

The Church of Sv. Spas (St. Savior)

More than a hundred churches from early medieval period are strewn along the eastern Adriatic coast and islands. Some of them are well preserved and still in use, whereas others fell into ruin. The church of Sv. Spas (St. Savior) is an outstanding example of a church that ravages of time had mercy on (front page).

The remains of these churches, built in the Pre-Romanesque period, make the Croatian coast one of the richest regions in archaeological sites from Pre-Romanesque period in Europe (Fig. 1, center). Unfortunately, it has been barely mentioned in the international literature on Pre-Romanesque architecture and often omitted in maps of archaeological sites (1).

These so-called Old-Croatian churches were built between the 9th and 11th century, when Croatia was an independent kingdom ruled by native princes and kings.

Slavonic tribes, which the Croats belong to, had settled on the Balkans during the great westward migrations in the early Middle Ages. The Croats settled along the eastern shores of the Adriatic sea in the 7th century. In the following two centuries, they were gradually converted to Christianity and their primitive tribal society transformed into a feudal system.

Old Croatian civilization developed under the influence of Roman life style and institutions in urban Roman settlements on the mainland and islands.

Croatia occupied the territory where the interests and influences of the world powers of that time met (Byzantium, Papal Rome, Frankish empire, and finally Venice). Croatia was at a crossroads between East and West, where people traveling through the country exchanged ideas and knowledge.

A very interesting record of this period is a preserved manuscript by Gottschalk, Frankish Benedictine monk, distinguished Saxon theologian, and early scholastic philosopher, who spent two years (846-848) at the court of the Croatian prince Trpimir (2). Croatian princes were, in various degrees, dependent on either Byzantine or Frankish sovereigns. They also acknowledged Pope's supreme authority.

Throughout its history, the bond between Croatia and the Roman Catholic Church stayed strong. A letter that Pope John VIII sent to Prince Branimir, on 7th June 879, is the first document known in which Croatia was acknowledged as an independent state (3).

Such was a political and cultural background of times in which the Old-Croatian churches were raised.

Their architecture combined elements from all these threads of influence with native Illyrian stonemasonry. The local craftsmen who lived and worked far from the great centers of art (Apennine peninsula, Byzantium, or Frankish empire) produced an impressive number of small churches of a great variety. Two basic structural types are predominant, the central and the longitudinal type, but the combinations of the two are not rare either (Fig. 1, bottom left) (4).

Most of these churches are not more than ten meters long. The centrally planned design varies from a simple circular or rectangular structure with an apse to the more sophisticated combinations of cuboid and circular structures. In the most sophisticated circular churches, the central space, covered by a cupola, is surrounded by six or eight radially arranged semicircular conches with half-domes (Fig. 1, bottom left) (3).

The churches of longitudinal type vary widely in dimensions, type of construction, and shape. Some are tiny structures without aisle, others are up to thirty meters long with a nave and two or three aisles and as many apses. The dome of the central part of the longitudinal churches (Fig. 1, bottom left) (6-8) comprises eastern and western styles.

Old-Croatian churches were built of roughly cut local limestone with ample use of mortar. Wooden roof constructions in the tradition of early Christian basilicas were exceptions. Most churches had stone vaults supported by buttresses and roofing of finely sliced stone slabs.

The design and construction in many cases show various irregularities. The base and the sections are asymmetric and the angles are acute or slanted rather than rectangular. The arrangement and shape of the windows do not always follow the rules of symmetry.

These irregularities were mistakenly attributed to ignorant or unskilled craftsmen. However, a more detailed analysis revealed that these irregularities were designed to make the church itself a unique sundial device (5). So it was possible to time the daily services by the sun, which would illuminate a particular spot in the church (altar, ciborium) on a particular day of the year (the day of the Patron Saint, Christmas, or Easter).

The interior was richly decorated with stone work. The remains of these decorations are the most valuable items of Croatian cultural heritage. The ornaments, highly stylized patterns in low relief, represented plaited ribbons, repetitive geometric figures, foliage with birds,

