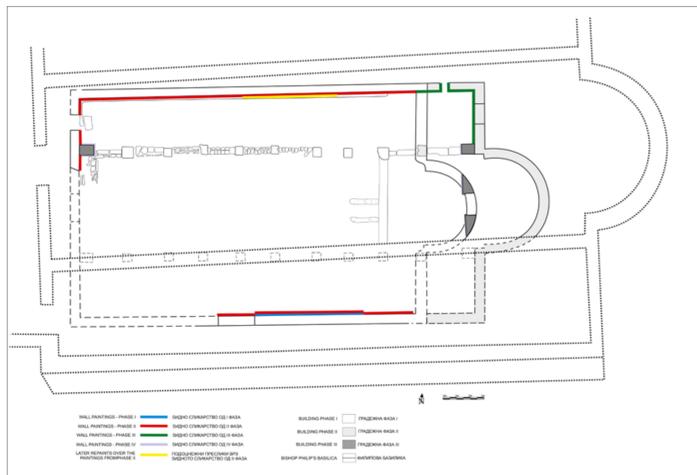




**PARETI DIPINTE
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The Frescoes from Stobi's Episcopal Basilica: a century of study, preservation and collaboration



1. Plan of the Episcopal Basilicas and the Baptistery with their building and decoration phases (M. Tutkovski)

History of Stobi and the Episcopal complex

The ancient city of Stobi emerged in the 2nd century BC, when the Roman province of Macedonia was established. During the next centuries, Stobi gained the status of *oppidum civium Romanorum* during Octavian Augustus' reign, and shortly afterwards of *municipium*, thus becoming one of the most prominent Balkan cities. In the Late Antiquity, Stobi had an important role as an Episcopal seat and from 5th century on it acted as the capital city of the newly established province of *Macedonia Secunda*. Nowadays, Stobi is one of the best-preserved Roman cities in North Macedonia, with its many excavated and displayed secular and religious buildings, among which are early examples of synagogues and churches.

The Episcopal Basilicas and the Baptistery (fig. 1), with their architectural and decorative assets, which reflect the changing trends of Christian art in 4-6th century AD, are considered the most important Early Christian monuments in North Macedonia. Their decorative arrangements include consecutive layers of both floor mosaics and wall and ceiling paintings.

History of excavations and conservation 1916-1945

In 1916, German troops discovered Stobi by unearthing, among others, parts of the Large Basilica. Their finds sparked the interest of the professional community and a series of excavations started. In 1932, a short text in *Starinar* mentioned the conservation of a mural decoration, excavated in the basilica. It described the detachment of larger fragments found intact on the walls and the collection of the smaller ones. It listed the materials used for the conservation: glue and newspapers for the facing, and a gypsum, glue and sand mix reinforced with an iron net for the new support. Then, all fragments were sent to the National Museum in Belgrade. Their faith since then remains unknown. Limited data are available on the excavations between the end of WWII and the '70s.

1970-1980

The next active period was in the '70s, when a joint American-Yugoslavian project for the excavation of Stobi took place. The field and post-excavation activities are very well documented through excavation and conservation field notebooks, publications, etc. (fig. 2). The Old Basilica was discovered when the excavations focused on the eastern part of the building. Both mosaics and wall paintings were found.

The smaller, loose painted fragments were collected and stored in wooden boxes (fig. 3). According to the notebooks, some of these fragments were cleaned and consolidated with PVAc or shellac. Larger fragments were lifted *en bloc* with gypsum shells and gauze. Each box was labelled and a reference to the relevant notebook entry was made. The second (visible) layer of wall paintings was assessed as being at risk and was detached using *strappo* technique (fig. 4). This left the murals of the first painting phase exposed to the elements, even though a temporary roof was erected to protect them.

1980-2009

The excavations continued under the supervision of B. Aleksova. She excavated the main part of the Episcopal basilica, uncovering the painted and mosaic decorations in almost full scale. Apart from the fragments and scarce images from the site, there is almost no written record of the conservation of the finds.

The frescoes on the North wall were exposed, under a protective roofing, until 2004, when their seriously deteriorated state made their detachment inevitable.

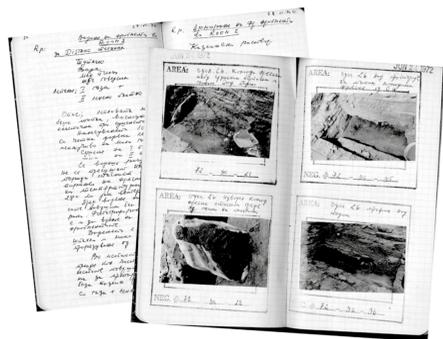
2009-present days

The National Institution Stobi was founded in 2009 with the aim of studying, preserving and popularizing the Roman city of Stobi. The excavations continued in the South aisle of the Old Basilica, uncovering the wall paintings on its South wall. The lack of proper roofing was one of the reasons the murals had to be detached. These ones, along with the fragments from the North wall, became part of a comprehensive conservation project (fig. 5). A successful collaboration between NI Stobi and the National Conservation Center in Skopje, the project, involving both professionals and students, was completed in 2011. All fragments are currently stable, transferred to aerolam supports, and ready to be reattached in their original positions. The whole project was thoroughly documented, with a documentation available upon request. With the last wall paintings to be uncovered this summer, the whole plan of the painted and mosaic decoration of the Episcopal Basilica in Stobi will hopefully be completed (fig. 6).

Conclusion

A century of archaeological and conservation work at Stobi has amassed a huge amount of both published and unpublished data. This vast record gives invaluable evidence of the history of both archaeology and conservation in the area. Processing the data on the Episcopal complex could provide a continuous, detailed and objective view of past practices and the lessons learned from all previous treatments, as well as the impact of a national and international multidisciplinary collaboration.

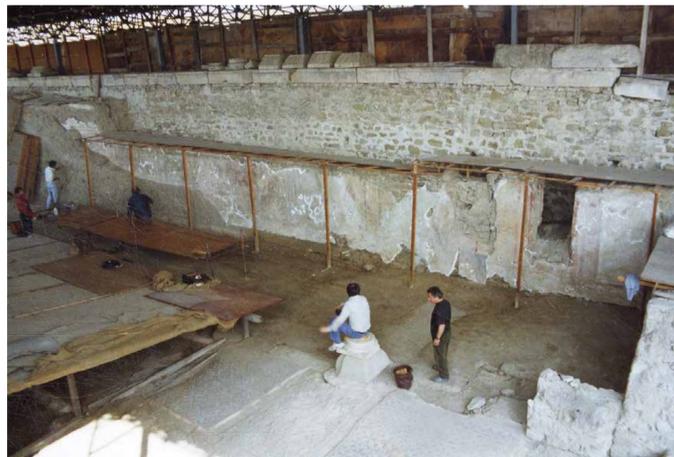
This will in turn provide solid ground for any future collaboration in the study and the conservation of this exceptional monument.



2. Pages from the field conservation notebooks from the American-Yugoslavian excavations campaign in 1972 (NI Stobi archive).



3. Some of the larger loose fragments from the ceiling decoration of the Old Episcopal Basilica (K. Frangova).



4. Detachment of the wall paintings from the North wall of the North aisle in the '80s (NI Stobi archive).



5. Detachment of the wall paintings from the South wall of the South aisle in 2010 (T. Filov, M. Tutkovski).



6. The Episcopal Basilicas and the baptistery nowadays (M. Tutkovski).

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