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HISTORY AND THE RESTORATION OF THE CHURCH AT ST. JOHN VLADIMIR MONASTERY, ELBASAN

Abstract: Monastery of St. John Vladimir is situated west of the city of Elbasan. The church is located on the north side of the monastery. On the west side there is the main entrance, while the north and south side are confined respectively by a gate, but of smaller size. On the south side there was also a porch, traces of which are preserved even today. The current architecture of the church, in addition to architectural fragments found on the walls, does not coincide with the appearance or format which would be considered as of XI or XIII century. The architecture is rebuilt together with the monastery in the XIV century by Karl Topia. Early church records were found during restoration works of the existing church (2004–2005).

Church of St. John planimetric typology belongs to the basilica divided into three naves by two rows of columns. The space is divided by the iconostasis of the altar realized in brick wall. In the altar area are partially preserved frescoes of a later time.

The church was burned twice and consequently was left without a roof and the four perimetrical walls were partially damaged and with vertical cracks. As a result of staying in the open, the floor was almost all damaged.

In the process of restoration during 2004–2005 conducted by the Orthodox Autocephalous Church of Albania, the walls were reinforced by vertical stitches, supplements, injections, and in certain parts joints were necessary. The reinforcement was further extended to the existing columns, and their verticality was corrected. The cella coverage was done with a timber construction roof and ceiling. The wooden roof trusses were supported by reinforced columns and extensions of these trusses by the perimeter walls. The roof was covered with locally produced tiles, reused, but selected and cleaned to maintain the texture of the old view. The interior floor was restored using the materials and the old morphology, the complete restoration of the iconostasis, and was applied a layer of protective plaster for the iconostasis and on all the walls, based on the old technique in an integral way and 3 mm below the existing fresco in the apse and niche, fresco which underwent consolidation and cleaning. Also in the interior; the second floor galery (Gineconity), was constructed with wooden material based on the existing remains.

At the main gate to the West, for functional and visual reasons, a wooden porch was constructed in the same quota of the old porch, traces of which are still visible on the facade. This new wooden porch is dismantable at any time and so the space will be emptied for further use.

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Monastery of St. John Vladimir is situated on the west of the city of Elbasan. It is located at the bottom of the eastern site's hill, which descends from top of the "Shënlliut" Rock and Petresh village. The place is a plateau, which (by east side) opens to a quite beautiful natural scenery. In the east, southeast and northeast are the meadows that locals call "Çaire". To the human eye, they are relaxing and mind inspiring the imagination of an artist. While in the west the hillside is lined with olive trees. Once these meadows, fields and olive trees were the property of the monastery. The village near Monastery is named after the monastery of St. John was build, and the people pronounce it "Shinjon", village of Shinjon. The buildings are mainly located in the south of the monastery and less to its north. East meadows are bordered by the river called "Kushës" and in the front of the monastery is the village called "Karakullak". On the south of the village "Shijon", is "Bradashesh" village, and located to the north of the monastery is the village "Reç".

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The history starts after the numerous conquests in the Balkan Peninsula, Bulgarian state turned into an empire and called himself as Kingdom of Bulgarians and Romans (Byzantines). With the death of Simeon the Bulgarian Kingdom was weakened as a result of feudal strife. At the end of the X century, Bulgarian Kingdom began to recover under the powerful feudal Samoil. He extended his rules and Bulgarian State Center was Prespa and later Ohrid. In the year 980, he captured the city of Durrës, which conquest for the first time under the rule of the Bulgarians. In the effort to stop the Byzantines who wanted to open a new front in the north, Samoil stretched military campaigns to

