

THE LATE ANTIQUE IMPERIAL PALACE IN POLAČE ON THE ISLAND OF MLJET

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In his analysis of imposing remains of the late antique palace in Polače on the island of Mljet, the author revises observations of other researchers, as well as their proposed reconstruction of the palace, its plan and elevation. For the first time, traces of the palace structural system are discussed in detail, and functions of rooms on the ground and upper floor are proposed. The palace on Mljet is contextualized in terms of the late antique residential architecture on the eastern Adriatic coast, which resulted in the detection of many points of contact with the residential tract of Diocletian's Palace in Split.

Key words: *imperial palace, late antique residential architecture, Mljet, Polače*

We would like to dedicate this paper to our dear colleague Nikola Jakšić on the occasion of his seventieth birthday. We gladly accepted the invitation and use this opportunity to publish a paper about a remarkably complex and absolutely unique monument on the eastern Adriatic coast, and beyond, that we have studied for the past twenty-five years, however I have not had the opportunity to publish results of personal observations before now.

The coastline of the island of Mljet is well-indented and provides safe harbour and anchorage to mariners. Thus, situated on the southeastern cape is the shallow sandy cove of Saplunara that is open to the sea. There are several remarkably safe ports for anchorage in the Mljet Canal: Okuklje, Prožura and Sobra. Okuklje and Sobra are visible from the antique observation tower, located southwest from an antique castrum with the early medieval Church of St. Michael in Stonsko Polje. The northwestern part of the island of Mljet is unusually indented with a series of isles that protect the coves and provide reliable and safe anchorage for ships. The bay of Lokva (whose name suggests calm sea) is situated at the farthest northwest end of the island, near the settlement of Pomena, which is protected from northerly winds by the Galicija cliff and the isle of Pomeštak. In its immediate vicinity, in front of the entrance to the Great Lake is the safe bay of Soline, suitable for smaller ships. Polače is definitely the largest and safest bay whose entrance is protected by several isles: Moračnik, Tajnik, Kobrava and Ovrata. Since Mljet's landscape is dominated by the forest in whose interior we only sporadically encounter smaller fertile areas, the reason for populating and developing Polače in Classical Antiquity and Early Middle Ages is found exclusively in its extremely favourable transit and strategic position, in addition to a source of drinking water. Polače was named after the most important building in the bay – the late antique palace. The palace in Polače is, together with Diocletian's Palace in Split and the Arena in Pula, the best preserved late antique monument on the eastern Adriatic coast. Taking into consideration its plan, function and position in the landscape, it should be categorized as an imperial maritime villa.

In this case, the villa was an imperial estate that generated considerable profit, so we should view Odoacer's deed of donation to his *comes* Pierius in that light. According to the extant copy of the document dated 13 March 486 AD, he donated it as repayment of debt in the amount of 690 gold

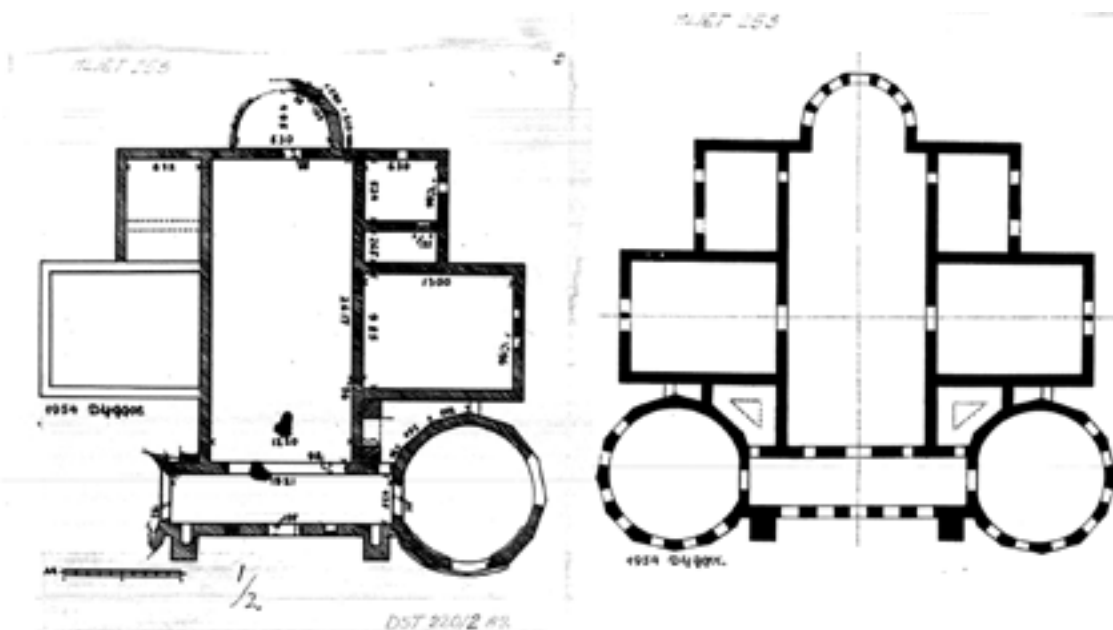


Fig. 1. Palace in Polače according to Dyggve 1959, ground and upper floor plan

solidi. The projected annual revenue from the island of Mljet was 200 gold *solidi*, which indicates a bountiful estate with considerable income accrued from agriculture, livestock, saltworks, hunting and fishing, trade or, more likely, the reception and accommodation of ships.¹

Although the palace is relatively well preserved, few researchers studied it in great detail.² Ejnar Dyggve dealt with the palace architecture. He surveyed it during one short half-day visit to Mljet, sketched its plan in the rain and then subsequently made perspective drawings of its ideal reconstruction. For decades, these drawings represented the sole attempt to show the building's original appearance and they became part of literature in a similar way that Hébrard's reconstruction of Diocletian's Palace had.³

On several occasions I. Fisković also wrote about Polače and the palace, which he dated into the 5th century.⁴ It is interesting that different authors dated the palace to an extended time period, from the 3rd to the 6th century. Accordingly, Karaman dated it into the 3rd century, Prijatelj in the period

¹ M. CAGIANO DE AZEVEDO, Ville rustiche tardoantiche e installazioni agricole altomedievali, in: C. D. Fonseca, D. Adamesteanu, F. d'Andria (eds.), *Casa, città e campagna nel tardo antico e nell'alto medioevo*, Archeologia storia, Galatina: Università di Lecce, 1986, pp. 314-344; M. CAGIANO DE AZEVEDO, Il Palatium di porto Palazzo a Meleda, *Atti del Convegno internazionale sul tema: Tardo antico e alto Medioevo, La forma artistica nel passaggio dell'antichità al medioevo*, Roma, 1968.

² F. BULIĆ, Melita (Mljet, Méleda), *Bullettino di archeologia e storia Dalmata* XL-XLII, Split, 1922, pp. 107-109; K. PRIJATELJ, Kasnoantikna palača u Polačama na otoku Mljetu, *Arhitektura* 25-27, Zagreb, 1949, pp. 89-93; LJ. KARAMAN, O rimskom zaseoku u Polačama na otoku Mljetu, *Vjesnik za arheologiju i historiju dalmatinsku* LVI-LIX (*Zbornik radova posvećen M. Abramiću*), Split, 1954-1957, pp. 102-107.

³ E. DYGGVE, Palača na otoku Mljetu s novog gledišta, in: N. Cambi, T. Marasović (eds.), *Ejnar Dyggve – izabrani spisi*, Split, 1989, pp. 167-176.

