of fan-shaped plinths in the form of a “bush” as in the tympana above the double windows in Perivleptos (Ill. 125–126).

Obviously, the construction in Veles is based on the rich and at the same time more refined forms of the monuments in Ohrid, but in a more laconic solution than in Prilep. The same motifs are presented in Veles in a reduced and simplified version due to the modest size of the single nave basilica and the lapidarity of its facades. However, the decoration program is remarkable for its thoughtfulness and originality. The lowering of the apse on the eastern facade opens up a wide field of trapezoidal tympanum, which is filled with a precisely calibrated composition combining the herringbone motif “opus spicatum” and pseudo-meander. The originality of the idea and the character of realization testify to the high level of the masters who worked here. If you look closely at the decoration of the southern facade, you will notice some inconsistencies, manifested in such nuances as a sudden break in the pseudo-meander ribbon in the area of the central arch with a window, after which the wall continues to the west in the cloisonné technique, while the band “opus reticulatum” in this section slightly increases its level. At the same time, the central window of the upper level is not on the axis of the portal below. In the articulation of the facade, there is a confused rhythm and asymmetry. This is partly explained by the subsequent niche, which has taken up a position exactly above the portal, as if replacing the shifted window. The work on architectural restoration in the church has not yet been carried out, but in the process of uncovering the fresco decoration in the narthex, a lavishly decorated western facade with the original portal was discovered (Ill. 127).



This is where the frieze with “checkers” – “opus reticulatum” led to. Another single window or niche was placed above, with stepped profiling similar to that observed in the windows of the southern facade. It is evident that the narthex with a tower was constructed in Veles during the second phase of construction. It seems reasonable to posit that this may have been the reason for the reconstruction of the western part of the southern wall, which concealed the joint of the narthex abutment. It is not implausible that following the construction of the second entrance on the southern side, now within the narthex, the original portal may have been relocated towards the center of the facade. This may have been the reason for the disruption of the compositional connection between the central portal and the upper window, which is situated in its place, as evidenced by the band of pseudo-meander adjoining it from the east. As previously stated, the character of the masonry undergoes a transformation from the west of the window. The implementation of special architectural restoration works, which have not yet been conducted, may serve to either substantiate or refute this hypothesis. In any case, the decorative program of the longitudinal facades was meticulously restored following the intervention, presumably by the same artisans. In light of the aforementioned evidence, it can be reasonably deduced that the addition of the tower occurred shortly after the construction of the main body of the basilica and before 1297, when the ktitor portrait was painted over the original western facade.

In its original version, without a tower in its western part, the single-nave basilica of St. Demetrius in Veles does not seem to be something surprising in this region. In all its parameters it is close to many similar ones, which were widespread in the northern Balkans as early as the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century. The fact that this type was also known in the North Macedonian regions is confirmed by the history of rebuilding in Varoš, including the first phase of the basilica of St. Demetrius in Prilep.

The arrangement of the tower over the narthex, which is unparalleled in Macedonia of this period, raises questions. When the church in Veles was dated to the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the appearance of the tower was explained by Serbian influence [7, p. 138]. Indeed, towers are one of the characteristic features of Serbian architecture, rooted in the traditions of the Adriatic coastal region (the Church of the Savior at the source of Cetina of the 9<sup>th</sup> century, the Church of St. Michael in Ston of the 11<sup>th</sup> century) [14]. The practice of erecting tall towers, placed in an axial position in front of the western facade, is transferred to the 12<sup>th</sup>–13<sup>th</sup> century architecture of Raška and is supplemented here by a variant where two slender tall towers flank the narthex (the Pillars of St. George in Ras and Beran, the Churches of St. Peter in Belo Polje and St. Nicholas in Kuršumljija, etc.) [9; 10; p. 45]. The functional and semantic significance of towers in Serbian architecture is considerable; however, by the middle of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the erection of towers had become a fairly infrequent phenomenon. The interest in towers would be revived during the reign of King Milutin (1282–1321) [54], but it would become significant in the context of specific ecclesiastical and political tasks. This was already the case in North Macedonia in the first quarter of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, as well as in Kosovo, where the old Serbian bishoprics were being renewed and the power of Serbian rulers in the former Byzantine lands was being established [20; 36; 42; 43; 65; 66]. By that time, Kotanitzes Tornikios, the ktitor of the church in Veles, was no longer a figure of consequence. Additionally, Milutin's orders were executed by the Epirote builders, who were also capable of constructing towers. The towers that are most proximate in time to that of Veles can be dated to no earlier than the first decade of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, exemplified by the Church of Our Lady of Ljeviška in Prizren (1307) [17; 34;

