Ivo Vojnović

# Reconstruction of the Original Appearance of the Perimeter Walls of Diocletian's Palace

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Date of public defense: March 7, 2023

The dissertation has 430 pages, 6 chapters,
418 illustrations, 118 drawings and a spatial representation,
printed in 2 volumes.

## Rekonstrukcija izvornog izgleda perimetralnih zidova Dioklecijanove palače

Diocletian's palace is one of the most notable examples of late Roman architecture in the world, due to its original concept and the high level of preservation. In particular, the external view of the perimeter walls still gives the impression of the original appearance of the palace. It is a misfortune that out of sixteen towers only three corner-towers have been preserved. In the interior of the palace, the best preserved parts are the Emperor's Mausoleum, peristyle with prothyron, vestibule and the prostyle temple in the west temenos. The state of preservation is excellent in nearly 40 original vaulted substructures beneath the imperial apartments.

The southern front is the most prominent one and largely preserved. Square towers were projecting from the east and west end. The upper section of the wall had a series of openings, giving the whole south front an attractive appearance. The portic, i.e. the covered gallery along the whole southern front also had three loggias, two at each end of the front and one in the middle. Although they were not preserved anywhere on the south front, it is assumed that ornamented triangle pediments with bases curved into an arch (so-called Syrian gables) were surmounted on top of the loggias. Between the loggias, the portic was divided with two horizontal cornices. Engaged columns on the lower and simpler section held the upper, more lavishly decorated cornice. Semi-circular windows were located between the columns. At two positions in the portic, on the axis of the imperial dining room in the east and the great hall in the west, there were somewhat larger semi-circular windows with the top horizontal semi-circular cornice. In the thesis, it is proposed for the first time that Syrian gables were surmounted on these windows, although they were not preserved, nor were the gables on loggias. A Syrian gable of similar form was reconstructed on the gymnasium building in Sardis, Turkey. A similar gable is found on the prothyron of the Palace, well-preserved and with more decorations. Furthermore, the author proposes that there was no superstructure above the upper cornice of the portic, as assumed in the existing literature, but only a single-pitch roof leaning to the north wall of the portic. Based on the findings of a large number of slots on top of the cornice, with better stone carving details in these positions, the author concludes that there was a series of sculptures placed on the cornice, on the axis of each engaged column.

The south part of the Palace had an exclusive residential purpose, with an ornamental south façade facing the sun and the sea, reminescent of a Roman maritime villa. In contrast, the rest of the Palace was organised according to the rules of a Roman military camp, best represented by the fronts. The three gates on the east, north and west wall had defensive courtyards, protecting the entrances to the Palace.

Outer perimeter walls on the first floor level of the imperial apartments have relatively large arcades, with the top cornice. Based on the discovery of cut stone blocks with dimensions 59´59 cm which were protruding from the back sides of perimeter walls between the arcade arches, it was considered that lateral walls of the upper floor extended from these blocks. On several locations on the first floor level, the author discovered stacked stone blocks, finely cut on all sides. The conclusion is that these cut stone blocks were not used to join with the walls, but were most probably constructed as counterforts positioned on the inner side of perimeter walls, thus contributing to the stability of relatively thin and long walls with a number of arcade openings.

In many respects, the discovered pylons changed the previous conceptions about the appearance of the rooms constructed adjacent to the inner side of the perimeter walls. It was assumed until now that there had been another level above, also divided in cubicles and with the floor plan identical to the lower level. However, the discovery of a pylon on the outer front excludes existence of rooms and leads to the assumption that this wide and long space was used as integrated space which in fact served as guards' walkway. The purpose of the walkway, typical for all Roman city walls and fortifications, was to enable fast repositioning of soldiers between the towers. The arcades on the perimeter wall of the Diocletian's palace served as a defensive parapet. In addition, the author proposes that this wide walkway never had a roof, also disputing the existence of a building at the first floor level. This is substantiated by the fact that no remains of a Roman wall were ever found on the upper level.

The solid and functionally clear organisational structure of the Palace, with sixteen defensive towers flanking the perimeter walls has clear features of military architecture. It greatly resembles some military camps in the east part of the Roman Empire, principally in Egypt. The ground plan of the camp in Nag el-Hagar with very similar arrangement of towers along the perimeter walls most closely resembles the Diocletian's palace. The ground plan of Qasr Qarun (Dionysias), another military camp located in Egypt, also resembles the Palace in Split. There is another large military camp in Babylon, located in the district now known as Old Cairo, erected during Diocletian's reign. Similarities are found in the fortifications Qasr Bashir and Da'janiya in the desert of Jordan and the camp in Syrian Palmyra. All the mentioned fortifications were constructed under Diocletian's rule, therefore it is not surprising that they share features with the Palace in Split.

Finally, based on a number of details in the Diocletian's palace we can assume that the dominant influence on its construction came from the Middle East, i.e. the eastern part of the Roman Empire. Although there are considerable similarities with other examples of Roman military architecture, the spatial arrangement of the Palace in Split is unique and is not found anywhere else in the world. One possible reason is Diocletian's direct involvement in the project and all the facilities required for the Palace. Taking into consideration the strategic projects envisioned and implemented by Diocletian in a relatively short time period on the eastern frontier (limes), i.e. numerous fortifications from Palmyra to Upper Egypt along the Roman road named after the Emperor - Strata Diocletiana, and in view of his passion for constructing grand buildings, we can be pretty certain that the Emperor himself contributed to planning and designing the Palace.