⁴ I. FISKOVIĆ, O ranokršćanskim spomenicima naronitanskog područja, in: I. Marović, Ž. Rapanić (eds.), *Dolina rijeke Neretve od prethistorije do ranog srednjeg vijeka*, Izdanja Hrvatskog arheološkog društva 5, Split, 1980, p. 237; I. FISKOVIĆ, Jesu li Polače na Mljetu bile sjelo vladara Dalmacije?, *Prilozi Instituta za arheologiju u Zagrebu* 13-14, Zagreb, 1996-1997, pp. 13-14, 67-68; I. FISKOVIĆ, Late antique buildings in Polače on the island of Mljet, *Radovi XIII. Međunarodnog kongresa za starokršćansku arheologiju*, vol. III, *Vjesnik za arheologiju i historiju dalmatinsku*, supl. vol. 87-89, Vatikan – Split, 1998, pp. 275-276.

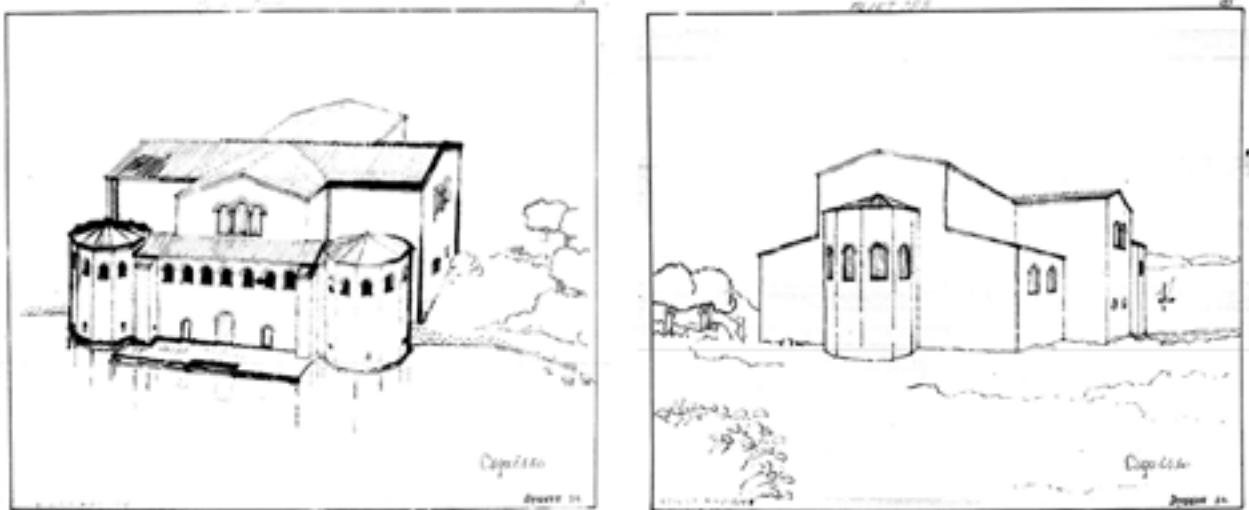


Fig. 2. Palace in Polače according to Dyggve 1959, perspective reconstruction, south and north view

of Tetrarchy, Azevedo to the 5th century (489 AD), Dyggve to the 6th, while Turković recently went back to Prijatelj's dating into the late 3rd or early 4th century.⁵ A series of authors devoted their papers to the importance of the bay as safe anchorage, to buildings along the port and shipwrecks in its vicinity, without addressing more directly the architecture of the palace itself.⁶ As early as the 1980s, Jerko Marasović warned that we should revise Dyggve's plan of the palace. He thought that the palace was not, as Dyggve suggested, symmetrically organized but that it had three smaller rooms on the southeastern side. He proposed to conduct a detailed architectural survey, as a precondition for quality analysis of the building's architecture. Interestingly, the remains of other buildings in Polače, except the palace itself, were investigated by archaeologists in the 1970s, and in 1975 the Institute for Photogrammetry of the Faculty of Geodesy in Zagreb created architectural documentation and conducted photogrammetric surveys of all the walls with plotted structure.⁷

The first architectural survey of the palace was commissioned in 1996 by Dubrovnik Museums and basic architectural plan documents of the original parts of the palace were created. During 2001 – as part of the protection works conducted by the Conservation Department in Dubrovnik – we cleaned the palace walls overgrown with ivy, cleared the stables and livestock and cleaned the flooring in the rooms on the northwestern side of the representative hall. On this occasion, we found a stone pylon in the centre of the larger northwestern room (triclinium), several movable finds and two well-preserved oil lamps. The said cleaning of walls and rooms facilitated the creation of quality documentation of all palace walls and annexes, with mapping of their structures that was conducted during 2003 and 2004.⁸

⁵ Cf. literature quoted in notes 2 and 3.

⁶ A. KISIĆ, Podmorski nalaz kasnoantičkih svjetiljki u uvali Polače na Mljetu, *Anali Historijskog odjela Centra za znanstveni rad JAZU u Dubrovniku* XV-XVI, 1978, pp. 7-11; N. CAMBI, Arhitektura Narone i njezina teritorija u kasnoj antici, *Radovi Filozofskog fakulteta u Zadru. Razdio povijesnih znanosti* 24 (11), 1985, pp. 24, 57; N. CAMBI, *Antika*, Zagreb, 2002, p. 234; Z. BRUSIĆ, Antička luka u Polačama na otoku Mljetu, in: Ž. Rapanić, (ed.), *Arheološka istraživanja u Dubrovniku i dubrovačkom području*, Izdanja Hrvatskog arheološkog društva 12, Zagreb, 1988, p. 140; M. ZANINOVIĆ, Liberov hram u Polačama na otoku Mljetu, *Arheološki vestnik* 41 (*Šašlov zbornik*), Ljubljana, 1990, pp. 725-732; Z. BRUSIĆ, Starokršćanski sakralni objekti uz plovidbenu rutu istočnom obalom Jadrana, *Diadora* 15, Zadar, 1993, pp. 223-236.

⁷ Documentation is kept in the Conservation Department in Dubrovnik.

⁸ Photogrammetric survey was conducted by the Geographica Ltd. company from Split, surveyor Miljenko Žabčić.