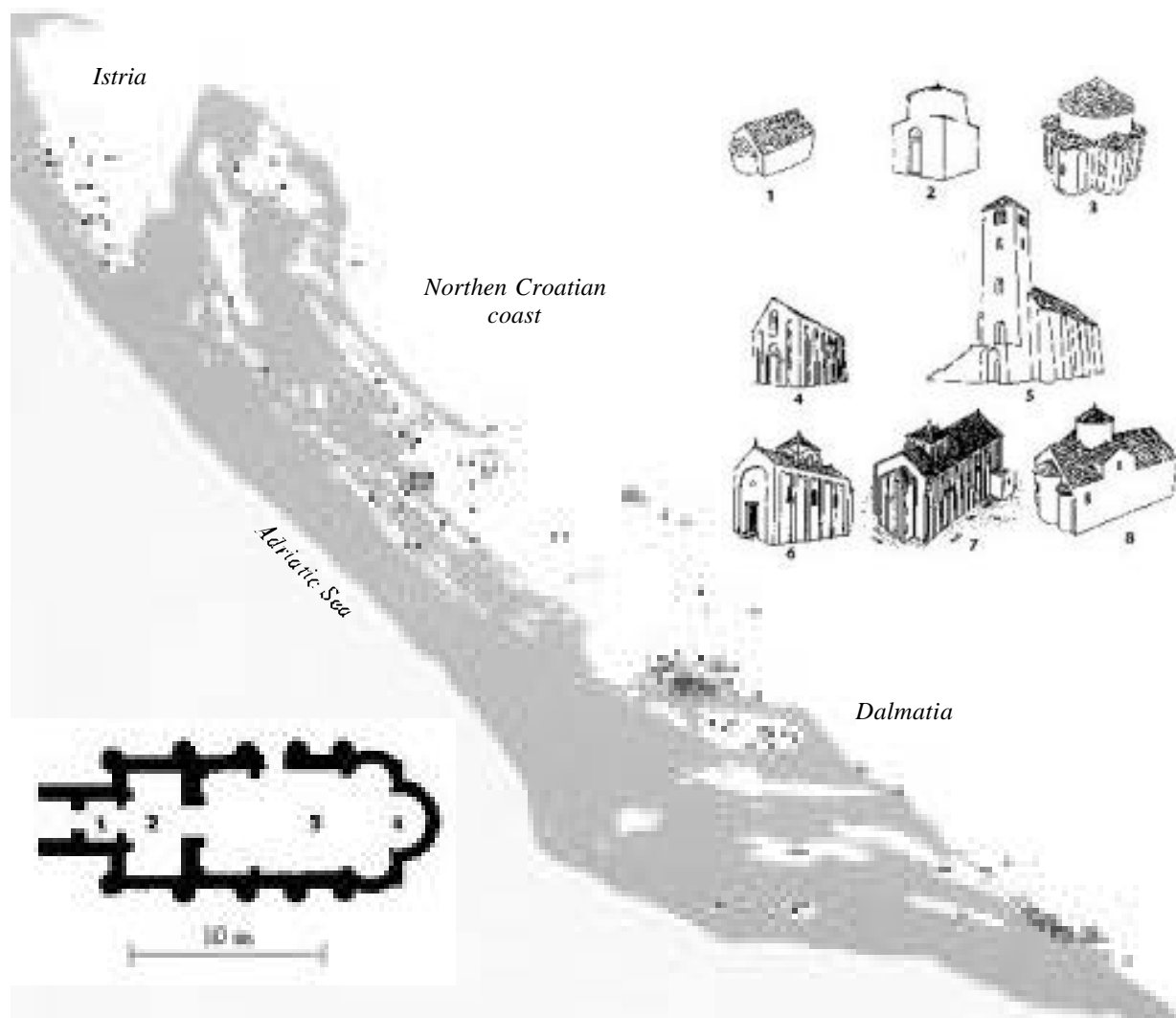


Figure 1. Pre-Romanesque monuments in Croatia. **Center:** Locations at the Adriatic coast. Closed circles – churches, open circles – reconstructed ancient buildings, squares – houses, triangles – monasteries. **Bottom left:** Plan of Sv. Spas church: 1. belfry; 2. westwerk; 3. nave; 4. trefoil apse. **Top right:** Reconstruction of the original forms of some of old-Croatian churches. 1. Sv. Juraj (St. George) in Split; 2. Sv. Pelegrin on Dugi Otok; 3. Sv. Trojica (Holy Trinity) in Split; 4. Sv. Juraj (St. George) in Kaštel Stari; 5. Sv. Spas (St. Savior) near the source of the river Cetina; 6. Sv. Petar (St. Peter) in Omiš; 7. Sv. Stjepan (St. Stephen) in Solin; 8. Sv. Eufemija (St. Euphemia) in Split.

and other motifs. These patterns in stone work are common both to contemporary Mediterranean and West European art (6).

