

Maja PETRINEC

Archaeological research into and arrangement of the architectural complex at Crkvina in Biskupija in the period from 2008 to 2017

The village of Biskupija lies on the eastern side of Kosovo polje, and is 7 km from the city of Knin. Archaeological research here has revealed the existence of five Early Christian church buildings and the sites Crkvina, Lopuska glavica, Stupovi, Bukorovića podvornica and the substratum of today's Orthodox Church of the Holy Trinity.

Crkvina is the biggest and most important archaeological site excavated to date in the area of Biskupija. The first excavations started on January 7, 1886, and with interruptions, shorter and longer, went on until 1908. Information about the site is, however, unluckily very sparse, and comes down to the notes of Fra Lujo Marun in his *Starinarski dnevnici* [*Antiquarian Diaries*] and reports in the scholarly periodicals of the time. We learn that a three-nave basilica and a complex of buildings connected with it were discovered, as well as a large number of medieval graves. Some of the finds were published by Lujo Marun's associate, the teacher Frano Radić, in the first series of *Starohrvatka prosvjeta*. Although drawn as early as 1890, the ground plan of the complex of Crkvina was until very recently mislaid in the archives of the Zagreb Archaeological Museum and was inaccessible to the broad professional and scholarly public, and the appearance of the church remained unknown right until the re-view excavations in the mid-20th century. In the period between 1951 and 1957 S. Gunjača did review excavations of the site at Crkvina. He published the results of the research and his thinking about the site in a lengthy report in 1953. Appearing in the literature then for the first time was a ground plan of the whole of the architectural complex – the Church of St Mary and the northern extension. And on that occasion, 124 medieval graves were investigated. The last archaeological excavations, of smaller scope, led by L. Gudelj, were carried out in 2000. Then the forecourt of the basilica and the space alongside the southern wall were re-excavated and a new ground plan of that part of the architecture was made. The remains of tombs and graves uncovered in previous research were also documented.

The site at Crkvina was intersected by a rural road, which at the end of the 19th century Fra Marun had unsuccessfully attempted to have moved. In 1998, it was widened and asphalted. The southern part, what is called Velika [Large] Crkvina (the basilica and part of the northern extension) was within the Roman Catholic graveyard, which together with the Parish Church of Our Lady was enclosed with a stone wall and a hedge. In the period between 2005 and 2011, in spite of the ban on interment, contemporary graves were a serious threat to the site, for the local people had started to dig them uncontrolledly over the whole area of Velika Crkvina, getting extremely close to the remains of the foundations of the basilica. The northern part, Mala [Small] Crkvina as it is called (the remaining part of the extension alongside the basilica to the north of the rural road) became overgrown in thick vegetation and was turned into an illegal village dump for refuse that for decades piled up so that the remains of the architecture were no longer visible. During 2008 and 2009, Mala Crkvina was thoroughly cleaned of trees and shrubs. Traces of the architecture were almost undiscernible and were covered with thick layers of various kinds of refuse. During 2010, a start was made on removing this waste, and in the following year, 2011, the asphalt was removed on the part where the road crossed the site, and in this way traffic was halted. On that occasion a satisfactory solution for interments in the graveyard was found. The Museum of Croatian Archaeological Monuments had a plan drawn up for the future arrangement of the graveyard that provided for controlled burial and the building of new tombs in the lower part of Velika Crkvina. In association with the art history department of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Rijeka, the site at Crkvina was in 2010 included in the five-year international project *Francia Media – Cradles of European Culture*, financed by the European Commission. Resources from this project were devoted to removing parts of the newly made village graves, and the development of two new tombs and several exhumations for the purpose of protecting the archaeological remains at the site. In 2015 part of the boundary wall of the graveyard that extended

over the site was removed and in this manner the whole of the architectural complex was unified in its totality for the first time. Some cypresses in front of the Church of Our Lady, which had been damaged by the bora and were likely to topple onto the remains of the architecture at the graveyard were felled.

Review archaeological excavations were carried out in the period from 2012 to 2017. As early as 2012, the excavations covered the whole site of Mala Crkvina and the walls of all the rooms that had been explored in 1951 by Gunjača were defined. It soon turned out that the ground plan then made did not entirely correspond with the real state of affairs. In the north east part of the complex one more room was revealed, previously unknown, and some new details appeared in the rooms in the far western side. Also discovered was a recent, 19th century, drainage channel, which, alongside the kerb of the old road, stretched in an east to west direction the whole length of the complex. Because of these new factors it was decided, before the walls were preventively repaired, at once to make an architectural drawing of the re-excavated rooms of the northern road, and all other structures discovered at that time. This job was undertaken by the privately owned firm Kaducej d.o.o. of Split.

Between 2013 and 2017, in five research campaigns, a large number of rooms of the northern extension of St Mary's Basilica were investigated in detail, as well as some of the rooms at Velika Crkvina and part of the area underneath the removed asphalt on the rural road. Some new previously unknown structures were discovered: an early medieval grave, two stoves, two entrances into the complex, a drainage channel, and continuations of the walls and parts of the flooring in the rooms that had not been covered by previous research and had never before been documented. In parallel with the review archaeological excavations, some smaller conservation-restoration operations were carried out, on the whole to do with preventive repairs (bracing) of walls to prevent them from collapsing before the making of the whole of the plan.

Graves 88 and 125, which derive from the last decade of the 8th or the first two decades of the 9th century, can be considered the oldest cultural stratum at the part of the site encompassed by the review archaeological excavations. These graves are coterminous with the known graves discovered at the end of the 19th century north of the Basilica of St Mary. The layers of ashes and soot and bones beneath wall **r2** and part of wall **s** in room **O** belong to the same era.

Two stoves, the origin of which certainly preceded the construction of the Mala Crkvina complex, since they are underneath the walls, and since the top of a run-off channel is built over one of them, belong to a somewhat later time. This channel passes through rooms L, K and J and has an outlet in the extreme western wall (wall **u**). The channel is completely negated by walls **u1** and **s**, which means that in the last phase of the functioning of the complex it was no longer in use.

For the moment, it is not possible to say much about the time of the building of the northern extension alongside the basilica. It is only certain that it started at the earliest in the beginning of the 9th century, as suggested by the fairly well dated graves 88 and 125, which are under the architecture. So it is probable that the extension was made at the same time as the basilica; however, the possibility of some later date, at the time of the two renovations of the church and its interior at the end of the 9th and in the early 10th century when the narthex too was built on, cannot be ruled out. Nor is it possible to rule out the complex's having been extended and rebuilt during the following centuries, and very likely at the time of the two last big renovations in the 11th century.

After all the research to date, including these last excavations, we do not have at our disposal a single good archaeological reason to confirm or deny the assumptions given in the literature concerning the function of the northern extension, described above. It is true that coming from the space of the extension are a large number of stone querns, mortars and vessels that suggest the residential function of the structure and the agricultural occupations of the inhabitants.

The northern extension alongside the basilica was probably working as long as the three-nave basilica was as well. At some time during the 13th century, in the central nave of the basilica, a new, smaller church was built and soon burials started around it. The graves of the 13th to 15th century negate the side naves and the narthex of the basilica, and it can be assumed that they extended further too, to the whole area of the northern extension. This is confirmed by the description of Fra Gašpar Vinjalić who in his report of 1746 said that the space around the remains of the then still visible and well preserved later church was thickly occupied by stone slabs or stechaks. Fra Stjepan Slatović in 1883 also described serried rows of stechaks and crosses.

Translated: Graham McMaster