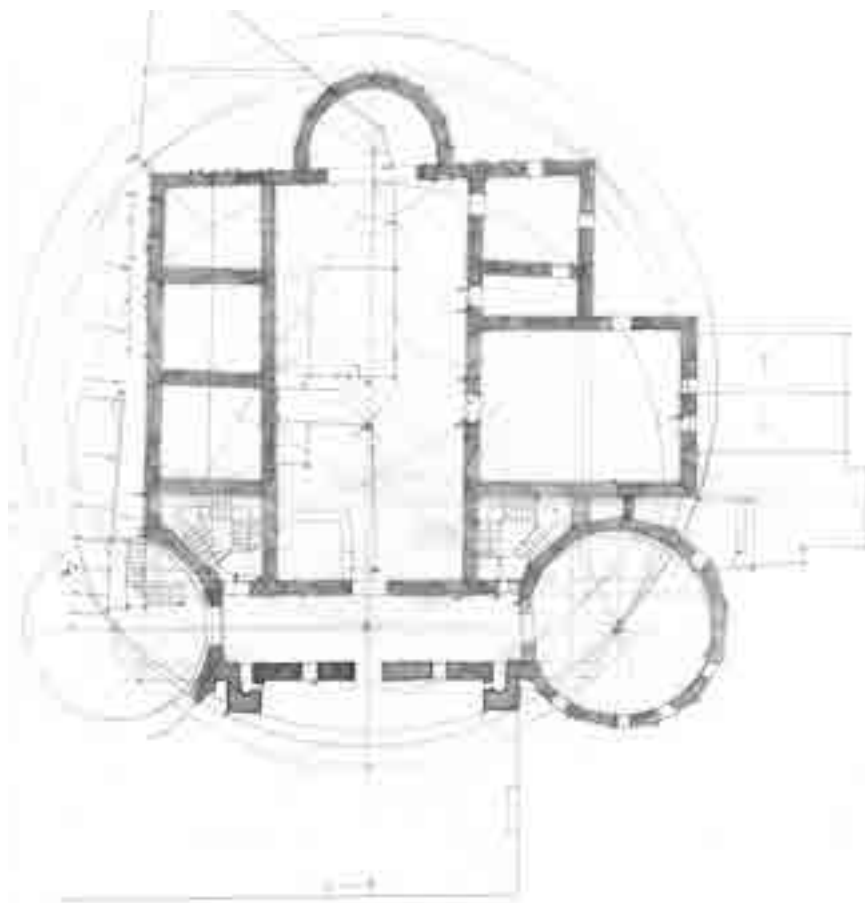


Fig. 3. Plan of the original parts of the palace, Ž. Peković 1996

Ivica Žile attempted to verify Jerko Marasović's ideas about the asymmetry of the palace by using a probe in the cabbage field on the southeastern side of the palace where, according to Dyggve, the hall symmetrical to the one on the northwestern side of the palace was supposed to be located. The probe was sterile and this investigation resulted in several authors writing papers that "corrected" the plan of the late antique palace in Polače.⁹ Besides "correcting" the plan, they also included their own observations regarding the organization and original appearance of the palace, which requires a more detailed review. They proposed the plan "correction" in parts of southeastern rooms adjacent to the central hall. They asserted that there were only two rooms with an unbuilt space between them, which could have contained an external staircase for climbing upstairs to the main floor, as the final part of communication from the eastern church to the palace. They were led to this conclusion by the door on the upper floor opposite the main hall, which had to have been accessed by the external staircase.¹⁰

⁹ J. STOŠIĆ – I. TENŠEK – I. VALJATO-VRUS – I. ŽILE, *Ispravljani tlocrt kasnoantičke palače u Polačama na otoku Mljetu*, *Dubrovnik* 13/1-2, Dubrovnik, 2002, pp. 271-276; I. ŽILE, *Polače na Mljetu*, in: A. Durman, (ed.), *Sto hrvatskih arheoloških nalazišta*, Zagreb, 2006, pp. 210-211.

¹⁰ Our research established that the space at the southeastern side of the audience hall was built in the form of three identical square rooms. We are not going to spend time discussing the possible existence of an external staircase between two rooms to the southeast of the Audience Hall as a continuation of communication that cuts through the most important palace spaces, and which leads to the eastern church through the audience hall to the narrow space on the northwestern side, where a small service staircase possibly stood.

Tin Turković recently published interesting observations about the palace.¹¹ He provided a comprehensive yet concise overview of previous research and ideas about the palace in Polače, and it would therefore be superfluous to repeat the same information. He dates the palace that he calls "aula" to the time of Licinius (308 – 324 AD). He does not provide a reconstruction of the palace plan, he instead presents a romantic (romanticized) perspective reconstruction of the main façade.¹²

In the text below we are going to propose a reconstruction of the original appearance of the palace on the basis of our research, and discuss its function as well as the function of individual rooms. The palace in Polače is a representative example of an imperial maritime villa (*villa maritima*). It is positioned perpendicular to the bay of Polače in the north-east direction with a divergence of 43 degrees in relation to the east. Its plan is composed of an entrance hall flanked by two polygonal towers, a central hall and a series of rooms attached to it. The ground floor served as utilitarian space, while the upper floor contained representative residential rooms.

The palace was accessed from a ground floor entrance hall, then one ascended the staircase to the upper floor and through the portico entered the audience hall. This hall was the central area of communication with lateral rooms.



Fig. 4. Plan of the palace, Stošić et al. 2002

¹¹ T. TURKOVIĆ, Kasnoantička „palača”u Polačama – nove spoznaje, in: M. Perković (ed.), *Zbornik radova simpozija „Dani Cvita Fiskovića”*, Zagreb, 2012, pp. 72-91; T. TURKOVIĆ, The late Antique "Palace" in Polače bay (Mljet) – Tetrachic "Palace", *Hortus Artium Medievalium* 17, Zagreb – Motovun, 2011, pp. 211-233.

¹² T. TURKOVIĆ, *op. cit.* (n. 11, 2012), p. 77. The proposed reconstruction of the façade is not consistent with extant remains of parts of the palace. Especially the main façade and towers. The main façade does not have a tripartite entrance, but one entrance and two windows. The tripartite entrance was an omission by Dyggve that continued to be repeated in literature to this day. The stated repetition should be rescinded because of very clear material remains. On the façade, in the position of the central entrance, a large wall ruin is preserved, with two smaller lateral windows with semicircular "mushroom" arches, daylight dimensions 100 x 120 cm, which have a clearly preserved lower section with a partially damaged parapet. Therefore, the main axis of the façade had an entrance (of which we found no remains during archaeological research because they were destroyed when a septic tank was built in that location) and one smaller window on each side.

In terms of the segmentation of towers, they do not have two levels of windows and are significantly lower than the perspective drawing shows. The uppermost levels of the towers cornice are significantly lower than the central nave cornice. They are 1.9 metres lower than the central nave cornice, and are of equal height as the lateral rooms along the northwestern part of the audience hall. What is most surprising is the opinion that the palace remained at ground level according to the original project, and that the remains of floor structures were the result of subsequent alterations to the original project. The palace is situated on a sloping terrain facing the sea and the ground floor was used to level the sloping terrain for a representative floor. The flooring of the extant lateral rooms is cascading, following the terrain, as well as the substructures of the audience hall. Upper floor walls are narrower than the ground floor walls, all masonry is intact, without traces of reconstruction from the foundations to the cornices.



Fig. 5. The palace, aerial view (photo: Ž. Bačić)

THE PALACE GROUND FLOOR

The basic concept of spatial organization of the palace consists of a ground floor with utilitarian and service areas and an upper floor with representative rooms for residential use. The palace entrance hall (cryptoporticus) is wider than the central hall, from which one probably passed through the central door and entered the ground-floor area, above which, on the upper floor, was the central audience hall. Internal dimensions of the entrance hall are 19.21 x 4.35 metres. The palace entrance hall was accessed from the seaside, through the central entrance flanked by two windows with semicircular "mushroom" arches and two prominent massive buttresses. The massive buttresses are hollow and in each of their interiors there is a small room in the form of a semicircular niche with one minor lateral window that is looking towards the palace entrance. This points to the fact that the said buttress spaces could have been used as guard posts for visual control of the main entrance to the palace, and simultaneously for ventilation. Very small window size precludes the possibility of the openings being used for defence purposes.

However, semicircular niches had an additional function – as sanitary facilities. The ground floor niche in the



Fig. 6. The façade buttress with a sanitary niche window (photo: Ž. Peković, 2010)



Fig. 7. Remains of a buttress niche on the palace first floor (photo: Ž. Peković, 2010)

northwestern buttress had a wooden floor, hollow underneath throughout the entire length of the niche, which was investigated up to the sea level and subsequently filled with sand. On the upper floor there are *in situ* preserved ceramic sewage pipes in the wall that removed faecal matter vertically from toilet niches on the upper floor. The northwestern niche is well preserved in elevation and upper floor. The height of the entrance hall and other ground floor rooms was approximately 7.2 metres. The wooden upper floor structure is preserved in indentations on the interior side of façade walls.

