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Społeczna
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THE PULPIT IN THE EPISCOPAL BASILICA
AT NOVAE (SVIŠTOV)
(AN ATTEMPT AT A RECONSTRUCTION)

ANDRZEJ BOLESŁAW BIERNACKI

ABSTRACT. Biernacki Andrzej Bolesław, *The pulpit in the episcopal basilica at Novae (Svištov). (An attempt at a reconstruction)*. Balcanica Posnaniensia. Acta et studia, VII, Adam Mickiewicz University Press, Poznań 1995, p. 315-332, 10 Figs. ISBN 83-232-0617-1. ISSN 0239-4278. Text in English.

The article is an attempt at a reconstruction of the construction system and external view of the pulpit of the Constantinople type from the early Christian episcopal basilica at Novae (Moesia Inferior) dated to the first half of the 6th century, most probably executed in marble from Proconesos. The basis of the reconstruction were more than 70 fragments of architectonic details found in the area of the basilica.

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Archaeological excavations at Novae (Svištov), jointly conducted by Polish and Bulgarian archaeologists for twenty seven years, have provided us with a very rich source material concerning both city-planning and architecture.¹ An essential part of these problems refers – both quantitatively and qualitatively – to architectural elements and details. Analytical-comparative studies of

¹ Archaeological excavations at Novae were started in 1960 by: The Warsaw Archaeological Expedition guided by Professor K. Majewski and the Expedition of the Archaeology Institute of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, guided by Professor D. D'mitrov. Presently, the two Expeditions are guided by Professor L. Press and Professor M. Čičikova, respectively. In 1970, the two Expeditions were joined by the Archaeological Expedition of the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, guided by Professor S. Parnicki-Pudełko. The Polish Expeditions run their excavatory campaigns interchangeably once every two years.

