

Studies of Early Representations of Balkan Vernacular Architecture

J. Brooke Harrington
Temple University
1947 N. 12th Street
Philadelphia, PA 19122
USA
E-mail: jharrington@temple.edu

Judith Bing
Drexel University
3201 Arch Street
Philadelphia, PA 19104
USA
E-mail: bingj@drexel.edu

ABSTRACT

This research involves the exploration of the earliest graphic and sculptural representations of simple architectural forms (dwellings and working buildings) found through a variety of sources and investigations, and the comparison of the buildings with contemporary examples of vernacular architecture of the Balkans. The work includes investigations from libraries, institutes, museums and on-site recording of building forms through photographic and digital means. The investigations have taken place over fifteen years in Austria, Hungary, Italy, former Yugoslavia and its Republics and Provinces, Roumania, Bulgaria and Turkey, as well as through contemporary research in important libraries and sites in Italy, Turkey, Greece, FYR Macedonia, and institutions and libraries in the United States, Europe and Asia.

The materials recently gathered include reproductions of images and on-site photographs of drawings, etchings, frescos, mosaics, sarcophagus reliefs, and building elements of early vernacular architecture of the lands of the Balkans. The results of these investigations are yielding representations of a complex set of morphological and typological building expressions that expose strong relationships with the remaining early traditional buildings of the Balkans. The materials reveal a variety of representational devices from iconographic or symbolic representation to more factual and accurate illustrative devices.

The analysis and understanding of where these device limits exist become part of an on-going work to better understand the roots of Balkan vernacular architecture. Another part of this investigation is to build, from the partial views provided, a logical and whole view of the elements and buildings represented and to compare these with the building technologies, morphologies and typologies that have been observed and known to exist for the last two hundred years in the Balkan peninsula and Turkey.

The presentation will include preliminary analysis of a number of early representations of Balkan vernacular architecture and comparative analysis of these with examples of remaining vernacular architecture that can be found on the Balkan peninsula today.

1. FRAMING THE STUDIES

For many years our studies have focused on the vernacular architecture of the Balkans, beginning in 1987 with studies in Yugoslavia and spreading throughout the rest of the Balkan peninsula and parts of Anatolia. Over the last year we have extended our research through explorations of the earliest representations of simple architectural forms found through a variety of sources including libraries, institutes, museums, and on-site recording of building forms through photographic and digital means. The investigations have taken place over the years in former Yugoslavia and its Republics and provinces, and most recently in important libraries and sites in Italy, Turkey, Greece, FYR Macedonia and institutions and libraries in the United States. The materials gathered include reproductions of images and on-site photographs of drawings, etchings, frescos, mosaics, sarcophagi reliefs, and building elements. The results are yielding illustrations of a complex set of building morphological and typological expressions that expose strong relationships to the remaining early traditional buildings of the Balkans.

The materials that we have examined reveal a variety of illustrative devices from iconographic or symbolic representation to more factual and precise depiction devices. The analysis and understanding of where these conflicts and dilemmas exist becomes a major part of the on-going

work. Another is to build, from the partial views provided, a logical and whole view of the elements and buildings represented and to compare these with the building technologies, morphologies and typologies that have been personally observed and known to exist for the last two hundred years.

2. THE QUESTION OF REPRESENTATION

A number of important questions had to be addressed before this study began. Initial questions dealt with the accuracy of representations found. Representation, as we often define it, must accurately depict the physical environment and context as we would perceive it first-hand if we were present in the place being represented. Yet representations by their nature transform wholly three-dimensional environments into two dimensional (or relieved two dimensional) abstractions for others to view. Beyond this representations exhibit symbolism, technique and craftsmanship. The earliest examples are dominated by symbolic and iconographic issues that demand a grasp of cultures and cosmological views of the time. The viewpoint of the author (artist) and often the patron or supporter may dominate the work. And finally, artistic techniques and craftsmanship intervene. These issues demand that each representation be viewed within its context. The degree of realism in the representation can only be validated by other supporting information or findings. Thus the premise of the research demands a highly critical approach and a realization that the investigation must be understood as speculative and theoretical in nature.