TOWERS

Two polygonal towers, fourteen-sided on the outside and circular inside, flank the entrance hall. Tower walls are preserved in segments, sometimes reaching roof height. They had a ground and upper floor. The ground level was 7.2 metres high. There are no traces of openings in the extant parts of ground level masonry. The internal diameter of the towers measures 11.6 – 12.2 meters. The floor structure was comprised of densely aligned laths resting against the walls in the direction north-west-southeast, and additionally resting on two more massive and widely spaced girders, positioned perpendicularly.¹³ The upper floor of the tower was perforated with irregularly spaced windows.¹⁴

¹³ Based on the indentations in the walls, the massive girders were 36 x 36 cm in diameter. Beams measuring 22 x 24 cm were spaced 38 – 45 cm apart, rested on the plates in the wall, 7 cm thick, while the layer of wood between the beams was 11 cm high.

¹⁴ Lateral frames of four windows were preserved, but only one side of each window, so we do not have data on their original width. The height of the window parapet above the wooden flooring is 86 – 94 cm, while the height of the window itself, to the beginning of the arch lintel, was 268 cm.



Fig. 8. Indentations of the wooden floor structure in the tower
(photo: Ž. Peković, 2010)



Fig. 9. Remains of lateral frames of the upper floor window in the tower
(photo: Ž. Peković, 2010)

The flattened apexes of tower walls share the same height as the flattened wall parts of the large northwestern room.

On the ground floor, next to the northwestern tower, there is an entrance leading to the triangular space formed by the walls of the entrance hall, the central hall, the polygonal tower and the large room positioned perpendicularly to the central hall. On all three walls of that space we discovered and documented indentations of the double-return staircase built on massive stone pylons connected with quadrant stone arches. The staircase led from the ground floor to a **portico** on the representative palace floor.¹⁵ We can assume that a similar, symmetrically positioned staircase existed in the identically formed space next to the northeastern tower.

GROUND FLOOR SPACE UNDERNEATH THE AUDIENCE HALL

The ground level space underneath the central audience hall that extends in the northeast-southwest direction, measures 12.46 x 26.20 metres, has rectangular form and 1:2 side ratio. The apse is preserved to a low height, and has a polygonal form like the towers. In terms of geometry, its outside form is somewhat larger than half of the tetradecagon (form of the towers' plan), it has seven full and two half sides/facets, while it is semicircular in the interior. Inside the apse semicircle, at ground floor level, we find remains of pronounced back walls whose function was undoubtedly to carry pillars of a tribelon on the upper floor.¹⁶

¹⁵ Staircase indentations on the walls provide us with the shape and dimensions of the stairs which were 33 cm wide and 24.5 – 26 cm high.

¹⁶ The tribelon in the Episcopal complex in Poreč is fully preserved. Although it is dated to a later period, we cite it as a continuity of form of the audience hall. A somewhat earlier example is the audience hall of Diocletian's Palace in Split whose substructures (here vaulted) are extant. We are of the opinion that stone overhangs in the apse were the foundations of a tribelon hall on the representative floor. M. JURKOVIĆ, Mljetski tribeloni – tradicija „auličke“ arhitekture kasne antike u srednjem vijeku, in: *Zbornik Tomislava Marasovića*, (eds.) I. Babić, A. Milošević, Ž. Rapanić, Split, 2002, p. 213 .

LATERAL GROUND FLOOR ROOMS

To the northwest of the central room on the ground floor, underneath the audience hall, lay two different-sized rooms positioned perpendicular to it, separated by a roofless passageway, 2.5 metres wide. The smaller room, situated at the back of the palace, has internal measurements of 6.3 x 5.8 metres, while the larger room measures 13 x 9.8 metres in the interior and has walls that are 0.96 metres thick. The larger room contains a massive stone pylon in the centre, connected to indentations of the massive beam - primary load-bearer in the wall that extended in the northwest-southeast direction, which, midway through its span, supports dense tie beams - secondary load-bearers of the floor structure positioned perpendicularly to it. Indentations of the floor structure, especially secondary beams on load-bearing walls attest to the composite floor structure that consisted of a massive beam – girder, wooden crossbeams with plank flooring and a thick layer of Roman concrete on top of them.¹⁷

The structure made of Roman concrete was most probably covered with representative flooring like, for example, marble tiles or mosaics.¹⁸ Besides the collapsed wall at the entrance to the central hall, this ground floor room also contains extant remains of a door (a formed opening and threshold *in situ*) leading to an exterior space on the southwestern wall, as well as two windows with semicircular "mushroom" arches and low parapet on the northwestern façade.¹⁹ In our opinion, the upper level of the said room was used as a dining room – triclinium.



Fig. 10. The audience hall lateral walls with remains of floor structure indentations
(photo: Ž. Peković, 2011)

¹⁷ The cross-section of the wooden girder measures 30 x 30 cm, and midway through its span, it additionally rests on the stone pylon. Crossbeams have indentations in the wall, measuring 22 x 26 cm in cross-section and spaced 46 – 58 cm apart. On the beams there was a layer of planking 3 cm thick, and concrete 26 cm thick. A layer that Vitruvius called the *nucleus*, consisting of pounded tile mixed with lime (not less than 6 digits = 11.1 cm thick), was most probably laid on top of concrete, over which lay the final floor finish.

¹⁸ The manner of execution, dimensions and construction technique of wooden floor structure with a layer of concrete is described in: M. P. VITRUVIJE, *Deset knjiga o arhitekturi*, Zagreb, 1999, pp. 119-120, 142. Vitruvius prescribes the thickness of compacted concrete to be a minimum $\frac{3}{4}$ of a foot = 22 cm, while the layer of concrete here measures 26 cm.

¹⁹ Ground floor windows had a similar size, as the extant first floor windows of Diocletian's Palace in Split, namely 0.92 x 1.39 metres. When we say window size we mean the width and height of the rectangular part, without the height of "mushroom" lintels.



Fig. 11. Reconstruction of the floor structure cross-section based on the triclinium wall indentations, Ž. Peković, 2011

The smaller ground floor room contains extant remains of a door to the narrow passage separating it from the larger room. This narrow passage, almost a hallway, was an exterior, roofless space. A door connected it to the space underneath the audience hall. It could have contained a smaller straight staircase that had a service function (link with the basement and kitchen). The room had windows on both external walls (southwestern and northwestern). The one on the northwestern façade was larger than other ground floor windows.²⁰ All windows had a low parapet. The existence of a "defenceless" entrance and wide windows positioned low supports the fact that the palace did not have a fortification role on that side. The function of this room would be closest to a kitchen or service space because of a direct link with the upper floor via the external auxiliary staircase.²¹

To the southeast of a ground floor room, located underneath the central representative hall, there are three rooms of identical size with a door connecting them to it. The palace ground floor was mostly used for storage, as a service area for the representative upper floor.²² The ground floor tract had the function – similar to the substructures of Diocletian's Palace in Split – of levelling the sloping terrain and forming the residential floor. The flooring of examined lateral rooms off the central hall follows the slope of the terrain towards the sea.

REPRESENTATIVE FLOOR FOR RESIDENTIAL USE

The upper palace floor strictly follows the layout and organizational scheme of the ground floor. It is accessed via two monumental double-return staircases which lead to the area of the upstairs **portico**. The portico was connected to the towers and most probably open to the sea with a series of windows.²³ The portico led to the audience hall, which then led to lateral rooms. At the semicircular apsidal end, the hall had a tribelon similar to the audience hall in the southern tract of Diocletian's

²⁰ Window size is 1.39 x 1.39 metres.

²¹ The construction of the roofless hallway between two rooms with high ceilings connects this project to the design of Diocletian's Palace where ventilation hallways were constructed – skylights between halls in the southern part of the palace. The skylight allowed for easier opening of windows in the lateral walls, better lighting and airing of rooms.

²² Room plans measured 5.7 – 5.9 x 6.3 metres. In Diocletian's Palace, rooms measured 4.42 x 5.23 metres.