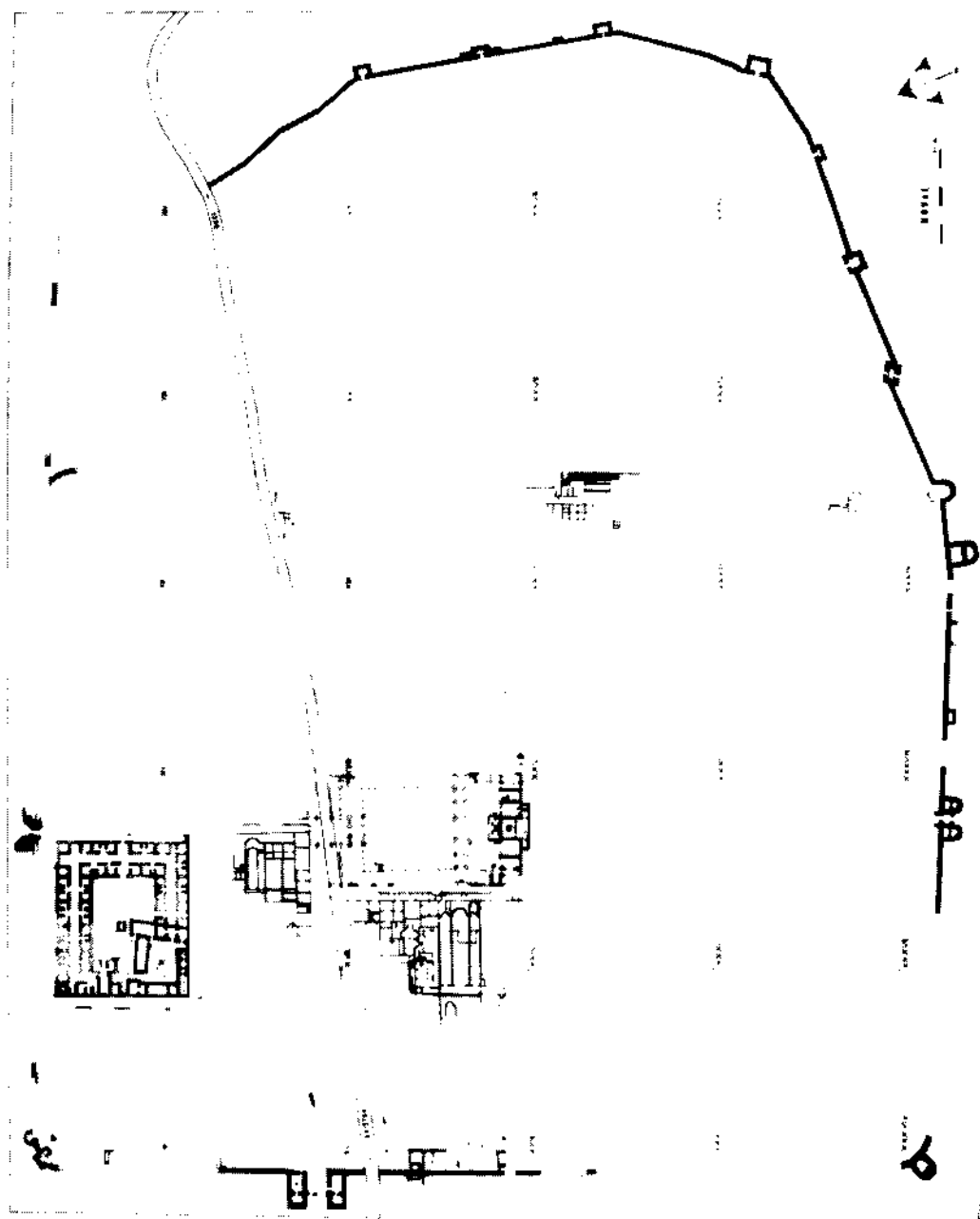


Fig. 1. A schematic plan of Novae. Designed by A. Biernacki and T. Sarnowski

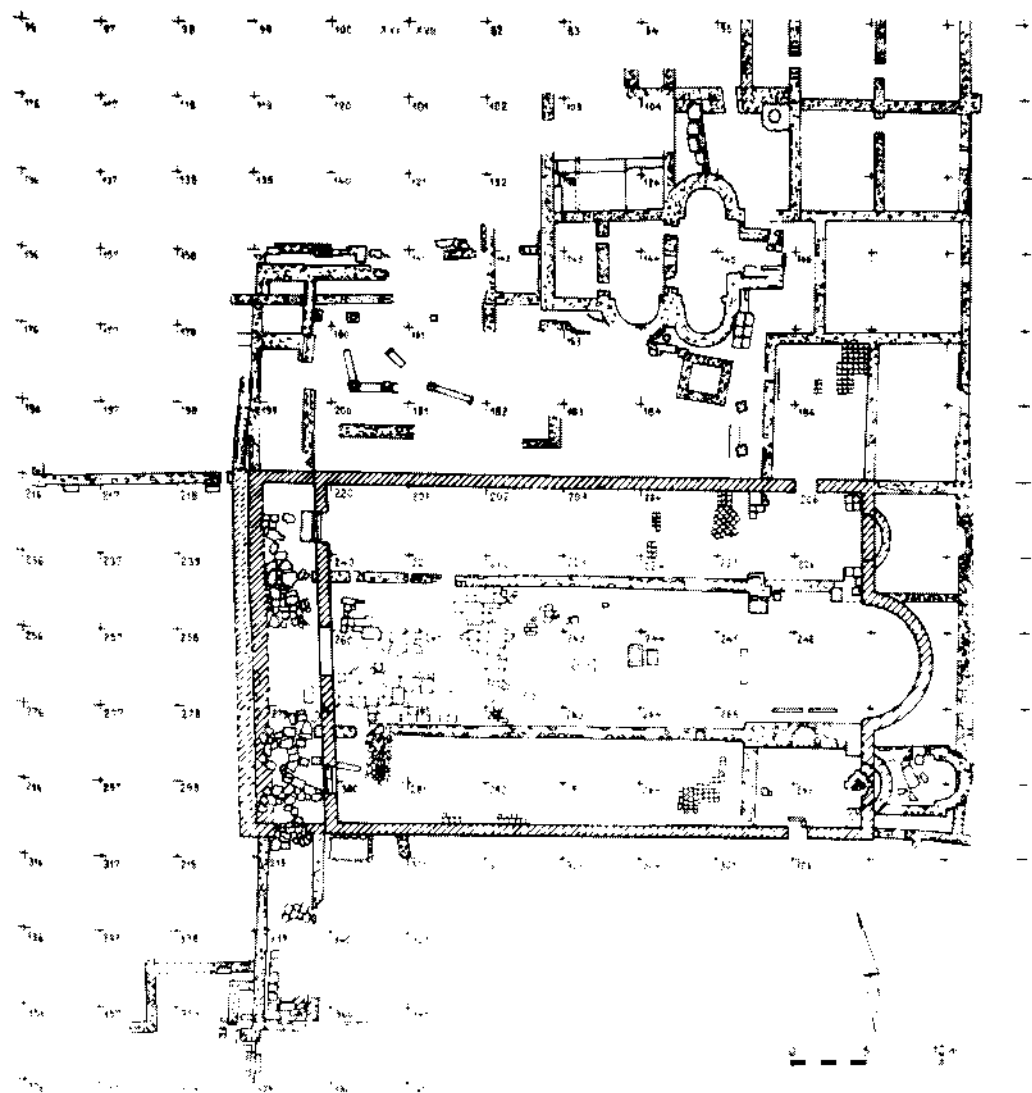


Fig. 2. Bottom view of the basilica and of the southern part of the episcopal residence from the I-III phase of construction. Designed by A. B. Biernacki and S. Medeksza

this type of archaeological sources have led to an attempt at a reconstruction of the monumental pulpit in the basilica at Novae.²

During six excavatory campaigns led in even years between 1976-1986 the Adam Mickiewicz University Archaeological Expedition concentrated their

² I would like to express my deep gratitude to members of the Bulgarian Archaeological Expedition at Novae, in particular to Professor M. Čičikova for her considerable help during my research work.

explorations in the area of the early Christian basilica and in the area of a complex of residential and utility lodges constituting the episcopal residence and directly adjoining the basilica on its northern side.³ (Fig. 1, 2). It should be stated that the basilica is the largest among the early Christian churches uncovered and explored over the territory of present-day Bulgaria; in fact, it is one of the most imposing churches all over the Balkan Peninsula.

The accumulated results of excavatory explorations have enabled us to define the maximum full length of the basilica as amounting to about 46,26 m, and the width as amounting to 24,20 – 24,30 m, (the difference being determined by the place of measurement). The three-aisled naos of the basilica has the following dimensions: 34,80 × 22,32 m. The width of the nave varies between 9,15 – 9,29 m. The central apse is 7,73 m in diameter. The nave, together with the apse, is 38,70 m in length. A system of four stone blocks, constituting a fragment of a foundation of the pulpit,⁴ was uncovered almost precisely on the length axis of the basilica's nave (Fig. 2, 3). The joint length of the blocks preserved *in situ* amounts to 2,06 m. In their upper surfaces, two of those blocks have sockets for spigots which form two parallel sets of four holes on the W – E axis. The distance between both rows of holes varies between 0,77 – 0,81 m. At a distance of 2,15 m west of the above-mentioned blocks a large stone plate with two longitudinal cuts was uncovered; these cuts are an exact extension of the southern row of holes. This is undoubtedly one more part of the pulpit's foundation. Let us emphasize at this point that it is a very typical constructional treatment of the foundation encountered in the majority of basilicas furnished with stone pulpits.⁵

During excavatory works conducted in the eastern and central parts of the church, a large number of marble architectural elements coming from the interior ornamentation of the basilica were uncovered.⁶ On the basis of

³ Current reports on excavatory explorations are published systematically in the yearly "Archeologia" and in a series of publications of the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań: *Novae – the Western Section*, edited by Professor S. Parnicki-Pudełko. See also the same, *The early Christian episcopal basilica in Novae*, Archeologia Polona XXI-XXII, 1983, pp. 241-270; idem, *Wczesnochrześcijańska bazylika episkopalna w Novae* (The early Christian episcopal basilica at Novae), Balcanica Posnaniensia I, 1984, pp. 271-304.