The decorations often contain inscriptions, with the names of the church founders and donors as well as the time of the church's construction. They are important records of early medieval Croatian history. Most inscriptions are in Latin, whereas few are in Croatian and written in Glagolitic script (7) by Glagolitic priests in Croatia, who had the unique right to use the vernacular in liturgy.

The church of Sv. Spas (St. Savior) near the town of Vrlika and the source of the river Cetina is an example of the Old-Croatian church, which was endowed by a king or a nobleman (8). Such churches were usually bigger and had some elements of royal Carolingian architecture, such as *westwerk*, a western atrium where the king or the lord attended the service separated from the common folk. Croatia is the only Mediterranean country where *westwerk* is found in the Pre-Romanesque churches, an

evidence of the combined influence of Carolingian and Mediterranean cultures.

Sv. Spas church was built in the late 9th century (Fig. 1, bottom left and top right, front page of this issue). The two-storied *westwerk* is adjacent to the belfry on the west side of the church. It has a separate entrance with a stairway leading to the upper gallery from where the lord attended the service.

Round buttresses support the vaults of the nave, and once a trefoil apse on the east side was rebuilt into rectangular one.

The valley of the river Cetina has always been the main communication line between the East and the West in Dalmatian highlands. It was the route along which merchants, emissaries, pilgrims, and missionaries traveled, but also along which enemies invaded the country. Church of Sv. Spas shared the fate of the area. During 13th and 14th century the Vlachs came down from the mountains and set-

tled in the region. They were nomadic natives, ethnically different from Slavonic Croats. The word 'Vlah' is of Celtic origin, and is present in various forms in many European languages in the meaning "foreigner" or "foreign", or country where such people live (Walhos, Walachei, welsch in German, Wlochy in Polish, Wales in English). The Vlachs merged with the Croats and assimilated their language and religion. They left a trace in the Croatian language, especially in the names of places. For example the word "katuni" originally meant "village" in Vlach language. To day it is the name of the village Katuni situated 100 km east of Sv. Spas church. (Incidentally, the family of the *Croatian Medical Journal* editor-in-chief Matko Marušić comes from this village.)

After the fall of the old Croatian kingdom in 1102, the region remained under the rule of Croatian princes, vassals of Hungaro-Croatian kings. Toward the end of the 14th century, Bosnian king Tvrtko conquered the territory. His reign lasted nine months. At the time, the Ottoman Empire was rising and Turkish armies began to pour into Europe. They reached this region at the end of the 15th and beginning of the 16th century. Turkish occupation was initially a reign of terror and those who managed to escape from the area found refuge either in the fortifications in the Northwest or on the Dalmatian islands. In the turmoil of the wars the church fell to ruins.

Toward the end of the 17th century, when the decline of Ottoman Empire began, Venice gained control of the Dalmatian mainland and islands. Venetian authorities welcomed Serb refugees from the Turk held territories in the East to settle on deserted lands. They provided badly needed work force as well as defense against minor Turkish raids.

The Serbs, who were Orthodox Christians, founded a settlement near the source of the river Cetina, and called the village Cetina. They buried their dead in the churchyard of church of Sv. Spas. A sad time for the church followed. Orthodox monks and people of the village Cetina refused to let Franciscan friars to repair the church. Serb writers later claimed that the church had been established by the Bosnian king Tvrtko as an Orthodox church for the Serbs, whom he had allegedly brought in to defend the area from Turkish raids. The villagers resented any attempt at archaeological investigation. When in 1895, Lujó Marun, the first archaeologist devoted to the old Croatian period, tried to investigate the locality, the villagers attacked him with stones, clubs,

and guns. He would not have managed to escape if there were not his fast horse and local gunsmiths.

After World War II, when archaeological investigations of the site were allowed, Stjepan Gunjača found fragments of ornamental stone work. One fragment of the altar screen bears the names of Župan (sheriff) Gastika and his mother Nemira, who had commissioned the construction of the church. This finding dates the church back to the 9th century. Further excavations revealed three layers of graves. The bottom one was on the same level with the foundations of the church and is the largest known Croatian necropolis. It harbors more than 1,600 graves, some of which contain artefacts, mostly gold or silver earrings. The most valuable finding is a Carolingian silver thurible from the 8th century, probably brought over by Frankish missionaries.

The second layer contained graves with megaliths, known as *stećak*, from the period of the Bosnian king Tvrtko and times after. The uppermost grave yard is the present Orthodox cemetery.

The fate of church of Sv. Spas reflects the ever-changing fortune of the country and its people.

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