²³ Diocletian's Palace in Split was organized in that way, whereas such façade schemes are found in representations of villas in late antique North African and Hispanic mosaics. T. TURKŌVIĆ, *op. cit.* (n. 11, 2012), p. 82. We also find such façade forms in twin-towered entrances into cities in the East and the West with a series of windows, sometimes on several levels.

Palace in Split and Bishop's Palace in Poreč. The floor structure was composite, the walls have extant indentations of tie beams, planks, and on top of them, a layer of Roman concrete which enabled the construction of a representative floor made of mosaics or marble paving. The cross-sectional dimensions are identical to those in the detailed description of floor structures in the celebrated treatise by Vitruvius. The beam cross-section is relatively small for a span of 12.8 metres, insufficient to bear load without significant sagging and vibrations. On top of them sat a heavy load of Roman concrete and the finishing paving more than 30 cm thick. It would be fair to assume that the wooden floor structure was supported by girders resting on stone pylons. Therefore, the ground floor underneath the central hall most probably had two rows of stone pylons similar to the ground floor of Diocletian's audience hall or in Bishop's Palace in Poreč. In Split pylons carry vaults, while in Poreč they carry a wooden floor. The central part of the palace was not investigated so their existence is unconfirmed. The stone pylon that supported the wooden floor structure of the triclinium was found in the probe under the larger northwestern room (triclinium), so we can assume with greater probability that a similar principle was also used in the central hall with a significantly larger span.²⁴

Two spaces to the northwest of the hall are conspicuous because of their position, form, the number and size of windows. It seems that the larger of the two was a spacious triclinium while the smaller was a sleeping chamber of the ruler/owner. They are separated by a narrow roofless hallway that tall triclinium windows are facing, oriented toward the southwest. On the northwestern façade of the larger room there is a remnant of one lateral window frame. Its height is identical to that of the tower windows, 268 cm. Its width is unknown. A geometric reconstruction showed that there were three, as opposed to the two significantly smaller windows preserved at ground floor level.

A series of three rooms alongside the southeastern wall of the audience hall were probably sleeping chambers. The central hall and two adjacent rooms at the northwestern side had gable roofs with sloping sides running parallel to the audience hall. An indentation of triclinium roof structure is preserved on the lateral wall of the audience hall.



Fig. 12. Remains of roof structure on the lateral wall of the audience hall (photo: Ž. Peković, 2010)

Rooms situated alongside the southeastern wall of the audience hall probably had a single-pitch roof and windows on the southeastern façade. The towers had pyramidal roof structures.

The audience hall did not have windows on lateral walls, since they are preserved almost entirely and reach up to the roof structure. The windows could have been located on the northeastern gable

²⁴ The size of the discovered stone pylon is 146 x 146 cm.

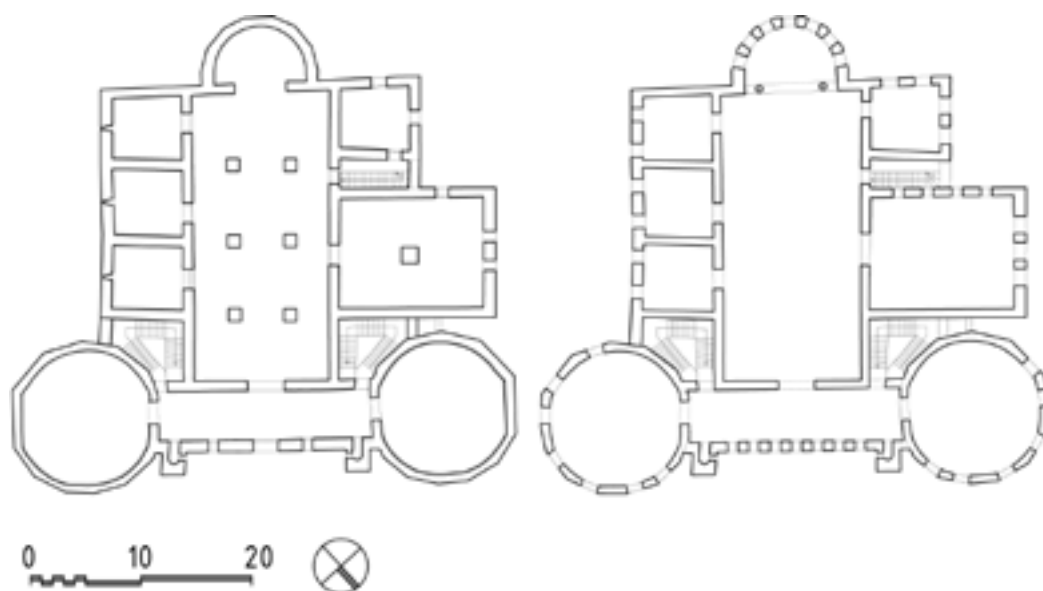


Fig. 13. Ground and upper palace floor, proposed ideal reconstruction, Ž. Peković, 2010

of the façade, above the portico roof structure and on lateral sides of the apse, which must have been richly perforated. Its dimensions between upper floor walls measured 12.82 x 26.20 metres. We could compare its size to a series of tetrarchic audience halls, closest to the one in Diocletian's Palace and those in Piazza Armerina and Mediana. The latter two are somewhat smaller.

Space height also contributes to the monumentality of the palace. Ground floor rooms measure 7.2 metres in height to the floor structure, at their highest point next to the main northeastern façade, while the audience hall measures 7.5 metres in height to the bottom of the roof structure, and the height of lateral rooms, including the triclinium, measures "only" 5.3 metres to the open type roof structure.

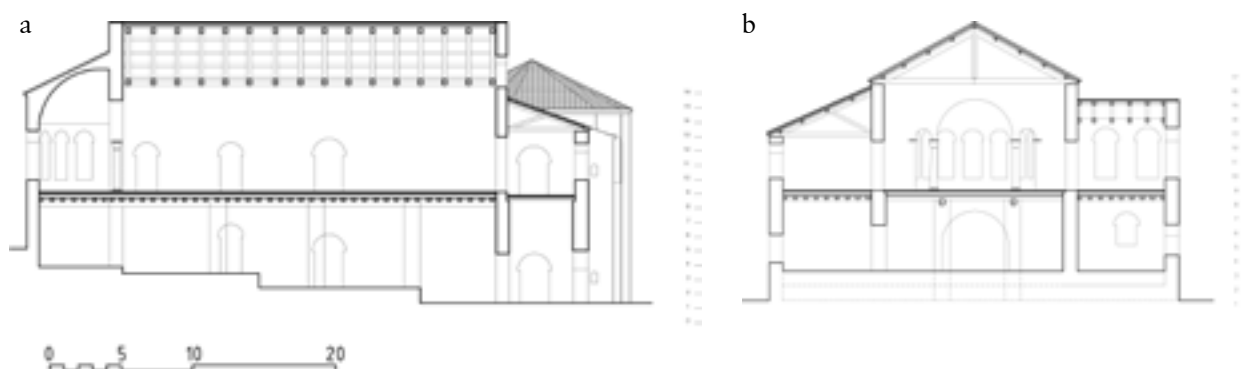


Fig. 14. Longitudinal and transverse palace section, proposed ideal reconstruction, Ž. Peković, 2010

The central hall size, and partly also the layout and disposition of surrounding rooms, facilitates a comparison of the residential floor of the palace in Polače with two related examples, one of which is of earlier and the other of later date. The plan and measurements of the central hall are almost indistinguishable from the audience hall in Diocletian's Palace in Split, they are bound together by the representative quality of the upper floor space and the tribelon in the apse. We are of the opinion that because of the organization of its plan, towers, portico and lateral rooms it can be compared to the Bishop's Palace in the complex of the Euphrasian Basilica in Poreč that was built much later.