⁴ A. B. Biernacki, in: *Novae – the Western Section, 1982. Current Reports on the excavations of the Archaeological Expedition conducted by the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań*, Archeologia XXXV, 1984 (1986), pp. 128-129; Parnicki-Pudełko, *The early Christian basilica at Novae*, pp. 285, 287; idem, *Ambona* (The pulpit) (Annex I), in: *Novae – the Western Section, 1982*, Archeologia XXXV, 1984 (1986), pp. 137-139.

⁵ J. P. Sordini, K. Kolokotsas, *Alikí II: La Basilique Double*, Athenes, pp. 94, 107-112 (extensive bibliography therein).

⁶ The first schematic reconstruction of the bottom and end views of the pulpit and its balcony was made by S. Parnicki-Pudełko, *The pulpit* (Annex I), in: *Novae – the Western Section 1980*, Archeologia XXXIII, 1982 (1985), pp. 191-196; idem, *The pulpit* (Annex I), in: *Novae – the Western Section 1982*, Archeologia XXXV, 1984 (1986), pp. 132-142.



Fig. 3. System of blocks forming part of the foundation of the pulpit. Western view. Photographed by L. Mrozewicz



Fig. 4. Fragments of the pulpit's marble balcony. Photographed by A. Biernacki

exhaustive documentary and comparative studies, over 70 architectural elements were selected; next, they served in an attempt at a complete reconstruction of the exterior of the pulpit, of its constructional system and its rich plastic design.⁷ It was determined that the pulpit was about 5,65 m in length and 2,86 m in height. The central part of the pulpit was a marble balcony, about 2,80 m in length, whose essential part was circular (its diameter – 1,66 m) and which was terminated on its opposite sides with rectangular projections (Fig. 4). The balcony was made of two monolithic marble blocks whose thickness amounted to 0,50 m. In the lower, concave and bowl-shaped part of the balcony, Jesus Christ's monogram had been hewed out. The bowl's diameter amounts to 1,24 m, its depth to 0,30 m. Christ's monogram was executed in the fashion of convex relief and embedded in a circle whose diameter equalled 0,54 m. The monogram is placed precisely in the centre of the bowl. (Fig. 4) Six convex listels, symbolizing "sun rays" run from the outer edges of the bowl to the circle. This ornamentation of the balcony's bowl refers clearly to the Christian symbolism of the firmament, with God's Son in the centre.⁸ The longer side of the balcony was richly ornamented with a carefully executed system of listels in the form of a quarter-round and a wide half-round molding.⁹ One should observe that this ornamentations extends to and widens in the upper part of the balcony, which follows from the fact that its upper surface was wider as compared to the lower part holding the bowl. As a result, the upper diameter equalled 1,66 m. In the upper surface of the balcony, special sockets serving to fix the plates and rails of the balustrade were preserved. In the upper part of the balcony's rectangular projections mentioned earlier, precisely at their outer edges, rectangular sockets were hewed out; they served as the highest stairs in the flights of stairs that led to the pulpit. These stairs were 0,70 m in length, 0,30 m in width, and about 0,25 m in height (Fig. 7, 8).

The balcony of the pulpit rested on four attached columns surmounted with capitals decorated with an acanthus. The distance between the attached columns on the length axis of the pulpit amounted to 1,40 m. The lower parts of these monolithic attached columns were designed in the form of semi-bases consisting of a plinth, torus, trochilus, and two further restyled toruses (Fig. 5). Let me emphasize that the attached columns constitute a monolithic whole together with the attached plates, covered with a rich linear and geometrical

⁷ Let me express my sincere thanks to Mr. Witold Tarka for his extensive help in carrying out this reconstruction and in its graphic analysis.

⁸ D. Forstner, *Die Welt der Christlichen Symbole*, Innsbruck, Wien, München 1977, pp. 40-41, 60-61, 95-99.

⁹ This way of ornamenting the sides of the balcony is encountered very frequently, e.g., in the pulpits of the following basilicas: Gortyna (St. Titus), Palaipolis (Andros), Philippes (basilicas A and B), Doljani, Preslav, Marzamemi, Olous (B), and Ravenna (San Spirito). Sodini, Kolokotsas, o.c., p. 114 (and extensive bibliography therein).