44; 48; 56]. As demonstrated in our previous research on the church in Prizren, the design of the elevated tower of Ljeviška, situated in front of the narthex along the central axis (Ill. 128), bears striking similarities to the tower of the first archbishopric in Žiža (1207–1219, before 1236 r.) [11] (Ills. 129–130). This observation suggests the existence of a symbolic connection between the two structures [34]. At the time of the construction of the Church of St. Demetrius in Veles, Milutin had not yet established his own distinctive architectural paradigm [47; 25]. Serbian influence would come to Macedonian lands later, only in the 14<sup>th</sup> century [43].

Another example of a tower exhibiting similarities to the one at Ljeviška can be observed in the vicinity of Kastoria, in the Churches of Saint George in Omorfokklisia (Ill. 131) [21]. The dating of the construction stages of this monument is a complex and contentious issue, with a range of possible dates between 1295 and 1317. This tower, also constructed by Epirote masters, exhibits a closer resemblance to Veles in its architectural forms, though this may have occurred at different points in time. However, its axial positioning in front of the narthex, as observed in the tower of the Church of St. Demetrius in Kypseli (1296–1310) [73], fundamentally distinguishes these examples from the solution in Veles. As evidenced by specialized studies on this topic, there is a notable increase in the prominence of towers in Byzantine architecture during the early 14<sup>th</sup> century. This period saw the proliferation of towers in prominent urban centers such as Constantinople, Thessaloniki, and Mystra, among others [21, p. 148; 46, pp. 97–99; 62, p. 111; 64, pp. 155–156], but they were different from the one in Veles. The tower in Veles is firmly incorporated into the narthex, forming the second tier, and is united with the main body of the church by the horizontal belts of the ridge, demonstrating a strong compositional unity. The tower-belfry is constructed in a square configuration and pierced on all sides by expansive single arches. These features are reminiscent of monuments of another architectural tradition. It is possible that analogous solutions in the architecture of neighboring Bulgaria may prove to be a suitable source of this form. In light of the aforementioned evidence, we propose that the tower in Veles displays greater similarity not to the Raška school in Serbia, as previously hypothesized by researchers, but rather to monuments of the Second Bulgarian Empire where this particular arrangement of towers above the narthex became widespread during the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries [12, pp. 109–121, 178–182].

The first instance of a church with a composition where a square tower rises above the narthex on Bulgarian territory is observed in the Byzantine fortress Stenimachos (Asen's Fortress) [50]. It refers to defensive structures in two tiers covering a high steep hill. The fortress was situated along a major regional thoroughfare that traversed the gorge. During the medieval period, it underwent repeated fortification and reconstruction, particularly in the 13<sup>th</sup> century [41; 5, pp. 225–231]. The first reliable mention of this fortress is found in the Typicon of the nearby Petritsoni Monastery (Bachkovo monastery), erected by the prominent Byzantine military leader Gregory Bakuriani in 1083 [50; 35]. Furthermore, the presence of fortifications in this area during the late 11<sup>th</sup> – early 12<sup>th</sup> century is corroborated by archaeological evidence from the time of Byzantine Emperor Alexius I Comnenus (1084–1118) [50].