The artifacts found include elements from periods that span over eight centuries. These represent items on archeological sites and documents from archeological sites, artifacts in academic institutions and museums, and in preserved buildings of the last four hundred years. The artifacts and documents reflect the sense of the ideal and the real that were of sufficient value to generate or commission the work of art, calligraphy or architecture that remains. The variety of techniques of representation that deal with the establishment of rules of orthogonal and axonometric projection, and perspective illustration influence greatly the study of the items that have come to light.

3. EARLIEST PERIODS

The earliest periods of Balkan life involve two areas; the cultures bordering on the Mediterranean Sea and those that existed on the Danube River basin. The *megaron house* found in Sesklo (near Thessaly, Greece and dating to approximately 5700 BC) has been found in many places on the Balkan Peninsula and throughout the islands of the Mediterranean and Aegean Seas as well as in Anatolia. This rectangular house with its columned portico and single interior room with a central hearth can be found as a prototype for many of the simple traditional Balkan houses that exist today. The second dwelling type is found in the Iron Gates region of the Danube at Lepenski Vir (in Serbia and dates from approximately 6500-5500 BC). The dwellings in this region are based on isosceles triangle geometries and are built into the terraced banks of the river with entries typically facing the river. Research about these dwellings is still evolving since their discovery in 1965⁷. Scholars agree that before this time inhabitants of the area lived in cave dwellings in this mountainous area where the Balkan (Dinaric) Alps and Transylvanian Alps meet at the Danube. Little has been found to show that the traditional dwellings of today reflect the influence of the dwellings and tombs of this early culture.

Maps of the transformation and the growth of civilization on the Balkan Peninsula and Anatolia indicate overlaps of the cultures of the Indo-European, Hittite, and Persian cultures as time passed.⁸ By 1850 BC the Illyrians, Thraco-Cimmerians, Greeks, Minoans, Livians and Hittites were major influences in the area. In 1000 BC the Illyrians, Thracians, Greeks, Ionian Greeks, Phrygians and Neo-Hittites were present. Xerxes, of the Persian Empire, captured Macedon and Thessaly in 480 BC and moved to occupy Athens. Alexander the Great extended the Macedonian Empire by 323 BC east to Indus River. By 145 BC the Roman Empire gained control of the lower Balkan Peninsula and allied itself with the powers in Anatolia. At Caesar's death in 44 BC the Roman Empire had control of the lower Balkan Peninsula, Anatolia, the eastern Mediterranean and Egypt. The movements of armies and peoples in the expansions of empires brought with them the evolution and transformation of dwelling and other building types.

⁷ Dragoslav Srejavic, *Lepenski Vir National Museum*, Beograd 1983

⁸ Colin McEvedy, *The Penguin Atlas of Ancient History*, London 1967

Typological expressions and variations of the early megaron house, the courtyard house, terraced housing and many of the techniques employed in the buildings of the Hittites of central Anatolia have been found in numerous archeological sites in these regions. These developments remain as principal bases of traditional dwellings that are represented and found in remaining dwellings of the last three hundred years.

4. ROMAN RECORDS AND IMPRINTS

The Roman Empire initially developed a number of outposts in the lower Balkan peninsula and then extended its control up to the Danube River and beyond to what is now Romania and the perimeter of the Black Sea. The exploits of the wars with Dacia and Thrace in 100-04 AD are memorialized on Trajan's Column. The column today remains an important record of not only the battles but also of the representations of the artists' interpretations of the village and town buildings of the cities of ancient Dacia and Thrace. The column has been studied by scholars for its rich detail. In addition to the column itself (estimated to be constructed in 110 AD) there is a portfolio of drawings produced in the 1660s⁹, a set of castings of the column panels created in the beginning of the twentieth century that are in the Museo della Civiltà Romana, and a number of sets of photographs of the castings. These will be discussed later.

