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Historical and archaeological analysis of the Church of the Nativity

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ABSTRACT

The team has considered the special status of the Basilica of Bethlehem, which is not just a monument of outstanding historic and artistic importance, but also and fundamentally a holy place, that has long been and is still perceived as a memorial site, marking the place of Christ's birth and transcribing into a sacred topography the main events of the Gospel narratives. Because of such a peculiarity, the team considered that it was indispensable to analyze the Basilica of Bethlehem from different viewpoints, namely those of archaeological and historical research. The historical approach aims at understanding the centuries-old development of the holy site as a ritual space and the materialized expression of holiness, the ways in which it has been perceived and used, and the messages that it was meant to convey to its beholders. It combines the findings of previous archaeological research with the data provided by the analysis of written evidence, including old textual sources about the Basilica (especially chronicles and pilgrims' accounts). For the archaeological study of the Basilica of the Nativity, we used the methodology of its investigation of the Archeology of Architecture. Stratigraphical analysis was carried out in relation to various portions of the church walls, as well as in relation to the buildings that make up the whole complex, in order to understand the dynamics of major changes in the structure in its entirety. Direct analysis of evidence from the walls was supported by the reading of existing literature and historical maps with particular reference to the plans of the church.

These tools of investigation have been applied to the analysis of the church in its entirety, including its underground cavities.

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1. Research aims

The historical research was devoted to the examination of the previous archaeological, historical, and art-historical secondary literature on the Bethlehem basilica and to a sampling of old written sources, by focusing on the history of the basilica and on its transformations down the centuries, which can be usefully combined with the data provided by archaeological and architectural analysis.

The main aim of the archeological research consists in the application of the stratigraphical method to architecture. The analysis of the plan of the building, which was in the past the most debated topic, has been integrated with the observations of the stratigraphical relationships that we made, analysing the external standing walls of the basilica.

The present study is part of a wide-ranging project commissioned, and funded, by the Palestinian National Authority. The project, awarded after an international tender, was aimed at the

analysis of the historical and archeological aspects, at assessing the physical and structural decay of the Church in all its components (see [1] and [2]) and at the analyses of the mosaics [3].

2. Historical analyses - M.Bacci

2.1. Bethlehem as historical problem

In the context of the international team for the survey, assessment study, and conservation plan for the Basilica of the Nativity, the unit being responsible for historical and archaeological analysis has been focused on the historical aspects and the gathering of written sources. The research work was developed on two different, yet strictly intertwined, grounds:

- it aimed at providing the other units with historical information being useful for the current works of investigation of the roofs and other material parts of the buildings;
- it provided some grounds for a thorough reassessment of the historical problems underlying the site and its architectural-artistic peculiarities, starting from an analysis of the different

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methodological approaches applied by past scholars to the interpretation of the Nativity church.

In first instance, it must be remarked that, despite the large number of publications concerning the site, many aspects of its history still prove to be disregarded or uninvestigated. More specifically, the contributions of experts in many different disciplinary fields have mostly not been merged into a general history of the Basilica. The scholarly debate started already in the 16th and 17th centuries with the publications by both Greek and Franciscan authors who basically dealt with the origins of the site, its holy mementoes in their devotional and commemorative significance, and the properties and rights granted to each Christian community. From the 19th century onwards, the basilica has been investigated from the viewpoint of historical-religious topography [4,5], architectural history [6–8], structural analysis [9,10] and archaeology [11–13], and art history and iconography [14–19]. Whereas the early history of the building has been much discussed since the very beginnings, its developments in the Byzantine and Crusader periods have been more specifically investigated only in much more recent works. Notwithstanding the large amount of written sources bearing witness to the history of the monument in the later centuries, the latter have not so much retained the attention of scholars.

2.2. State of the field

To some extent, the abundance and variety of sources constitute a limitation to the development of historical research. Chronicles and archival documents occasionally shed some lights on specific aspects of the site history. Yet, pilgrims' accounts constitute by and large the most important category of written sources: those worked out from the 4th through the late 13th century are easily accessible in a published collections of texts in both their original language (Greek, Latin, Armenian, and Arabic) and Latin, Greek, English or French translations [20–26]. On the other hand, from the 14th century onwards pilgrimage reports and descriptions of the holy sites were disseminated almost everywhere and were written in almost all the European and Mediterranean languages (including Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, French, English, German, Danish, Czech, Polish, Hungarian, Croatian, Serbian, Bulgarian, Russian, Greek, Armenian, Georgian, Arabic, Persian, and Ethiopic); a thorough examination of all such sources [27] proves to be extremely difficult, as many of them have published by scholars interested only in their historical-linguistic aspects and, even if some of them can be accessed through some anthologies of texts [23,24,28–36] have never been gathered within systematic databases, a preliminary attempt being that recently established by the project *Digiberichte* of Kiel University (www.digiberichte.de).