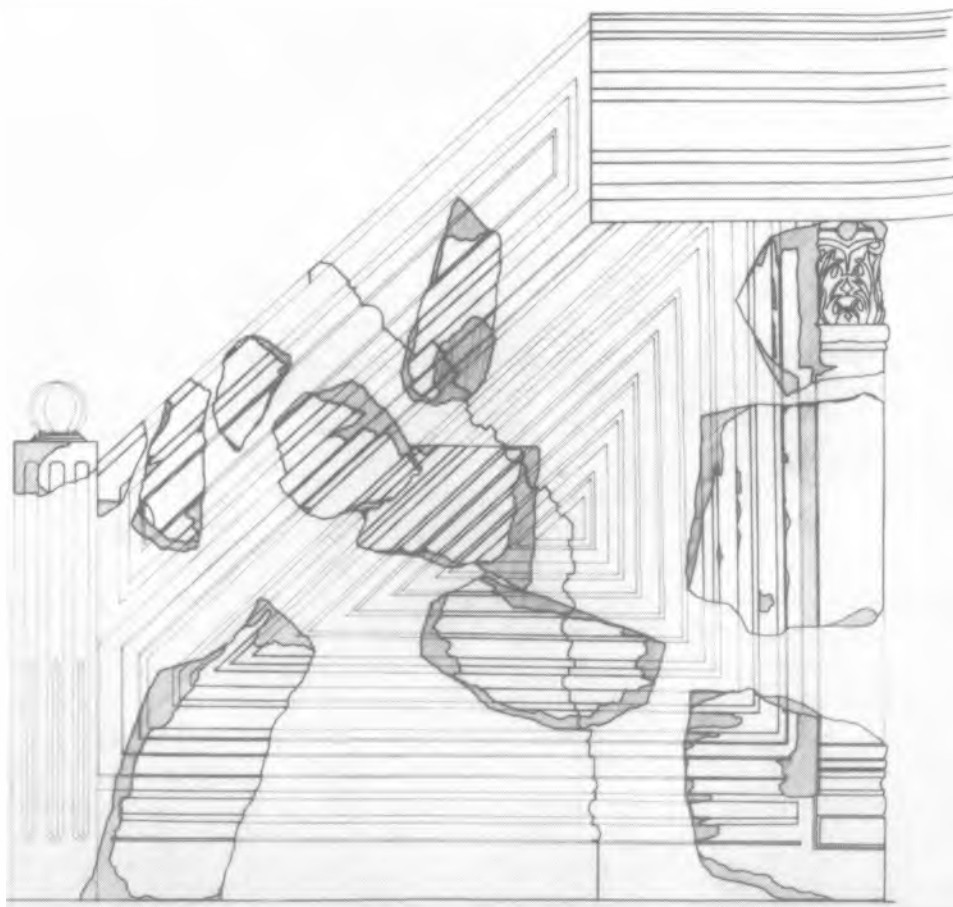


Fig. 5. Reconstruction of the facing plates of the stairs together with the rail and attached column

ornamentation. On the opposite side of such a plate there was a monolithic rail-pilaster (Fig. 6).

These monolithically designed marble plates formed the facing of the construction of both flights of stairs leading to the pulpit on both sides. The attached columns were 1,64 m in height, their diameter amounted to 0,19 – 0,21 m, and the total length of the facing plate equalled 2,08 m (including the attached column and the pilaster).¹⁰ The plate's rich ornamentation was based on the arrangement of concentric rectangular triangles whose sides had identical transverse section. The ornamentation consisted of a system of concave and convex listels, half-round moldings, quarter-rounds, and S-shaped

¹⁰ So far, about 37 fragments of these facing plates have been uncovered at Novae.



(on the basis of preserved fragments). Designed by A. B. Biernacki and W. Tarka. Drawing by W. Tarka

profiles (Fig. 5, 9). The plate's thickness varied from 0,21 – 0,08 m, and it decreased towards the centre of the decorated surface which was determined by the depth of the plastic design. The rail-pilaster that served as an ending of the facing plate on each of the two sides of the flight of stairs leading to the pulpit was about 1,10 m in height, and its dimensions in the transverse section were: 0,20/0,21 m × 0,18 m. It was surmounted with an octagonal knob.

The stair-cases on both sides of the pulpit consisted of nine stairs each. The first and lowest stair protruded over the pilaster of the facing of the stairs.¹¹ The pulpit's balustrade that was running from the lower pilaster to the side edge of the rectangular projections of the balcony at an angle of 45° – 48°,

¹¹ A similar treatment can also be found in the pulpits from Alikí, Philippos (basilica A), Delos (Saint Quirique), and in Marzamemi. See Sodini, Kolokotsas, o.c., p. 113.



Fig. 6. Fragment of the facing plate of the stairs and the rail. Photographed by A. B. Biernacki

ended precisely at the level of their upper edge. It was ornamented on both sides with an arrangement of two listels separated by a half-round molding. Moreover, on the side of the stairs, this ornamentation is more shallow with a slightly convex half-round molding. The balustrade's plate was 0,10 m in thickness and 0,32 m in height. It should be stressed at this point that the