The garrison fortress is notable for its Church of the Virgin Mary, constructed on an upper ledge that is situated almost directly above the cliff (Ill. 132). The precise date of its construction is uncertain, but the architectural features of the building [49] and the historical context of the fortress's reconstruction in 1231 by Bulgarian King Ivan II Asen suggest that the church may have been erected prior to that date<sup>12</sup>. Given its strategic location, Asen's fortress played

<sup>12</sup> According to A.Y. Vinogradov, the altar part of the Church of the Virgin in the Asen's fortress is sepa-

a pivotal role in the military conflicts of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The Church of the Virgin, situated at the summit of the mountain and featuring a two-storey structure, was an imposing sight. The church's elevated position on the rocky terrain necessitated the construction of a substantial plinth to provide stability. The architecture of the church exhibits notable similarities to that of the ossuary at the Bachkovo monastery, including two storeys, the articulation of the facade with a series of profiled arches, and the hall structure of the interior [35, pp. 797–798]. In the case of the Church of the Virgin Mary of the Asen's Fortress, the church, located on the second floor, is topped with a dome and a narthex, above which there is a square tower-bell, which has openings in all directions with large arches. In addition to its artistic significance, this church served as a model for subsequent architectural developments within the Second Bulgarian Empire. The tower structure of the Church of St. Demetrius in Veles is the most similar to the aforementioned structure. The architectural characteristics of the church, including the elongated hall plan and the two-storey narthex with a tower, are likely to have originated in the Bulgarian capital city of Tarnovo, which reached its peak in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. During this period, extensive church construction was underway on the city's hills. It is unfortunate that, with few exceptions, the churches of Tarnovo have an archaeological degree of preservation, which makes it impossible to judge the details of their volume-spatial characteristics. However, at the level of layouts, it can be observed that most of them are small, somewhat elongated along the longitudinal axis of the building, with square or rectangular narthexes adjoining from the west. The architectural plans of the churches in Tarnovo appear to exhibit similarities to the basilica in Veles. A reconstruction of a possible variant of the Tarnovo churches with a square tower over the narthex is presented in the late-12<sup>th</sup>-century Church of St. Demetrius in Tarnovo (Ill. 133) [12, pp. 109–115]. The bad state of preservation of the building precludes the possibility of accepting this reconstruction. It is therefore proposed that the preserved 14<sup>th</sup>-century Bulgarian monuments of other regions may serve as more reliable reference points for the reconstruction of the appearance of the Tarnovo churches. The influence of the Tarnovo churches is evidenced by the appearance of square towers over the narthexes in different types of churches in Červen (Church No. 2) [12, pp. 114–120] and Nessebar (the churches of St. Archangels and Pantokrator) (Ill. 134 a-b, 135) [12, pp. 116–117]. By the time the Church of St. Demetrius in Veles was constructed, the composition of the tower over the narthex had already become a common feature of Bulgarian architecture [12, p. 179].

The commissioner of the Church of St. Demetrius in Veles must have been well aware of the architectural traditions of his military allies, not only the Serbs, but also the Bulgar. In addition, there are direct references in the sources mentioning that Byzantine military campaigns from the middle of the 13<sup>th</sup> century unfolded simultaneously in Veles and in Asen's fortress. At the same time, the military commander Michael Tornikios, a relative of the Palaiologos family, is also mentioned in the pages of Akropolites' Annals.<sup>13</sup> We believe that Kotanitzes Tornikios, who was operating on the border with Bulgaria, could have been guided by the church architecture of the Asen's fortress and Tarnovo in choosing a design for his church. In

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rated from the naos by a wall with three openings. Such a rare feature can be explained by the influence of the Raška models, which were established in Serbian architecture in the second half of the 12<sup>th</sup> – 13<sup>th</sup> centuries. See: [61, p. 332].

<sup>13</sup> Asen's fortress and Velesos (Veles) are mentioned in one chapter: Acropolites (Ch. 44). In Ch. 57, Michael Tornik, who was granted the dignity of the great primikirion under Emperor John, is mentioned in connection with the campaign to the fortress of Stenimahos in the Rhodopes.

the conditions of political instability and a complete break with hostile Constantinople, the former Byzantine dignitary, and now Serbian military commander, hardly had the opportunity for a large-scale construction of a cross-dome church, not often found at that time in the remote northern provinces of Macedonia even in the commissions of eminent Byzantines. As we have seen, this is also evidenced by the church construction in Prilep in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The tower with a domed top, placed over the narthex of the single-nave basilica, designed by the Epirote builders in the style of the luxurious churches of Ohrid, served as an alternative solution to the domed church and may have emphasized a certain ideological paradigm of the commissioner, who was fighting not on the side of Byzantium.