Iconographic sources include views of the city and the basilica, plans, illustrated proskynetaria, and elevations of the building. Mostly dating from the late 16th century onwards (including the important engravings by Natale Bonifacio, Bernardino Amico, Cornelis van Bruyn, Roberts and Bartlett), they have been already published and used by most of the scholars dealing with the history of the Nativity church [13]; yet a thorough catalogue of all extant witness is still lacking. Another important source of information is represented by the Palestinian wooden and mother-of-pearl model reproductions of the Basilica, many of which were the object of a specific investigation by Michele Piccirillo [37].

Archaeological investigations were occasionally executed in the 19th century in the Franciscan compound. New and more accurate excavations and soundings were made in 1932 in the narthex, in 1933–1934 in several parts of the basilica [38], and again in 1947 through 1951 in the area of the Franciscan convent [13]. Soundings of the remnants of mosaic in the nave and transept took place in 1983 under the auspices of the Deutsches Archäologisches Institut

and the Görres-Institut and were carried on by Prof. Gustav Kühnel, whose work still remains partly unpublished [17,39].

On the whole, the contributions given by many different scholars have managed to shed light on specific aspects of the history of the Basilica, yet a wider and fuller interpretation of the site is still lacking and many questions remain unanswered. In some respects, past scholars have sometimes proved to disregard the true peculiarity of the Nativity church, which is by itself not just a very eminent historical site and a very sumptuous manifestation of monumental architecture, but also and very specifically a “mnemotopos”, i.e. a topographical transcription of several events mentioned in the Christian Holy Scriptures and religious tradition [40]. This specificity distinguishes the Palestinian *loca sancta* from any other holy place in the Christian world: inasmuch as they are perceived to bear witness to Christ's Incarnation and to be imbued with a holy power connected to their contact with Christ's body, they are also deemed to be holy and deserving veneration; the ways in which holy events have been more or less firmly associated with specific sites and public devotion to them has been architecturally, spatially, and visually promoted to the eyes of pilgrims and devotees constitutes a specific field of research which remains largely uninvestigated.

2.3. Major themes of Bethlehem's architectural and artistic history

The location of Christ's birth and its deposition in the manger on the cave of Bethlehem, on the second hill over the Wadi el-Charubeh, was already hinted at in the writings of Justin Martyr (mid-2nd century) and Origenes (3rd century) and was clearly promulgated by the writings of ecclesiastical writers from the 4th century onwards, as well as by the descriptions of a number of early pilgrims. According to the view especially defended by Franciscan authors [41,42] but recently rejected by Taylor [43], the memory of the location had possibly been preserved by the local Jewish-Christian communities.

The sumptuous church erected by Constantine, according to Eusebius of Caesarea's account, was actually not the main focus of the pilgrim's experience, as it was basically conceived of as a beautiful and monumental frame marking the site of and giving access to the underground cave, where visitors were allowed to worship the visual and spatial mementoes of Jesus' birth. The special setting of the cave itself, including, among others, the gilded revetment of the manger and later on the visualization of the connected event by means of a mosaic image, was just one of the many strategies worked out since the very beginnings in order to enhance and stimulate the visitor's feeling of holiness associated to the site. In the course of time the nearby grottoes and some specific spots in the basilica itself and its surroundings were alternatively identified with either minor events of the Nativity story (e.g., the site where the Magi left their horses, the place of Christ's circumcision, the tombs of the holy innocents, the place where a drop of the Virgin's milk had fallen down, the site of Christ's firth bath, the palm under which, according to Islamic tradition, the Virgin Mary gave birth to Jesus, etc.) or the documented presence of important personages of church history near the basilica (Jerome, John of Damascus, etc.). Such locations may vary according to the different views of each Christian community, the multifarious perceptions and experiences of visitors, and the different emphasis laid on each event in the course of time.

As visual and tangible evocations of holy history, holy spots and their setting played a primary role in the pilgrim's experience of the Bethlehem basilica. Yet, if compared to other Palestinian holy sites, the latter's aesthetic appeal and monumental appearance was often recorded as something unexpected; especially from

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