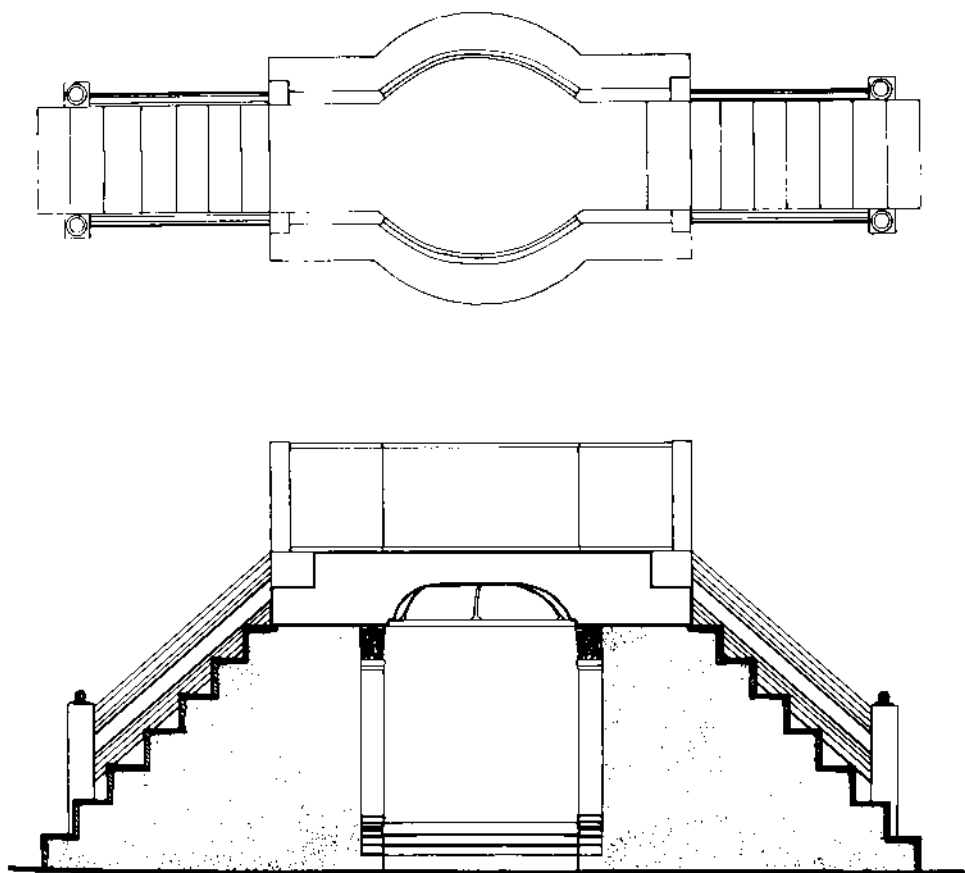


Fig. 7. Reconstruction of the pulpit. Bottom view and length section. Designed by A. B. Biernacki and W. Tarka. Drawing by W. Tarka

preserved fragments of the facing plates and of the balustrades indicate two constructional treatments of these elements. The first is that the monolithic plate was connected with the attached column, facing plate, rail and balustrade of the stair-case. The second is that a separate plate of the stair's balustrade was attached to the facing plate by means of small spigots.

The upper surface of the pulpit's balcony was placed 2,14 m over the level of the floor in the nave of the basilica. The balustrade of the pulpit's balcony, 0,72 m in height, consisted of rectangular marble plates, very richly decorated with linear and geometrical elements based on the figure of the rhomb in the corners of which the peacock, one of typical Christian symbols, was placed¹² (Fig. 9). The sides of the rhombs as well as the upper and lower ramifications of the plate of the balustrade were designed in a similar way, i.e., the

¹² Ibidem, pp. 116-120; Forstner, o.c., pp. 230-232.

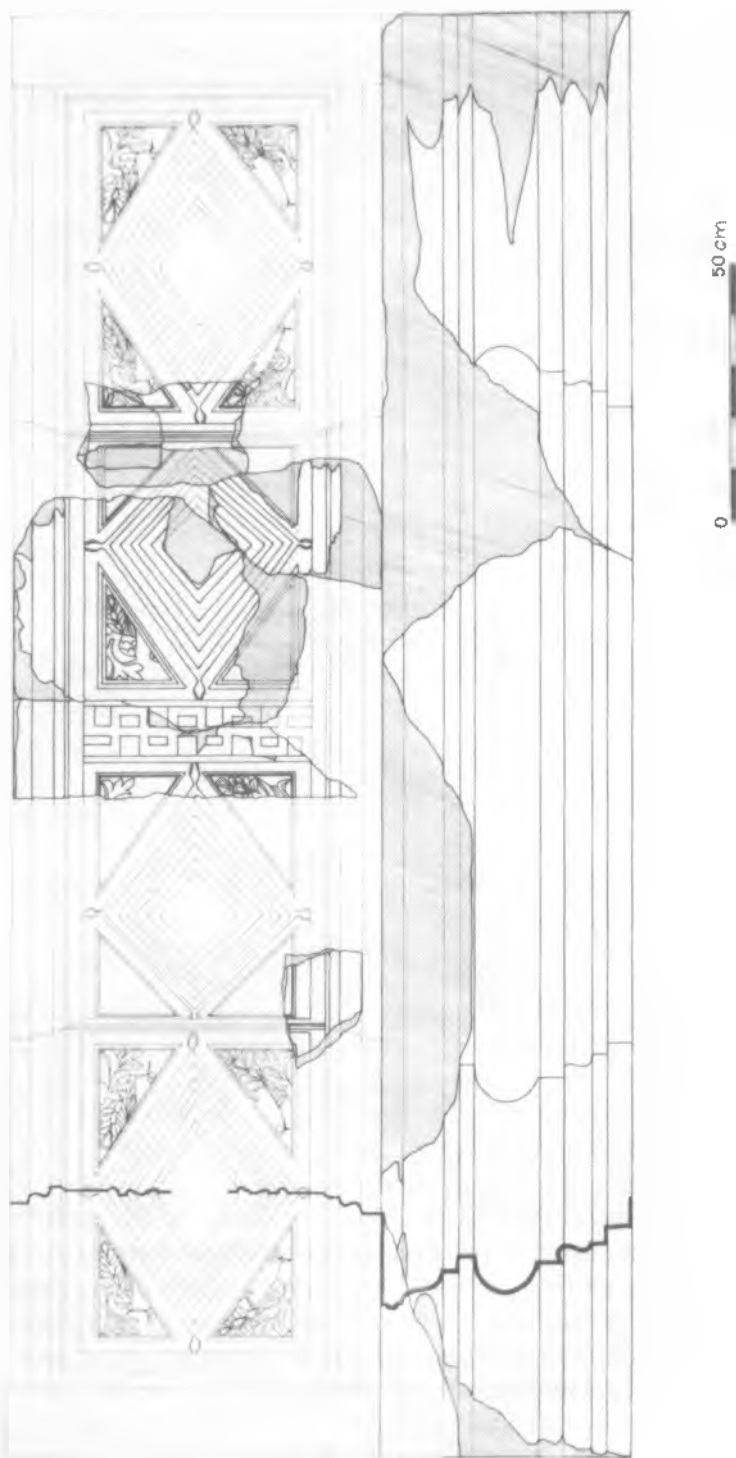


Fig. 8. Reconstruction of the pulpit's balcony together with the balustrade (on the basis of preserved fragments). Designed by A. B. Biernacki and W. Tarka. Drawing by W. Tarka