The architectural solution of the Church of St. Demetrius in Veles is well aligned with both the historical development of the region's architectural style and the broader cultural and political context of Northern Macedonia during that period. In addition to its aesthetic merits, this monument offers a dependable historical account of the challenging and occasionally tragic circumstances that unfolded on these crossroads during the late 13<sup>th</sup> century.

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**Title.** Architectural Features of the Church of St. Demetrius in Veles: An Analysis of Recent Discoveries

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**Abstract.** The article is devoted to an in-depth study of the architectural features of the Church of St. Demetrius the Great Martyr in Veles. For an extended period, there was a lack of available information regarding the date of construction of the church and its history during the Middle Ages. The first to undertake a study of the church was the Yugoslav historian of architecture J. Bošković. In the absence of any information regarding the history of the church, he attributed its architectural solution to the second half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. As a result, the Church of St. Demetrius in Veles was included in the primary reviews on the Balkan architecture, and was considered to be in a similar style to the churches of Serbia. An alternative viewpoint, which posits the possibility of categorizing the church in Veles within the context of early Paleologian architecture of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, was initially presented in the thesis of the Macedonian historian of architecture Sasho Korunovski. During the restoration work conducted between 2018 and 2022 by a team of specialists from the NI National Conservation Center in Skopje, the original murals were discovered and cleared of lime plaster in the interior of the narthex, on its eastern and northern walls. The newly discovered fragments of murals on the eastern wall of the northeastern corner of the narthex have revealed a ktitor’s composition depicting a large figure holding a model of the church in his hand. A lengthy dedicatory inscription accompanies the

ktitorial portrait. Despite the considerable damage, the majority of the text could be deciphered. The date of construction and the name of the ktitor have been identified. Once the dating was clarified, it became possible to undertake a more detailed analysis of the architectural features of the church in the context of the artistic traditions of the era in which it was constructed.

**Keywords:** Veles, Paleologian architecture, architecture of Northern Macedonia, Architecture of Epirus, Archbishopric of Ohrid, Kotanitzes Tornikios

**Название статьи.** Архитектура церкви Св. Димитрия в Велесе: в свете новых открытий<sup>14</sup>

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**Аннотация.** Статья посвящена изучению архитектуры церкви Святого великомученика Димитрия в Велесе. О времени возведения храма и его средневековой истории долго не было никаких данных. Первым исследовал церковь югославский историк архитектуры Дж. Бошкович. В отсутствии каких-либо сведений об истории церкви он отнес её архитектурное решение ко второй половине XIV столетия. С такой датировкой храм Св. Димитрия в Велесе вошел в основные обзоры, посвященные балканской архитектуре и рассматривался в одном ряду с церквями Сербии. Иное мнение, в пользу возможности рассмотрения храма в Велесе в контексте раннепалеологовской архитектуры XIII века, впервые было высказано в диссертации македонского историка архитектуры Сашо Коруновски. В ходе реставрационных работ, проводимых в период с 2018 по 2022 г. группой специалистов Национального центра реставрации в Скопье, в интерьере нартекса, на его восточной и северной стенах, под известковой штукатуркой была найдена и расчищена оригинальная живопись. Среди обнаруженных фрагментов фресковой декорации на восточной стене северо-восточного угла нартекса раскрыта ктигорская композиция с изображением большой фигуры в рост с моделью храма в руке. Ктигорский портрет сопровождается пространная посвятельная надпись. Несмотря на значительные повреждения и утраты, большую часть текста удалось прочитать. Известными стали и дата постройки, и имя ктигора. После уточнения датировки появилась возможность более детально проанализировать архитектурные особенности храма в контексте художественных традиций его эпохи.

