



TRACING THE “ORIENT” IN SYNAGOGUE ARCHITECTURE IN BULGARIA

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Abstract

The report is focused on the synagogues in Bulgarian territory, built in the last decades of 19th and the first years of 20th century. (Bulgaria is a part of the Ottoman Empire from the end of 14th century to the completion of the Russo-Turkish Liberation War in 1878. However, the country is officially recognized as independent in 1908.) Sacred Jewish architecture in Bulgaria has been more actively investigated in the end of 20th and in the beginning of 21th century. Usually its studies were conducted in three directions: findings of new data; updates of old records; publications on famous and preserved monuments.

As there are only a few attempts on typological, architectural or stylistic analysis of the synagogues in the chosen period, our article is focused on defining and “placing” the Jewish religious buildings both within the local and regional (cultural) context of Bulgaria, and inside the wider borders of the Ottoman empire. It explores their appearance, architectural styles and characteristics, and their spatial solutions and decorative profiles. Thus, Bulgarian synagogue design is found to reflect mostly on: general archaic models of temple architecture applied in its simple, vernacular form; traces of representative Ottoman architecture and its evolution; influences of European architecture from the 18th and 19th century. The study results are in the areas of history of arts and architecture, and reveal new research perspectives over the diverse cultural heritage from the chosen period.

Keywords: temple architecture, synagogues, Bulgarian architecture, Ottoman Empire, Orient art

1. Introduction:

1.1. The Jewish community in Bulgaria

Jews were part of the population dwelling in Bulgarian lands during the entire period of its state history: Roman

and Byzantine Empires, medieval First and Second Bulgarian States, Ottoman rule.

In the Balkans, the descendants of Jews, who had lived in ancient Roman Empire, are called Romagnoti. At various times later on, new groups of Jewish

settlers were coming to the region, leaving their homes in Central and Western Europe. The largest compact community of this population were the so-called Sephardic - Jews who had been expelled from Catholic Spain at the end of the 15th century (1492). Another notable group of settlers was the Ashkenazi Jews.

At the end of the 1940s, when the State of Israel was formed, most Bulgarian Jews (45000-50000 people) left the country. Currently in Bulgaria live only a few thousand Jews.

1.2. Synagogues in Bulgaria

Material traces of Jewish population were found even in ancient archaeological sites as Ulpia Eskus and Philippopolis (Plovdiv), or in later medieval villages like Tarnovo (Veliko Tarnovo) and Mesembria (Nesebar).

Now in the Plovdiv Archaeological museum are exposed some elements and mosaics of an ancient synagogue [1], which had been built in the city probably at the end of the 3rd century AC (when Bulgarian lands were part of the Roman Empire). The findings on site include: main foundation walls; a mosaic image of one of the major Jewish symbols - the menorah; and a votive inscription in Greek placed in side panels of the floor in the prayer hall. [2] It says: "Thanks to the sources and due to the Cosmian's prudence, so-called Joseph decorated (the synagogue), bless them all" [3].

1.3. Methodology

The report is focused on synagogues built in Bulgarian lands during the last decades of the 19th and early years of 20th century. These buildings are elements of the state historical and artistic heritage (which is now partly preserved), as religious buildings of all the ethno-confessional

communities within the Ottoman Empire are included in it.

A special feature of the chosen time period is the role of the temple and temple institution (be it a synagogue, church or mosque) as an urban and social structure. During that time, religious edifices and ensembles truly consolidated their respective ethnic communities in the Balkans, as common places of faith, traditions and rituals. Still in addition, they also performed wide register of social activities - like archival, communicational, and educational and so on. Later those social functions have been (partially) transferred and even limited to another, usually secular, institutions, following the modernist concept for differentiating aims, spaces and zones.

Our study explores appearance, architectural styles and characteristics of Jewish religious buildings and their links with regional and oriental art traditions, understood the most widely: as temple spatial solutions and decorative profile (motifs, ornaments, texts, signs, symbols).

According to Bulgarian researchers [4], during XIX century and in the first decade of the XX century there were synagogues in 34 Bulgarian cities (which included one, two or more Jewish religious buildings in a settlement). Ten of them (built until 1909) are preserved today, but not all still function as Jewish temples. Following this data, a schematic territorial distribution of Bulgarian cities with functioning synagogues in the studied historical period (1850-1909) is created on figure 1. Thus, it is possible to notice the concentration of religious buildings in the main state settlements, same as the lack of synagogues in the southern parts of the country. Buildings, that still exist today, are located in cities, colored with green on the Figure 1 map.



Figure 1. Territorial distribution of Bulgarian cities with functioning synagogues in the studied historical period (1850-1909).