The presence of the Roman Empire in the Balkans and Anatolia cannot be understated since the Romans brought another culture to the landscape and built up areas that previously had been sparsely occupied. The buildings of the new governors and the development of roads and other infrastructure promoted trade as social and economic stability were established. For these reasons, we studied the representation of the Roman rural landscape and its buildings to understand whether (and to what degree) the traditional buildings of the Balkans were extensions of Roman prototypes. We sought illustrations of common rural and urban settings found in paintings, mosaics and sculptural reliefs and recording the most compelling examples. The time span and geographical distances covered by these examples is large since the Empire survived across a millennium and spread across Europe and a portion of Asia. The Empire's influence was tempered by the inclusion of many peoples, even by elevation of foreigners to the position of 'Caesar'.

The earliest notable examples of Roman urban buildings come from the frescoes of Boscoreale from a noble's dwelling in Pompeii (circa 100 BC). Their complexity and asymmetrical overlays display a great divergence from the dominant symmetry normally associated with typical Roman courtyard dwellings. The scenes are fanciful and yet display, through cantilevered elements, a freedom of building form and structural expectations. Sensitivity to the creation of mock symmetry and arrangement of shading and shadows reveal a playful look at the moods that can be created by the use of shifting light patterns.

An important Roman example depicting an idealized scene of rural village life was found on one sarcophagus for a child (circa 300 AD). The relief on this small marble sarcophagus depicts Eros playfully accompanying a boat passing small dwellings with cantilevered balconies on the upper levels. The peaceful and pleasant setting is in contrast to the multitude of sarcophagi that depict struggles of heroic men in battle with one another, or lions, predators and preys in deadly struggles, or men in the context of their work. The scene of the child passing to another world accompanied by the Eros is a scene that evokes sympathy for a life cut short. We encountered a number of other reliefs that illustrate the settings of town and village life, but these are rare in the vast collections in Rome.

The mosaics of Pompeii and Rome are exquisitely made and serve as excellent vehicles to illustrate people, events and buildings. But rarely is the subject the common life of rural or urban settings (in the Eastern Empire more examples appear). Within the churches of Rome, Venice and Constantinople some of the most famous mosaics depict critical Christian religious events. However, in such instances the settings most often complete the scene and buildings are highly abstracted to frame focus upon the central figures of the events. The early mosaics of Pompeii, Ostia and southern Italy often address the creatures of the sea and the gods of Roman mythology

⁹ Bartoli, Petro Santi, 1635-1700 Colonna Traiana eretta dal Senato, e popolo romano all'imperatore Traiano augusto nel suo foro in Roma.

but a few touch on rural life. Those that do describe economic buildings (stables, grain storage buildings, etc.) as secondary parts of the theme.

The Column of Trajan is a chronicle of the war years in Dacia and Thrace. The artists created a series of relief panels that spiral up the shaft and depict battles, places, armies (both adversaries and allies) and travels. The Column still stands at the edge of Trajan's market. The castings in the Museo della Civiltà Romana allow people to view each part closely. For the purposes of this paper I will discuss just one relief panel. Panel XX/XXV shows Roman soldiers setting Dacian town buildings on fire. The buildings are wooden plank structures of simple construction. Today on the column itself, the building in the foreground is clearly shown as supported on piles, however the area below is void of treatment. In the drawing of the same building done in the seventeenth century the base of the building is shown as enclosed and constructed using the same plank construction as the upper storey. The casting of the scene, as one might expect, is in agreement with this column panel as it now exists. This conflict brings into question whether the buildings in panel XX/XXV are pile structures (common along the Danube) or two storey structures (also common along the Danube and Sava Rivers).



Fig. 1 Trajan's Column, Dacian Building (panel XXV)

Fig. 2 Bartoli Drawings, portion of panel XXV

There are many images of buildings and fortresses on the column that need close review and analysis. The dilemma of this one example points to the need to carefully inspect not only the artifacts as primary sources but also the historic records in order to understand the representations that occur.