**Ключевые слова:** Велес, палеологовская архитектура, архитектура Северной Македонии, Архитектура Эпира, Охридская архиепископия, Котаница Торник

<sup>14</sup> Исследование выполнено за счет гранта Российского научного фонда №20-18-00294-П в Научно-исследовательском институте теории и истории архитектуры и градостроительства — филиале ЦНИИП Минстроя России.





III. 110. Church of St. Demetrius in Veles, northern facade (1297). Photo: S.V. Maltseva



III. 111. The Church of St. Demetrius in Veles, the tower over the narthex (1297). Photo: S.V. Maltseva



III. 112. Church of St. Demetrius in Veles, the tower over the narthex, interior (1297). Photo: S.V. Maltseva



III. 113. Church of St. Demetrius in Veles, frescoes on the northern wall of the narthex (1297). Photo: S.V. Maltseva



III. 114. Church of St. Demetrius in Veles, ktitor's composition in the north-eastern part of the narthex (1297).  
Photo: S.V. Maltseva



Ill. 115. Church of St. Demetrius in Veles, portrait of the ktitor with a model of the church in the northeastern part of the narthex (1297). Photo: S.V. Maltseva



Ill. 116. The Church of St. Demetrius in Veles, a dedicatory inscription from the ktitor's composition (1297). Photo: S.V. Maltseva



Ill. 117. Church of St. Demetrius in Varoš near Prilep. View to the north-east (13<sup>th</sup> century). Photo: S.V. Maltseva



Ill. 118. Church of St. Demetrius in Varoš near Prilep. View to the south-east (13<sup>th</sup> century). Photo: S.V. Maltseva



III. 119. Church of St. Nicholas in Varoš near Prilep, northern facade (1298). Photo: S.V. Maltseva



III. 120. Church of St. Nicholas in Varoš near Prilep, apse (1298). Photo: S.V. Maltseva



III. 121. Church of St. Demetrius in Veles, western facade (1297). Photo: S.V. Maltseva



III. 123. The Church of St. Demetrius in Veles, the apse (1297). Photo: S.V. Maltseva



III. 122. Church of St. Demetrius in Veles, northern facade (1297). Photo: S.V. Maltseva



Ill. 124. Church of Our Lady Perivleptos in Ohrid (1294/1295). Photo: S.V. Maltseva



Ill. 125. Church of Our Lady Perivleptos in Ohrid, the apse (before 1294/1295). Photo: S.V. Maltseva





III. 126. The Church of Our Lady Perivleptos in Ohrid, the window of the tympanum on the southern facade (1294/1295). Photo: S.V. Maltseva



III. 127. Church of St. Demetrius in Veles. Interior of the narthex, western wall (1297). Photo: S.V. Maltseva



Ill. 128. Church of Our Lady Ljeviška in Prizren, the tower in front of the western facade (c. 1306).  
Photo: S.V. Maltseva



Ill. 130. The tower in front of the narthex of the catholicion in Žića (before 1220). Photo: S.V. Maltseva



Ill. 129. Žića monastery, the northern facade of the Church of the Savior (before 1220). Photo: S.V. Maltseva



Ill. 131. The tower in front of the narthex of the church of St. George in Omorfoklisia (between 1295 and 1317). Photo: S.V. Maltseva



Ill. 132. Church of the Virgin Mary in Asen's fortress, south facade (first third of the 13<sup>th</sup> century?). Photo: S.V. Maltseva



III. 133. Church of St. Demetrius in Tarnovo (late 12<sup>th</sup> century). Photo: S.V. Maltseva



III. 134-a. Church of St. Archangels in Nessebar (14<sup>th</sup> century). Photo: S.V. Maltseva



III. 134-b. Church of St. Archangels in Nessebar (14<sup>th</sup> century). Photo: S.V. Maltseva



III. 135. Church of Pantocrator in Nessebar (14<sup>th</sup> century). Photo: S.V. Maltseva