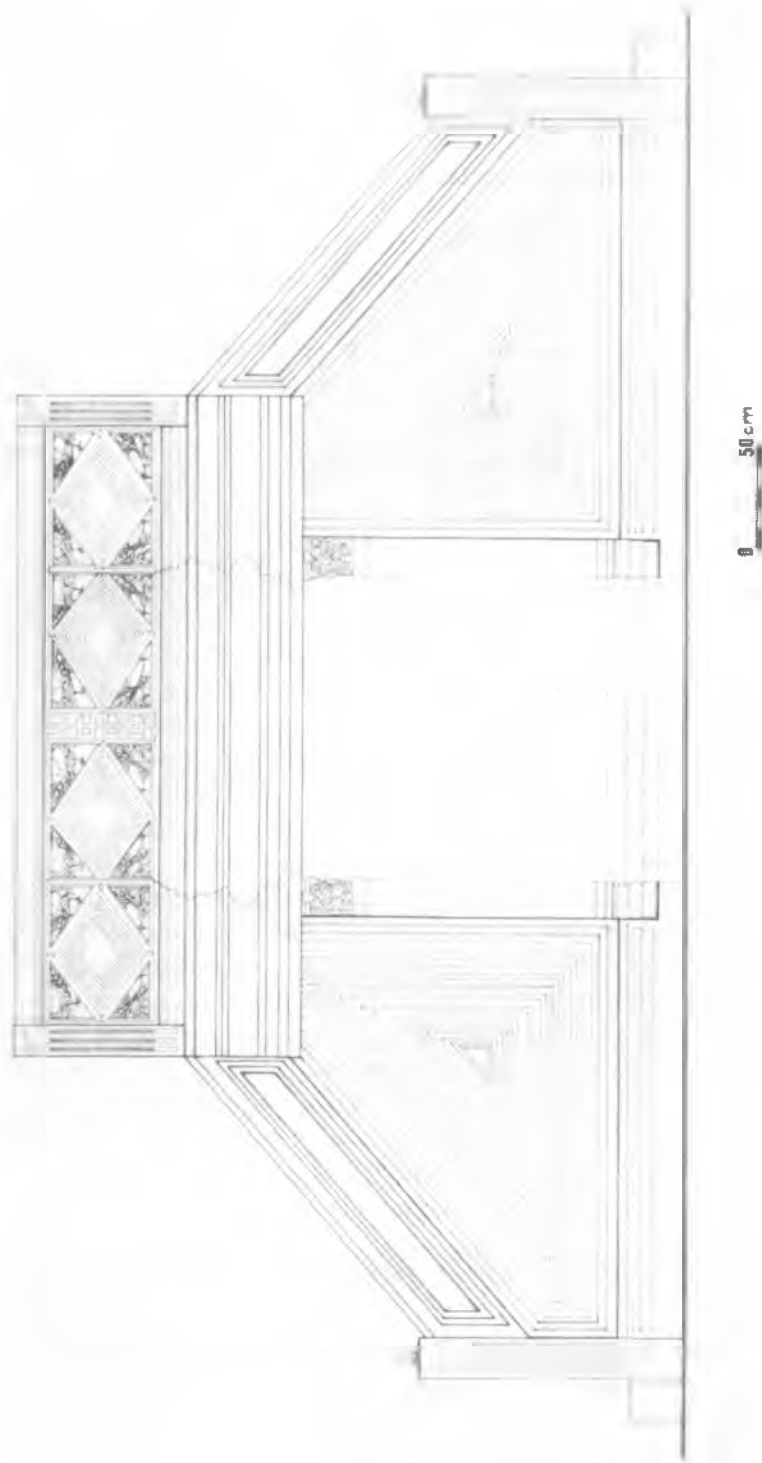


Fig. 9. Reconstruction of the pulpit. End view. Designed by A. B. Biernacki and W. Tarka. Drawing by W. Tarka

ornamentation consisted in its transverse section of an arrangement of listels, concave and convex half-round moldings, and S-shaped profiles. The plates of the balustrade in the circular part of the balcony were decorated in a similar way; they were appropriately arcuately ornamented and installed in such a way that they were bending slightly outwards in the vertical plane. The system of four rhombs, decorating one side of the balustrade, was most probably separated in its middle by a vertical belt of four swastikas, executed in the fashion of a convex relief.¹³ On the basis of the preserved plate fragments, one can assume that the balustrades were equipped with only four rectangular rails, two on each side, and installed directly at the endings of the pulpit's balcony.¹⁴ The sides of these rails probably amounted to about 0,20 m in their horizontal projection. It is this size of a recess that was preserved in one of the rectangular projections of the balcony. In this recess, a socket is visible; it may have served to fix the balustrade's rail with a spigot.¹⁵

Let me now concentrate on four fragments of arc-shaped marble blocks which seem to have been placed on a stone foundation, perpendicular to the circular part of the balcony and between the attached columns on the W-E axis of the pulpit¹⁶ (Fig. 8-10). The ornamentation which occurs in the form of two listels separated by a wide quarter-round, can only be found on the outer (i.e., convex) parts of these blocks. In the lower and upper surfaces of these blocks, only rectangular sockets for spigots can be seen. One thus assumes that the holes in the lower surface served to connect the blocks with the blocks of the foundation. The function of the holes found in the upper surface of the blocks has not been explained; the problem thus requires further comparative studies. Having analyzed the constructional treatments, one should state that the vertical contact surface of two identical monolithic marble blocks which constitute the pulpit's balcony was devoid of any sockets and spigots. That is why in order to secure greater stability of that connection, a stone plate, 0,05 m in thickness, could have been placed in the upper surface of the balcony. Obviously, this statement is only hypothetical. However, the upper surface of the preserved elements of the balcony is less carefully executed. In addition, the last upper stair, hewed out in both rectangular projections of the balcony, is only 0,20 m in height, whereas the preceding stair is 0,25 m in height (Fig. 8). Another constructional problem is connected with a non-uniform execution of

¹³ Forstner, o.c., p. 20; K. Onasch, *Liturgie und Kunst der Ostkirche in Stichworten*, Leipzig 1981, pp. 221-222.