Many churches in Rome contain important mosaics that span over five hundred years, and the images of towns within Christian religious scenes offer images of both heavenly cities, Jerusalem, and other biblical cities. These images are highly interpretive yet exhibit some knowledge of building groupings, often with proper relationships between known and archeologically confirmed building sites. The majority of these images display only masonry and prominent buildings of the times. These images were noted and recorded for comparison with those of later images in Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox mosaics and frescoes in the churches of the Balkans.

5. BYZANTIUM AND THE EASTERN ROMAN EMPIRE

After the decline of the Western Roman Empire, the Eastern Empire retained control of much of the Balkans, Anatolia and parts of the Eastern Mediterranean for over six hundred years. The contractions and re-expansion of the Eastern Roman Empire allowed for the joining of Eastern and Roman traditions and building types. The division of Christianity into Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox through the late Roman Empire reflected important divisions of the cultures of the Empire. The Eastern Roman Empire and Byzantine Empire adopted the Cyrillic alphabet and Greek and Slavonic languages. This separation in religious liturgies impacted greatly on the way representations evolved. During this broad period, Antioch and Damascus became major cities in the Eastern Mediterranean and were major centers of populations and trade. While Rome and Venice were struggling, these cities were flourishing. In Constantinople, Antioch, Damascus and even Jerusalem one finds significant mosaic representations of buildings and town plans of the time. These representations often incorporate names written in Greek Cyrillic alphabet. The building types, most often grand in nature, show the range of forms and porticoes, masonry pattern relationships that one can find in towns and villages of the late medieval period.



Fig.4 Mosaic in Great Mosque,



Fig. 3 The Madaba Mosaic in Jerusalem
Damascus

The mosaics of the Eastern Mediterranean are representations of the Byzantine era, but incorporate elements of Persian as well as western design. The exchanges of power during struggles over the sacred cities of the East gave rise to blended techniques of the artistic heritages of those who worked in these settings. The buildings even changed hands from Christian to Islamic but often the themes of the art maintained the traditional expressions of the common culture (Persian versus Arabic or Greek Christian versus Islamic). Enclosed ground levels and open upper levels of the dwellings and other buildings are common attributes of the structures of these times. Few examples of wooden buildings are depicted but extended roof profiles hint that these are wooden caps to the buildings.

6. THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE

One of the most difficult aspects of this study is a recurring insistence among certain scholars that there is no such thing as a Byzantine house, and that the predominant dwelling forms of the southern Balkans are direct expressions or derivations of Ottoman architecture. These issues are most strongly contested by Turkish and Greek scholars. To this end we searched through the works of deBeylie and Choisy from the beginning of the twentieth century and found that many of the primary sources of later authors were also the bases of the theories of these scholars. Fortunately there are etchings and drawings that have survived and serve to describe the landscape and city views of major trade cities, and depict the dwellings in question.



Fig.5 Istanbul Image (inverted) Melchior Lorichs, 1559
Istanbul, c. 1500



Fig. 6 Ancient House in Fenner,

7. POST-BYZANTINE STUDIES AND SUMMARY

In Italy, Turkey, Greece and other Balkan countries, the mosaics and frescoes of the Christian churches (some converted to mosques) provide images of buildings that begin to further define the built landscape of the period since the Ottoman Empire collapsed. In the acropolis district of Thessaloniki, Diocletian's Palace district of Split, and numerous villages of the Balkans one can still find the urban fabric of much older times.

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries travel accounts by diplomats, writers and artists have provided views of the cities and landscapes of the Balkans and Anatolia that form a rich set of documents from which to study the traditional buildings and landscape of these lands. These demonstrate that the simple houses of the country and village are consistent with the early dwellings of more ancient times. These comparisons are being formed into a document that is currently under development by the authors.