Fig. 15. Palace façades, proposed ideal reconstruction, Ž. Peković, 2010

From the northeastern, sea-facing side and the southeastern side, the palace could have served a fortification purpose, and possibly had an attached castrum.

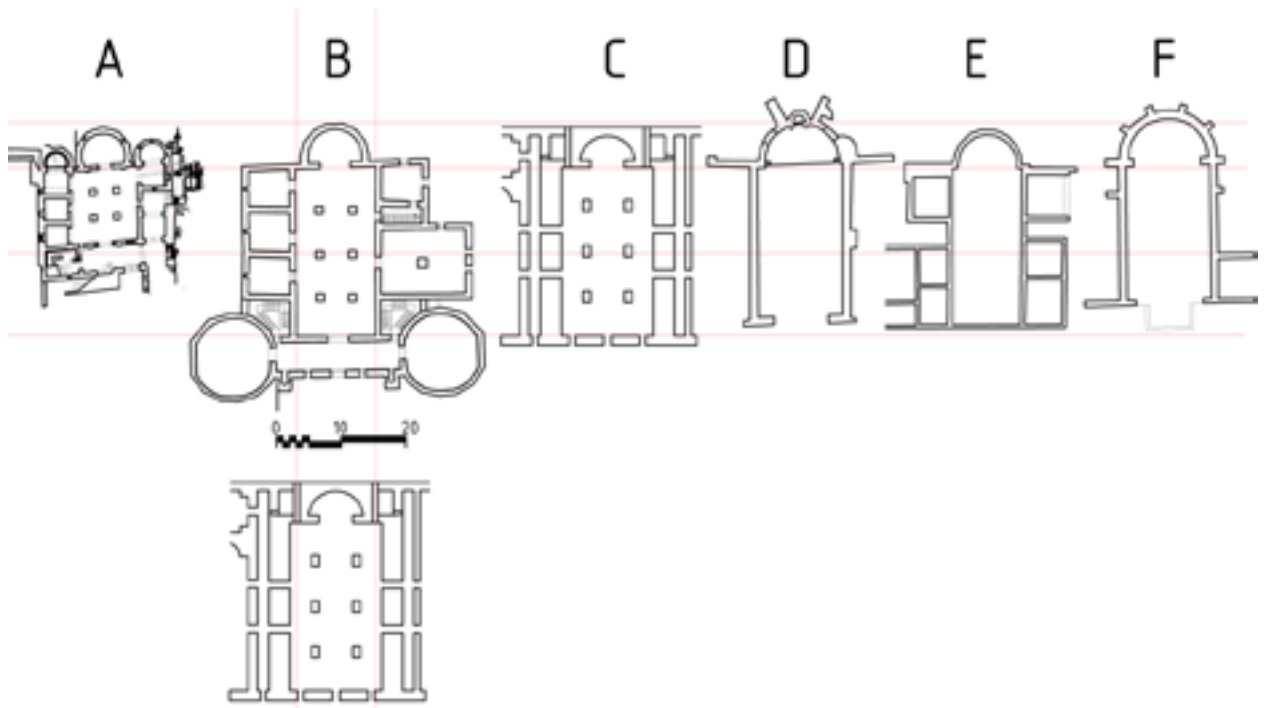


Fig. 16. Comparison of the Polače plan (B) with audience hall plans in A) Bishop's Palace in Poreč, C) Diocletian's Palace in Split, D) Piazza Armerina, E) Theodoric palace, Ravenna, F) Mediana.

THE CASTRUM IN POLAČE

There are several spatial reference points and small remnants of towers and walls which point to the fact that Polače was protected by castrum walls. The walls of all important buildings inside the castrum run parallel to its walls.

The castrum in Polače protected buildings and port facilities on the imperial estate near the port of Polače. It had an almost regular square plan with sides measuring approximately 160 metres. We can only speculate about the date of its construction, however, there are three orthogonally situated spatial reference points which indicate the area it covered. All three spatial reference points are situated in its corners: in the south corner, on top of a hill that "controls" the bay there are ruins of a tower with an unknown plan (it was never investigated), in the western corner an early Christian basilica that was built in the 5th century, and next to it an extant castrum wall 1.6 metres wide, while the eastern corner contains the palace. The early Christian church was built in the corner of the castrum that was already there, which is evidenced by the unusual orientation of the church, the positioning of its entrance in the lateral wall of the church nave, and by the aforementioned remnants of the castrum wall next to the southwestern façade of the church.

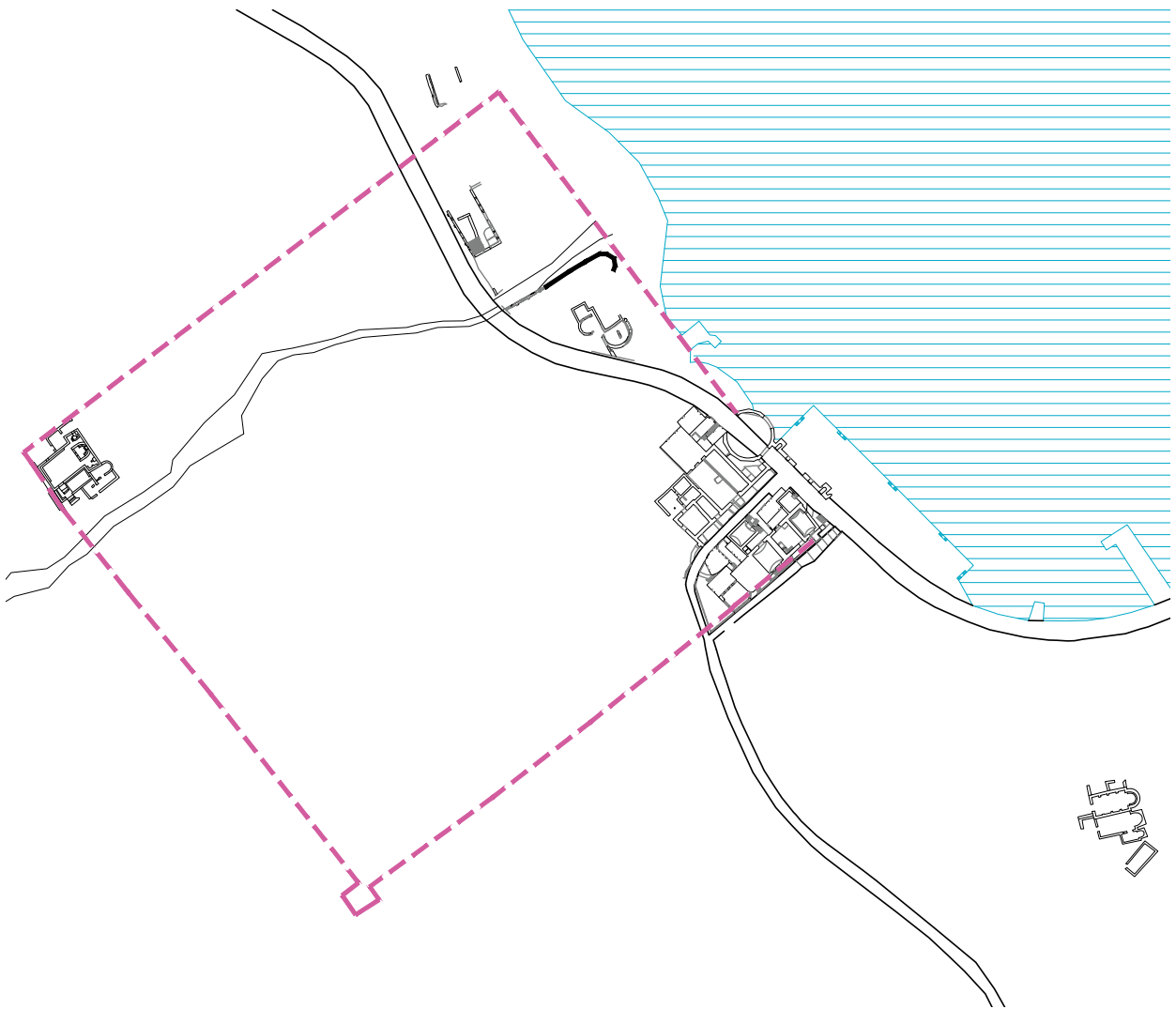


Fig. 17. Polače plan with inscribed buildings and the proposed appearance of the castrum, Ž. Peković