¹⁴ The constructional system of the pulpit's balustrade is very common, e.g., in the following basilicas: Marzamemi, Philippos (basilica B), on the Paros, Delos, and at Pirdop. See Sodini, Kolokotsas, o.c., p. 115.

¹⁵ S. Parnicki-Pudelko, *The pulpit* (Annex I), in: *Novae – the Western Section 1982*, *Archeologia XXXV*, 1984 (1986), pp. 134-135, Fig. 41.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 135.

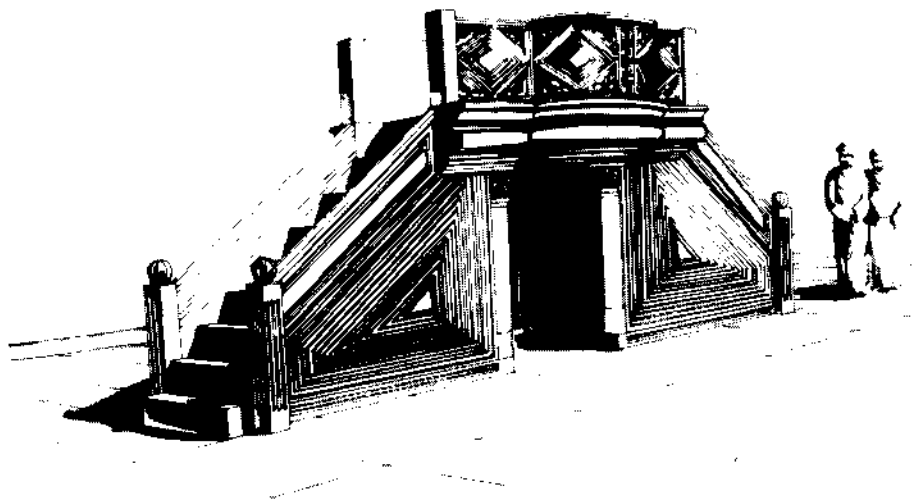


Fig. 10. Reconstruction of the pulpit. End view. Designed by A. B. Biernacki and W. Tarka.
Drawing by W. Tarka

the rear surfaces of the facing plates of the stairs. That is, apart from parts which are carefully polished (e.g., right on the inner sides of the attached columns), one can also see fragments which are only rough-hewn. This fact provides an argument in favour of the hypothesis that under the plates there was a special stone or brick construction to which the stairs were attached and, partly, the rectangular projections of the pulpit's balcony, 0,30 m in width.¹⁷

The present typological-comparative studies have enabled one to unequivocally classify this pulpit as belonging to the Constantinople type¹⁸ (Fig. 10). This decision is based on the following parameters: the central placement of the pulpit precisely on the length (W-E) axis of the basilica, and the occurrence of two flights of stairs running to the balcony from the eastern and western sides. On the basis of four pulpits found in Greece and Illyricum and having

¹⁷ According to J. P. Sodini, the constructional system of the stairs leading to the pulpit depended strongly on a local tradition and there was considerable freedom as to the preferred constructional treatment. See Sodini, Kolokotsas, o.c., p. 112.

¹⁸ Ibidem, pp. 105-106; D. Pallas, *L'édifice cultuel chrétien et la liturgie dans L'Illyricum oriental*, in: *Rapports de X CAC Thessalonique 1980*, pp. 525-530.

considered the location of entrances to the pulpit's balcony, J. P. Sodini distinguished four groups of pulpits.¹⁹ The particular instance of the pulpit at Novae belongs to the most frequently occurring group I of pulpits. The group comprises the objects which have two flights of stairs; it has the following representatives: the pulpit at Stobi, Caricin Grad – the basilica with a transept, Amphipolis – basilica A, Philippos – basilica A, Nea-Anchialos – basilica D, Daphnusia, Nicopolis – basilica B, Delos.²⁰ Typologically similar pulpits were also uncovered in Asia Minor, e.g., at Shohut Kasaba (ancient Synnada), Hasan Koy (ancient Akmonia), Eskisehir (ancient Dorylaeum), or at Selcikler (ancient Sebaste).²¹ Specimens of such pulpits have also been found over the territory of Bithynia and on the islands of the Aegean Sea, e.g., Lesbos, Samos, Kos, Andros, Paros, and Crete.²² This type of pulpit is almost completely unknown in the Peloponnesus, in Attica, Epirus, or in Boiotia, where only singular pulpits of the type were discovered.²³ Over the territory of the Balkan Peninsula, pulpits of the Constantinople type have occurred quite numerously. In most cases, they have been preserved in a very bad condition. Most frequently, we have to do with single or, at best, several fragments of facing plates of the stairs; more rarely, we have to do with fragments of the balcony itself, or with elements of the pulpit's balustrade.

The architectural elements uncovered in present-day Bulgaria come from Pirdop, Stara Zagora, Perustica, Mesambria, Sofia, Varna, Zlata, Marcianopolis, and Preslav.²⁴ In Yugoslavia, specimens of these pulpits were found in Doljani, Stobi, Bregovina, and the previously mentioned Caricin Grad.²⁵ In Roumania, this type of pulpit was uncovered at Tomis.²⁶ One can also encounter these pulpits on the northern and eastern coasts of the Black Sea and in the Crimea.²⁷ There exist two pulpits of that type in Ravenna's churches: San Apollinare Nuovo and San Spirito.²⁸ The first of these pulpits

¹⁹ J. P. Sodini, *La sculpture architecturale à l'époque paleochrétienne en Illyricum*, in: *Rapports du X^e CAC Thessalonique 1980*, pp. 91-92.

