

Ivan BASIĆ

New remarks on the Christianization of Diocletian's mausoleum

The paper addresses the issue of transformation of the emperor Diocletian's mausoleum in Split into a Christian church, namely the chronology of the process itself and the circumstances under which it happened. The author tries to demonstrate that the funerary building underwent the same process of appropriation and gradual transformation, developing in several stages, just like many other similar buildings did, throughout the Roman Empire. Since the late 19th century, modern scholarship has devoted considerable attention to the problem of original layout and function of Diocletian's mausoleum at Split. Afterlife of the building up until the 9th century was definitely understudied, partly because of a lack of comprehensive and coherent sources. Thus, it is hardly surprising that it was an American, Mark Johnson, who was the first to examine tetrarchic funerary buildings as a group (in 2009) – in terms of their functions, typology and architectural iconography. However, during the past few decades the study of relevant textual sources, as well as the number of archaeological ones, have multiplied. So has the international scholarly attention given to the process of Christianization of pagan buildings in general (J. Alchermes, B. Brenk, J.-P. Caillet, G. Cantino Wataghin, B. Caseau, F. W. Deichmann, C. J. Goddard, J. Hahn, J. Hillner, Y. Janvier, M. J. Johnson, A. Karivieri, H.-R. Meier, H. Saradi Mendelovici, J. Vaes, B. Ward-Perkins). Stressing the new approach to relevant textual sources, the author, at the same time, presents some new material evidence in order to corroborate the claim that the pagan mausoleum in Split did not undergo any substantial modifications prior to 6th century. Furthermore, he demonstrates that the change went through several stages. In a first stage, the building has been obviously transformed into a relatively simple church and only afterwards it was transformed into a cathedral. There is no doubt that this case study of a transformation of a pagan monument into a Christian one holds many important clues that could put some new light on the processes of transformation of pagan buildings into churches in general. The traditional scholarly interpretation persists on a hypothesis that the Mausoleum was transformed into a cathedral (that of a runaway Salonitan archbishop) during the 7th century and that this was a one-stage transformation. Conversely, it is usually held that the emperor's tomb suffered destruction immediately after the Edict of Milan, proclaimed in February 313, awaiting further on 640s to be re-used for a new Salonitan cathedral. However, new interpretive paradigms – that have, unfortunately, circumvented the case of Split – along with the new archaeological evidence surfacing all the time, have put the traditional interpretations to a serious test. Before mentioned innovative approaches to the problem of reuse have resulted in several important conclusions: there were three separate periods of transformation of Roman pagan and secular buildings into churches: the first phase, pertaining mainly to the 4th century, concentrated predominantly on the adaptation of profane, private buildings; the second phase reutilized public buildings of any kind; only in the third phase, during the 5th and 6th century, pagan temples and sanctuaries were finally appropriated. The case of Spalatum fits nicely into these overall results. One should also add that these studies have shown that many extremely important Roman shrines and public monuments (e.g. »Temple of Romulus« at the Roman Forum, Pantheon, Academy in Athens, Serapeum of Alexandria, temple complex on Philae near Aswan) have all been appropriated by the Church only after a long and arduous process that included several steps – the final Christianisation of respective structures being the last one. This was even more true in the case of structures forming the part of imperial estates or public property, which could not have been subjected to arbitrary destruction with impunity. As the Diocletian's palace itself was actually built on an imperial property, established as such as early as the 1st century and retained as part of the *fiscus* for centuries to come, by-passing this fact naturally resulted in some outdated theories that will now obviously have to be overcome. As a part of unalienable property of the crown, the palace at Spalatum as well as the mausoleum were under imperial supervision. Thus for any suspension of its usual function an imperial decree was necessary in order to freely dispose with the building. The removal of its pagan contents could only have taken place in several

stages, during a protracted time-span: suspension of pagan cult practices, desacralization, dissolution of imperial prerogatives attached to the building, followed by the possible exemption of the parts of its inventory, ultimately its Christianisation and adaptation for a new use. The archaeological findings of the earliest post-Diocletianic phase hardly received any attention, although they seem to hold many important clues which can shed light on its later development. These useful archaeological details consist of several examples of Early Christian sculpture, found during excavation works in and around the cathedral, that can be firmly dated. Thanks to these remains, dating from the mid-6th century, we are able to date the earliest Christian adaptations of the mausoleum to the same period. On the one hand, this seems to confirm that the adaptation of octagon for Christian usage happened at least a hundred years earlier than the mid-7th century; on the other hand, it implies that the original state of the building was left intact for a much longer period of time than it has been previously hypothesized. This can be further corroborated drawing on a variety of sources, dating from 4th, 5th and 6th century (Ammianus Marcellinus, *Codex Theodosianus*, *Codex Iustinianus*, etc.). Particularly important is the evidence provided by Sidonius Apollinaris (late 480s), which seems to confirm that the emperor's mausoleum was still in function during the Gallic bishop's lifetime. Although these facts and material traces have all been common knowledge for many years, neither the data in question nor its implications for the process of Christianisation were ever considered in relation to one another. Consequently, most arguments hitherto offered for the conclusions about the mentioned process were inevitably incomplete. Some other issues have also never received explanation. For example, how did the frieze on the top of the interior – bearing images of Diocletian, his wife Prisca, Hermes Psychopompos and erotes – ever survive the supposed Christian reprisal? Furthermore, how is it possible that the iconographically most important relief of the same frieze, positioned directly above the main niche (and probably representing emperor's apotheosis), reached 16th century undamaged? All of this, again, points to the conclusion that there was no immediate or noteworthy Christian retribution at the expense of the dead emperor, namely that important parts of the mausoleum's pagan interior were left in place at least up to 6th century, when the first functional modifications took place. To sum up, one should differentiate between the conversion of pagan mausoleum into a church and the subsequent elevation of the latter to the status of a cathedral, which was a much later and contextually different event. Under what circumstances did the former event take place? The importance of the palace during the transitional period from Late Antiquity to Early Middle Ages is confirmed by its inclusion in the so-called *Ravenna Cosmography*, compiled by an anonymous cleric in Ravenna around 700. In it the structure is recorded as *Spalathron*, *Spalathrum* and as such included among other civitates, that is among small towns. As it is generally accepted, the data concerning these settlements and towns recorded by the Anonymous from Ravenna were based on geographical and topographical knowledge gathered prior to the 560s. Thus, it seems that the palace itself certainly retained its important position in the years prior to 6th century, only for it to be further emphasized by a settlement forming in it roughly in the early 500s. Apart from this, the existence of a town called Spalatum is attested by a number of Early Christian churches in the palace, built as early as the 6th century. The settlement, surely, predated the transition of populace from the town of Salona that, probably, happened during the 7th century. Again, the alterations in question must have happened during the 6th century and were, most surely, arranged by the then-inhabitants of the Palace. The question that remains is who initiated these large-scale interventions. Considering the well-known policy of emperor Justinian I (527-565) towards the Church after the Gothic wars of 535-555, it can be assumed that at least some parts of Diocletian's palace were ceded by the Byzantine government to the *Ecclesia catholica Salonitana* under archbishops Honorius II (528-547) or Peter (554-562). Thus, most of these alterations could be attributed to them, in close collaboration with the Byzantine military units stationed in the palace at the time.