Its dating is disputable, but because of the architectural solution of the pseudo-apse, the sarcophagus for elite burial and the lack of a cemetery, we are inclined to date the church to the period of early Ostrogothic rule, i.e. the 5th century.²⁵ The castrum predated the early Christian church, but it seems that it "rested" on the palace that was already built, which means that the source of living water, located immediately behind the palace apse, was inside its perimeter. We are inclined to think that the palace was built earlier, particularly because of the skylight design similar to the one in Diocletian's Palace, built in the 4th century.

Remains of a building with wall ruins and two apsidal semicircular spaces with an unidentified function were found northwest of the palace. Apsidal spaces have a pronounced horseshoe shape, the smaller one to the southeast of the building measures 4.9 metres in diameter, while the larger has a diameter of 8.2 metres. In earlier literature it was assumed that these were remains of *thermae* or perhaps a church.²⁶ There are no findings that would confirm any of the proposed functions. A small part of the floor mosaic with a crane motif was found in the larger apse. Farther west from the building, near the very edge of a gully, there is a high wall with *lesenes* running in the southwest-northeast direction. It continues underground towards the sea, and smaller remnants of another apsidal space were found where it ends, on the shoreline. It was part of an imposing complex of rooms whose plan measures 26 x 24 metres. Most likely, it was a representative triclinium space separated from the palace corpus, situated immediately by the shore overlooking the surface of the sea. It was often the case that an imperial palace had several triclinia as separate buildings within the palace complex.

Outside the castrum, to the northwest, there is a smaller *villa maritima*, preserved in scant traces of walls built using the technique of *opus quadratum*, to the northwest and the double early Christian church from the 6th century to the southeast.²⁷

²⁵ Ž. PEKOVIĆ – K. BABIĆ, Kasnoantička sakralna arhitektura u doba Istočnih Gota u Dalmaciji, *Prostor* 24, 2 (52), Zagreb, 2016, p. 167.

²⁶ I. FISKOVIĆ, *op. cit.* (n. 11, 2012), pp. 13-14, 67-68.

²⁷ Outside the castrum, east of the late antique palace ruins, on a small promontory we find remains of double churches mentioned in sparse literature as an eastern basilica. The northern one is preserved as a ruin, almost 3 metres high, while only the foundations of the southern one are extant. We associate the degree of preservation of the northern church with its medieval use. It is a correctly oriented single nave church, 13.3 metres long and 6.5 metres wide, not measuring the entrance hall that is 4 metres long. It has a horseshoe-shaped apse, supported by external buttresses with a built-in *subselium*. Along the north wall there are remains of two auxiliary rooms, characteristic of religious architecture in the Diocese of Nara. Its walls were constructed using a technique of *opus incertum* while the medieval additions were built more irregularly with an abundant use of mortar. In the original phase of construction, it was covered with a timber roof structure. The church is dated into the 5th century. Another early Christian/Byzantine church was added next to it to the south, with similar dimensions and a small memorial chapel. Both new churches have rectangular apses in the exterior that are horseshoe-shaped in the interior. They are double churches, so regular church liturgy was performed in the northern one, while the southern one was used for memorial functions. The smaller measures 12.95 x 5.6 metres, while the memorial chapel measures 6.9 x 2.7 metres. Based on the apse forms, they are dated into the 6th century. In the Early Middle Ages the northern church was reconstructed, and the rest of the site was destroyed. An entrance hall was added and three pairs of half-pylons were built in, which defined it as a four-bay church, in addition to which a vaulting system was constructed. The southern half-pylon in front of the apse occluded the door in the shared wall of early Christian double basilicas. Next to the church we find remains of the above-ground water cistern, with external measures of 9.15 x 4.3 metres. There are no titularies of Polače churches recorded in inscriptions, toponyms or memory of the local population, so it is unknown whom these religious buildings were dedicated to. I. FISKOVIĆ, *op. cit.* (n. 4, 1980), p. 239; P. CHEVALIER, *Ecclesiae Dalmatiae – L'architecture paleochrétienne de la province romaine de Dalmatie (VI-VII s.)*, tome 2, Rome – Split, 1995, 95, pl. LXIX; I. FISKOVIĆ, *op. cit.* (n. 4, 1996-1997), pp. 70-73; T. MARASOVIĆ, *Dalmatia praeromanica. Ranosrednjovjekovno graditeljstvo u Dalmaciji*, 4. Korpus arhitekture: južna Dalmacija, Bosna i Hercegovina, Crna Gora, Split - Zagreb, 2013, pp. 183-185.

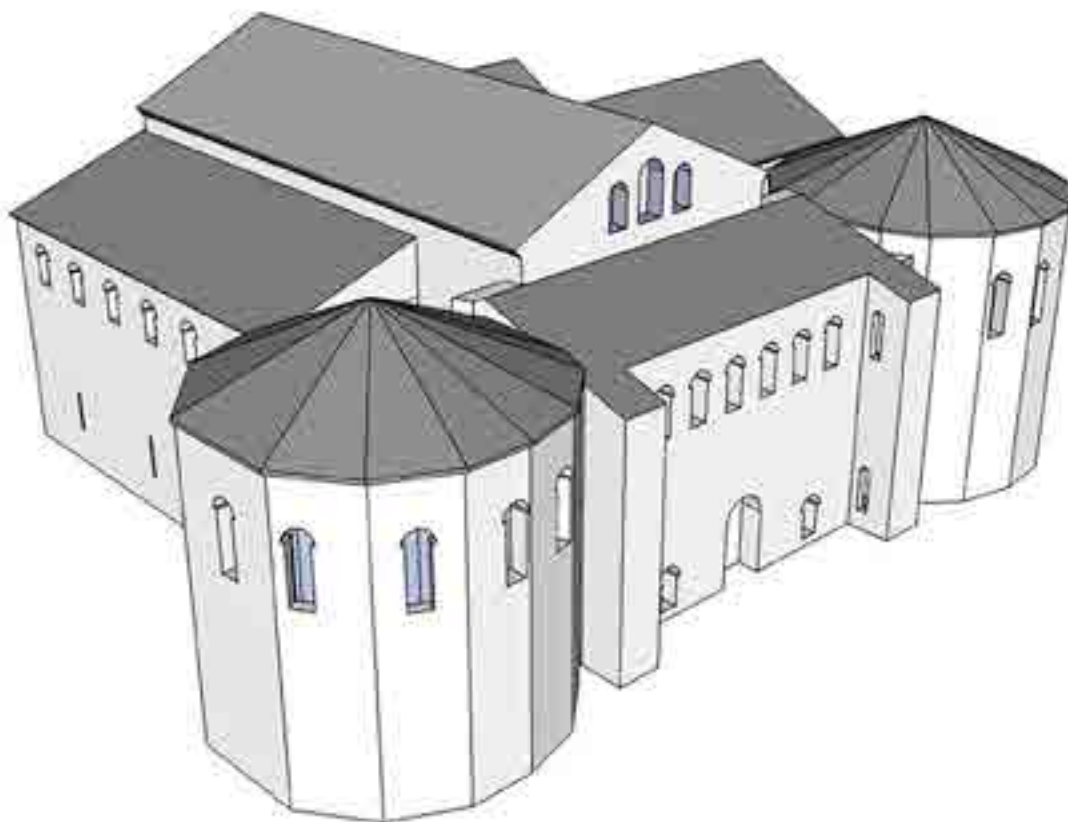


Fig. 18. Perspective view of the palace, ideal reconstruction, Ž. Peković, 2010

There was another, later castrum, on the imperial estate located on the isle of St. Mary in the Great Lake on Mljet, that we discovered and investigated as far back as 2005.²⁸ At the foot of the castrum, on the shore of the brackish lake, in the substructures of the Benedictine monastery there are remains of an earlier building, most probably a villa.