Dalmatia. On this occasion he also subjected Kraja ruler, Prince Ivan (John) Vladimir, with his belongings in the west of Lake Skadar. But these victories were not sustainable. Byzantine Emperor, Basil II managed to have some success against the Bulgarian Kingdom. In the year 1005 he took Durres, and later at 1014 he got Monastery and beat the Bulgarian army in Macedonia. With the death of Samoil, Byzantium continued to fight against his nephew, Ivan Vladislav. Byzantine successes demolished Bulgarians alliances, so the allies began to leave. And one of these was John (Ivan) Vladimir Prince of Kraja who joined the Byzantines, but was killed near Prespa by people of Bulgarian king Ivan Vladislav. Initially, his body was buried in Kraja. For nearly 199 years his relics was stored in the church "Virgin of Kraja". In 1215 the ruler Teodor Engel Komneni, took the relics of John Vladimir and brought them to Durres and it is not known in which church settled. Later in the XIV century, the Albanian prince Karl Topia sends them in a monastery near the city of Elbasan. Monastery was named in his honor, and has the same name today, the Monastery of Saint John (Vladimir).

Connected with the Monastery of Saint John Vladimir there are some traditions and legends still recognized by the people of this area.

One of them says "one day John, was walking in the forest along the river of Kushës, and was an eagle carrying a bright cross. The eagle left on the ground the bright cross and disappeared. John went there, and took the cross and placed it in the same place where later he built a church.

Vladislav the King of Bulgarians the conqueror of the John's lands, invites him in Ohrid. Vladislav, as soon as he saw John, drew his sword and cut his head of. The Saint took the severed head in his hands, and rode the horse and went to church he had built himself. Here was buried Saint John Vladimir by country Archbishop on 4 June 1015. (On this date, 4 June, is the feast of the church). Kozara wife of John Vladimir, built a house next to the church. She lived there until her death. Later, the house became a monastery. "

According to another version, "John Vladimir married Kozara, who was the daughter of Samoil King of Bulgarians. This marriage rested no longer after the prince had decided to remain a virgin. This decision aroused resentment to Kozara and for her people. For this reason brother of Kozara attacked John with the sword, but sword did not kill him, it bowed as if it were wax at the moment it touched the body of John (Saint). Then John thought the honor of his death, gave the assassins his sword, with which he beheaded John. The Saint took the severed head in hand, and went to church of "Virgin of Kraja", while the murderer, by divine punishment, ate the flesh of his body."

Another legend says that “16 French wanted to steal the relics of Saint, thought that it was gold, but mules that carried the relics of Saint died before they crossed the river of Kushës”.

Connected to the name of John Vladimir, was created a fairly wide cult, apparently due to the organization of the peoples against the Bulgarian occupation. Kraja province on west of Lake Skadar is an area that is inhabited also by the Albanian population, and for Prince John Vladimir is thought to be of Albanian origin coming from the population of this province. Prince John has been a man who enjoyed the sympathy in the province of his people, (Kraja) apparently from works of charity which he did there. And this is what the legend says, that there were some snakes on Oblik hills that throw fire from the mouth. They had been a serious danger for the population of this area. Prince with his prayers made the snakes non aggressive and the people calmed down and returned to their works.

In XVIII century Albanian painter Constantine Shpataraku has done the icon of John Vladimir. Prince is at the center of the icon with severed head in his left hand. Around the central figures are 12 different scenes. In one of those scenes, Albanian Prince Karl Topia is standing, who shows with the right hand the monastery of St. John Vladimir in Elbasan. Karl Topia's figure, the painter Constantine Shpataraku has taken from the old icon that was in this monastery.

Over the years, the first church, in the west of the city of Elbasan dating probably from early second millennium, was ruined. The church was rebuilt together with the monastery in XIV century by Karl Topia. In this time the remains of the Saint were taken from the city of Durres and placed in the church and monastery near Elbasan, which takes the name of the Monastery of St. John Vladimir. At the main entrance to the church is located a stone inscribed with the emblem of Prince Karl Topia.