²⁰ Ibidem, pp. 92-98.

²¹ Sodini, Kolokotsas, o.c., p. 107 (and further bibliography therein).

²² Ibidem, pp. 107-108.

²³ Ibidem, p. 109.

²⁴ Ibidem, pp. 109-110 (and further bibliography therein). Let me thank dr. M. Vaklinova for her valuable suggestions that she gave me during my comparative studies of the pulpit from Novae.

²⁵ Ibidem, p. 110; V. Kondić, V. Popović, *Carin Grad*, Belgrade 1977, pp. 109-123, 140-144, 154.

²⁶ I. Barnea, *Christian art in Romania*, I, Bucharest 1979, pp. 132-133, pl. 48.

²⁷ Sodini, Kolokotsas, o.c., p. 110.

²⁸ F. W. Deichmann, *Ravenna. Hauptstadt des Spätantiken Abendlandes*, I, 1969, Fig. 88, 91, pp. 72-73; idem, *Ravenna*, II, part I, *Geschichte und Monumente*, 1974, pp. 136, 250, Fig. 109-110; idem, *Ravenna*, III, *Frühchristlichen Bauten...*, pl. 247.

was made in a famous mason centre on the Prokonnesos, from where it was transported to Italy by sea route.²⁹

Having examined the above-mentioned specimens, one can state that pulpits of the Constantinople type can generally be placed in the chronological interval from 500 A.D. to the end of the 4th century.

However, to determine the dating of the pulpit under consideration more precisely, it is necessary to consider some of the technical and constructional details of the pulpit at Novae at greater detail. The variant, in which the attached columns supporting the balcony constitute one monolithic whole with the facing plates of the stair-case, can be encountered in Istanbul (de Beyazid Pulpit), Philippos (the Basilica Extra Muros), on the Delos (Saint-Quirique), Rodos (Lardos), and on the Paros (the Basilica of Three Churches).³⁰

Also, the constructional treatment of the balcony in the form of two identical monolithic marble blocks has a very close analogy to the basilicas uncovered in Palaioiopolis (Andros), Marzamemi, on the Paros (the Basilica of Three Churches), and at Gortyna (the Basilica of Saint Titus).³¹

Jesus Christ's monogram, visible in the centre of the bowl-shaped balcony of the pulpit at Novae, is also known from analogous reliefs found in the basilicas at Doljani, Nea-Anchialos (basilica D), Thermes (on the Kos), and on the Tauric Chersonese.³²

The problem of the origin of the marble of which the pulpit at Novae was made as well as the problem of a proper recognition of the mason's workshop where its constructional and plastic designs were carried out, still remains open. J. P. Sodini turned our attention to the fact that the most famous quarries and mason centres where pulpits of the Constantinople type had been made were found at Synnada, on the Thasos and the Paros, and to the fact that the most famous centres were on the Prokonnesos from where the products were even sent to Italy.³³

Having examined the material, technical methods, and, above all, the plastic design of the pulpit, one can conclude that there exist far-reaching similarities between the various architectural elements which contribute to the interior decorations of the episcopal basilica at Novae. One is also inclined to put forth a hypothesis according to which the essential elements of the

²⁹ The problem of importing ready-made architectural elements, constituting the interiors of basilicas, from Prokonnesos to Italy (including the pulpits) is thoroughly dealt with by G. Kapitan. This analysis is based on unique under-water findings of such architectural details in Marzamemi (Syracuse). See *idem*, *Elementi architettonici per una basilica dal relitto navale del secolo di Marzamemi (Siracusa)*. In: XXVII Corso di cultura sull'arte Ravennate e Bizantina, 1980, pp. 71-136.

³⁰ Sodini, Kolokotsas, *o.c.*, p. 112 (and further bibliography therein).

³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 113; Kapitan, *o.c.*, pp. 109-113, Fig. 25, 26.

³² Sodini, Kolokotsas, *o.c.*, p. 113; Sodini, *o.c.*, pp. 94-96.

³³ Sodini, Kolokotsas, *o.c.*, p. 110; Kapitan, *o.c.*, pp. 125-130.

basilica's interior (such as the pulpit, altar (?), altar barrier) may be thought to have originated in one and the same mason's workshop, and may be thought to have been designed by the same architect. However, a possibility cannot be excluded that the majority, perhaps even all of the pulpits found in Moesia and Thrace, today known only fragmentarily, do in fact come from one and the same mason centre. To be solved, the problem requires that all the architectural elements found over the territory of present-day Bulgaria be examined geologically and petrographically.

The three phases of construction of the episcopal basilica at Novae, distinguished on the basis of past and present archaeological explorations, can be placed in the following chronological intervals:³⁴

phase I: three-aisled, one-apse basilica – the end of the 5th century;

phase II: three-aisled, three-apse basilica, with the presbytery and ancillary liturgical interiors (the prothesis and diakonikon (?)) located in the aisles. The basilica's narthex is closed – the first half of the 6th century;

phase III: three-aisled, three-apse basilica with the isolated presbytery and northern ancillary liturgical interior (prothesis?) and baptistery erected in place of the previously existing diakonikon (?) – the second half of the 6th century.

On the basis of the above-described archaeological data, as well as on the basis of an analysis of the stratigraphic arrangement and as a result of analytical-comparative studies, the time of the construction of the pulpit at Novae should be properly associated with the second phase of the basilica's construction. The pulpit's construction should thus be dated back to the first half of the 6th century.

Poznań 1986

Translated by St. Puppel

³⁴ A. B. Biernacki, in: *Novae – the Western Section 1980*, *Archeologia XXXIII*, 1982 (1985), p. 191; Parnicki-Pudełko, *The early Christian basilica*, pp. 301-302.