More recent studies show that the palace on Mljet could be compared to similar aulic villas with pseudo-fortifications that were constructed in the Danube and Balkan regions at the end of the 3rd and beginning of the 4th century. Towers "decorate" façades of a series of villas depicted in late antique North African and Hispanic mosaics,²⁹ but also early Christian churches from the 5th century.³⁰ The construction of the palace is totally omitted from historical sources, which leaves open an important question of who commissioned such a building.

Several assumptions were drawn. From the one made by Azevedo who compared the palace to Ostrogothic hunting lodges intended for entertainment during hunting, to the proposition that this

²⁸ At the time the lake on the island of Mljet was not connected to the sea, it was filled, like other similar locations on Mljet, with brackish water that had lower levels than the sea. We dated the castrum into the 6th century, and its form can be compared to a series of 6th-century castra built in the age of Justinian on the eastern Adriatic coast. These castra are characterized by relatively thin walls (0.95 metres), frequent shearing which increases their rigidity, the late antique texture of stone and the use of wooden cornices inside the wall to strengthen masonry structures. It has a rather regular form with prominent corner towers, while the small irregularity of castrum geometry is caused by the reality of the terrain. It measures approximately 40 x 30 metres.

²⁹ T. TURKOVIĆ, *op. cit.* (n. 11, 2012), p. 82.

³⁰ Ž. PEKOVIĆ, *Crkva sv. Petra Velikoga- Dubrovačka predromanička katedrala i njezina skulptura / La chiesa di S. Pietro Maggiore La cattedrale preromantica di Ragusa e il suo arredo scultoreo*, Dubrovnik – Split, 2010, p. 64.

was a project at the highest level of the Roman state from the period when capital cities were relocated as emperors were looking for safe havens, i.e. the period immediately preceding the fall of the Western Roman Empire. It was often the case in 4th/5th centuries that rulers left and built safe havens away from towns, in rural areas. The attraction of residential Polače grew during the decline of importance of towns and the general movement of society towards rural regions, consequently, such an economic unit would be the result of an enhanced system of provincial management. Mljet was under the direct rule of Rome since the conquests of Augustus (35 BC), so it seems that Odoacer assumed some former right related to the governance of Mljet which he bestowed upon *comes* Pierius.

What elicits attention is the rent this estate brought to Pierius, who was unable to benefit from it because of his untimely death. It is difficult to imagine a production that would make such a large profit. Under the direct *patrimonium* of the Roman imperial family, Mljet was important from a naval and strategic standpoint, especially because of the subsequent turn eastwards. We have to conclude that during Diocletian's reforms Mljet became a wealthy estate in Dalmatia that produced income for its procurator from trade and taxes. The position of Polače on the main sailing route along the eastern Adriatic coast with an extremely safe anchorage meant that it was surely an important trade stop, as evidenced by numerous underwater finds in the immediate vicinity of Polače.

Undoubtedly, the palace was an imperial project proven by the size of its audience hall, monumental façade and the quality of construction. The surrounding landscape is extremely important for residential architecture – in this case, a relatively spacious and well-protected bay where the sea is almost always as calm as the lake, surrounded by gentle landscape. The necessary inference is that the palace complex originated at the end of the 3rd and beginning of the 4th century, when it was built as an imperial residential edifice that would have great economic importance in the ensuing centuries.

Kasnoantička carska palača u Polačama na otoku Mljetu

Najvjerojatnije krajem 3. ili početkom 4. stoljeća u zaklonjenoj uvali Polače na otoku Mljetu, neposredno uz morskobalu, sagrađena je carska rezidencijalna palača. Razvedenoga je i nesimetričnog tlocrta. Sastoji se od dviju etaža, pa su tako u donjoj raspoređene prostorije gospodarske i servisne namjene. One su u funkcionalnoj korelaciji s rezidencijalnim prostorijama reprezentativne gornje etaže kojima se pristupalo preko dvaju simetričnih trokrakih stubišta postavljenih u prostor iza kula koje flankiraju pročelje. Moguće je da im se pristupalo i još jednim, pomoćnim, nenatkrivenim stubištem koje je moglo biti smješteno između dviju prostorija prislonjenih uz sjeverozapadno pročelje palače. Samo prizemlje služi i niveliranju terena koji pada prema moru. U ovom se radu predlaže prepoznavanje konkretnih namjena prostorija na katu. Površinom najveća, izdužena prostorija s apsidalnim završetkom, bila je dvorana za audijenciju iz koje se pristupalo bočnim prostorijama. Na sjeverozapadu se nalazio triklinij te nešto manja spavaonica vlasnika palače. Nasuprot trikliniju smještene su tri manje prostorije koje su najvjerojatnije također služile kao spavaonice.

Prema sačuvanim, imponantnim ostacima palače te tragovima na licima njezinih obodnih zidova, autor je po prvi put detaljno prokomentirao njezin konstruktivni sustav te ga doveo u izravnu vezu s Vitruvijevim zapisima – osobito u rekonstrukciji međukatne konstrukcije. Njegova promišljanja i istraživanja rezultirala su revidiranim tlocrtom izvornoga stanja. U odnosu na prethodno ponuđene, i iz literature poznate tlocrtne rekonstrukcije, novim je tlocrtom raspoznato nekoliko do sada neuočenih elemenata: simetrično postavljena trokraka stubišta smještena iza kula koje flankiraju pročelje, zatim još jedna prostorija manjih dimenzija na jugoistoku (između dviju već prethodno ucrtanih prostorija sličnih dimenzija) te zidani pylon u većoj prizemnoj prostoriji na sjeverozapadu objekta, koji je podupirao međukatne konstrukcije triklinija na gornjoj etaži. Temeljem jednog arheološki utvrđenoga pilona prizemlja, predlaže se postojanje njih ukupno šest u središnjoj prostoriji prizemlja s istom namjenom. U rekonstrukciji elevacije palače autor je još prepoznao neke nove elemente, kao na primjer pročelje sa samo jednim vratima koja su bila flankirana dvama prozorima (a ne dvama vratima).

Palača je naknadno obuhvaćena zidinama nešto mlađeg kastruma koji za sada nije istražen, a na čije postojanje upućuju ostaci kule na visinski istaknutoj točki južno od palače, kao i položaji dviju ranokršćanskih crkava koje su, pak, mlađe od kastruma. Dio njegova zida pronađen je uz jugozapadno pročelje zapadne crkve u Polačama. Unutar kastruma nalaze se i ostaci objekta s trima apsidama, za koji se prethodno predmnijevalo da je bio dio termalnog kompleksa ili možda sakralnog objekta. Autor, međutim, predlaže da se u tom objektu raspoznaju još jedan triklinij smješten neposredno uz morskobalu.

Ključne riječi: carska palača, kasnoantička rezidencijalna arhitektura, Mljet, Polače