In the late Middle Ages the monastery became one of the most important centers of Albanian orthodoxy, of monks and knowledgeable people who gathered at the monastery. Important works have come not only for religious, but also for the history of the Albanian language. One of these is “The Book of the Psalms”, the exact name of the author is unknown, being called “Anonymous of Elbasan”, “Papa Totos” as well as “Theodore Bogomili”. This is the oldest writings of the Albanian language, that is written in secured spelling and old alphabetic language. In mid XIX century Monastery of St. John became an important center for Albanian culture. Foreign scholars, as historians, archaeologists, linguists, ethnologists, geologists etc. passing from Elbasan, had stayed there for several days, definitely visiting this important cultural center.

In the years 1940–41, at the beginning of the Italian-Greek war, a general quarter of the Italian army was placed in the monastery. In that time the mon-

astery was visited by the highest personalities of the Italian state. The monastery of St. John was visited by Badoglio, and in 1941 the Duce had stayed about a week. By negligence of Italian soldiers, part of the monastery and the church was burned. A second fire including the monastery hospices and partially the church, was during the time of departure of the German army in 1944.

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During the survey and restoration work in the church, in the right nave, near the southern gate were found the stairs and the foundation (of a column) in the lower quotas than the floor of the existing church. Its positioning seemed determined symmetrically and in a regular position with the church. This position creates the impression that this foundation is the oldest trace of the church and should be one of the four bases of the four columns of the interior of the old church. The morphology of the old church would have been the type of inscribed cross with cupola, typical for that type of church in the X and XI century, in which is believed to be dating the construction of the first church. Also outside of the church, between the south-eastern corner and the apse, in similar quotas to the interior foundation, was found a three page niches (at the diaconicon part) foundation. These elements gradually meet the form of the old church. Other surveys and studies will be needed to create a full scene of history of the church in Monastery of St. John Vladimir.



West — South view of the church before restoration



West — South view of the church after restoration



Interior view of the church before restoration



Interior view of the church after restoration



Frescos (Platytera) before restoration



Frescos (Platytera) after restoration



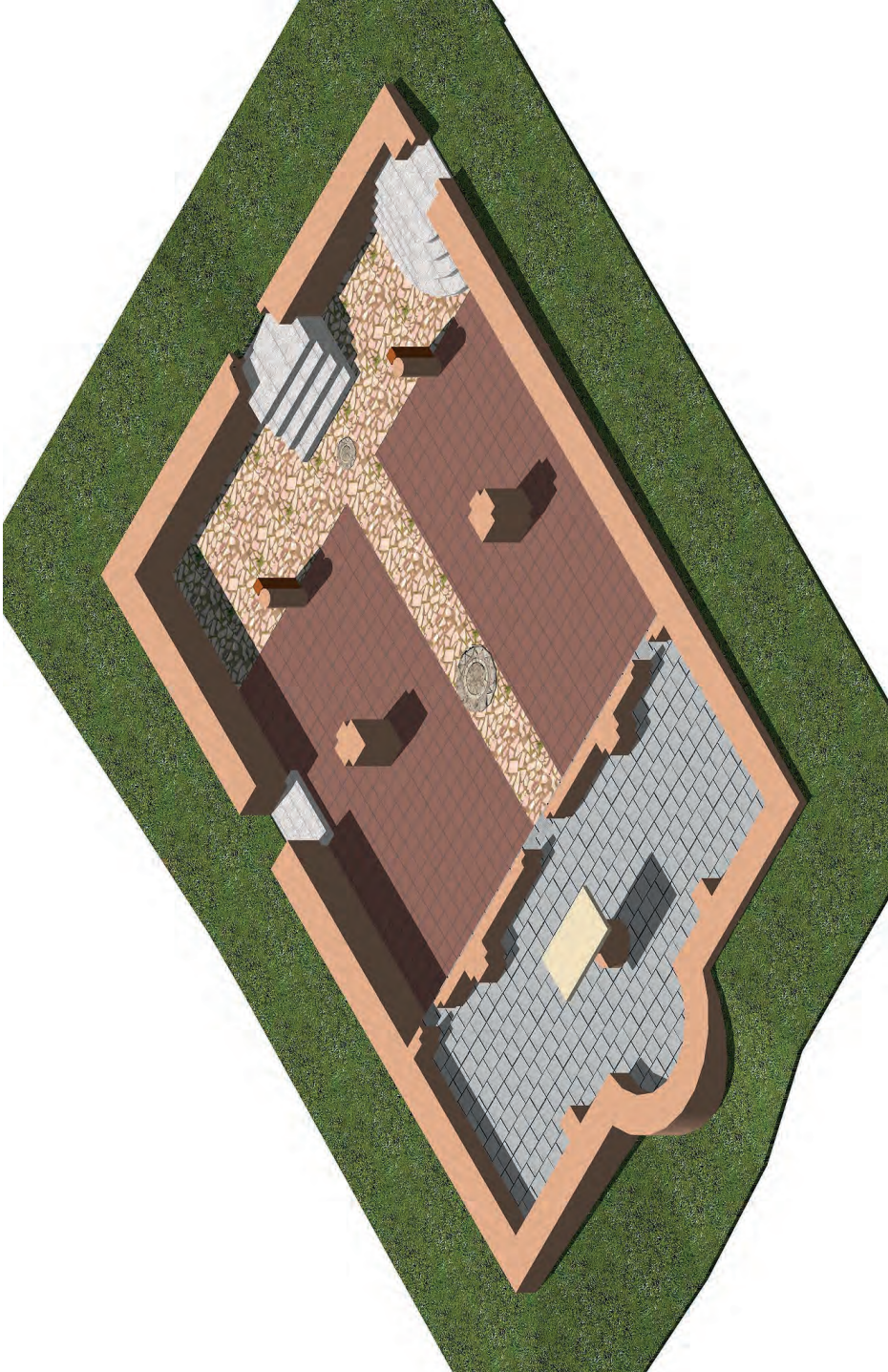
Detail of Frescos (Platytera) after restoration



View of the foundation of the column during survey



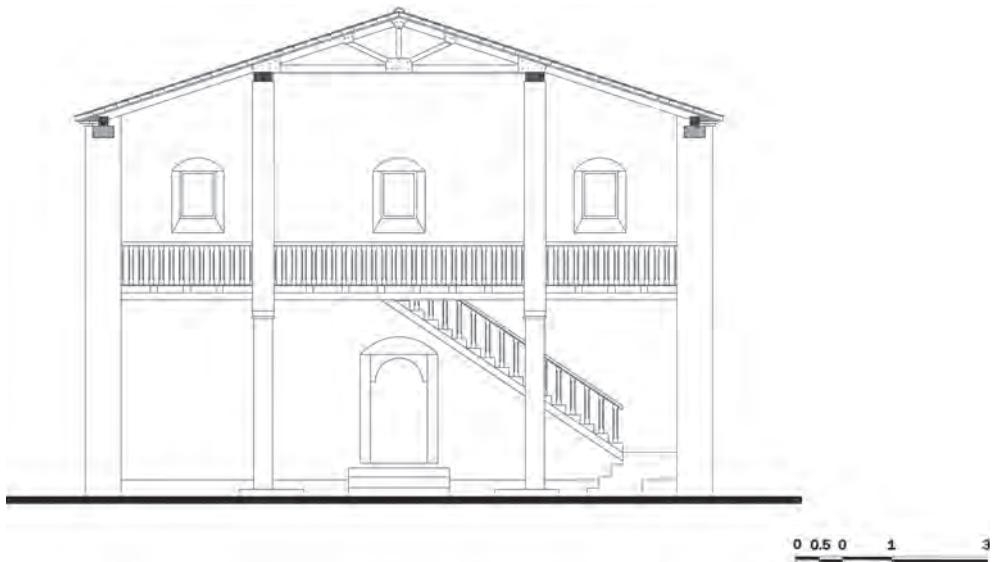
View of the old stairs during survey



3 Dimensional view floor with all the authentic material



3 Dimensional view of the porch



0 0.5 0 1 3

Section view of the proposal reconstruction



North part view during the restoration



East view of the church after restorations



Interior view of the church after restoration



During a liturgical ceremony