2. Case studies research

The relatively small number of preserved synagogues in the selected period allows their further investigation in chronological order.

One of the first notable buildings of Jewish temple typology is the Great Synagogue in Pazardzhik, built in 1850 [4, p. 57-68]. (Today, the building is used as an art gallery.) It is an edifice with simple rectangular plan and single-storey volume, and its sloped roof planes do not outline the main, centrally located space of the

prayer hall. Near the entrance, a small covered gallery (arcade) is located.

This type of one-volume rectangular planning was a common practice for the built in the middle of the XIX century religious buildings, including churches and mosques (fortunately many of them are still preserved today). They usually had the same rectangular plan composition and similar sloped roofs covering the central prayer halls. In most of them, like in the case of Pazardzhik, entrance arcade and galleries were used - incorporated in the main silhouette.

The synagogue in Pazardzhik was created by Stavri Temelkov [5], a member of Bratsigovo building "clans" (these were groups of traveling builders, decorators and architects, famous at the time [6]). Builders of these clans built not only synagogues but also a lot of churches and mosques in other regions of Bulgaria.

The openings along the facades of the Pazardzhik synagogue are framed by rows



Figure 2. Case 1: Great Synagogue in Pazardzhik in exterior, gallery, entrance, ceiling, 2016.

of semicircular niches. The prayer hall has no dome and the ceiling fields are set on four central columns. The decoration of its space include geometrized carved ceiling panels. Various stylized floral motifs and ornaments cover niches borders and decorate beams, lintels and capitals. In the symmetric motifs above the arches are visible traces of some typical European XVIII centuries decoration - ie. "dessus de porte", widely used in the era of French Rococo. This decorative fashion spread all over Europe and even entered into Istanbul buildings (for example in some of the halls of the Topkapi Palace). However, in Bulgaria we have widespread evidences of it, mainly from the XIX century.

Our second case - the next, still existing, synagogue - was built during the years 1854-1860, in the town of Samokov (Figure 3). The local Jewish community and the regional bankers Arie funded its construction [7. p. 4019]. The building has a similar one storey-volume architecture (with no dome). It was created with the common rectangular plan design, which also included an embedded entrance gallery. Again, its silhouette is solved with a sloped roof. A marble piece with carved inscription on it, was placed above the door of the synagogue, saying: "This is the door of the Lord ... That's synagogue in which people will be blessed in the name of the Lord, and the city of Arie, Gabriel



Figure 3. Case 2. The Synagogue in Samokov, exterior and interior, 2016.

and Yehuda will flourish." [8]

Although the building is classified as a monument of Bulgarian culture heritage, its current situation is sad. There are still traces of its elegant architectural executions and decorations. The interior of the prayer hall is again created with four supporting columns supporting carved ceilings with geometric decoration. Their fields are connected with painted ornamental friezes. The appearance of capitals and the decoration of openings and niches are also similar to those already found in the Pazardzhik synagogue.

It is also possible to some find stylistic or element similarities with some religious buildings of other communities of the same period and region. A well known parallel example in this context is the Bayrakli Mosque in Samokov, reconstructed in the middle of the XIX century by local builders, and later on painted around 1845 by local painters.

The mosque is equipped with a prominent central dome. Still the entrance



Figure 4. The Bayrakli Mosque, Samokov, 2016.

area - the gallery - is designed with arcades and similar wooden ceilings. (Figure 4). From an architectural perspective, the links between the Mosque building and Pazardjik and Samokov synagogues can be found in:

- the geometry of their plans
- the scale of the buildings,



Figure 5. The Church "John the Baptist" in Bratsigovo, 2016

- the distribution of their structural elements
- the entrance spaces with arcade galleries.

There are also obvious similarities in architectural and plastic solutions, in the used materials, in the organic forms of structural and decorative elements in all the three explored in the text buildings. Compliance is also found in the nature and the locations of the decorations, in the chosen colors and their combinations.

Spaces, structures, plastic and mural interior decorations, used in these cases, of course could be stylistically compared even with some, built in the period, christian temples of Bulgaria, and especially with those created by Bratsigovo builders. A possible example is even the earlier church "John the Baptist" [9] erected in the very Bratsigovo in 1833. Despite its small scale and its clear orthodoxal plan scheme, we can see parallels within its overall design planning and spatial solutions, the selection of materials applied in its structures, and partly - in its mural decoration.

Such parallels (within the used architectural design, ornaments and style: the shapes of the openings and arches, the silhouettes of columns with capitals, the carved ornamentation of the ceilings, the chosen colors and the

color correspondence itself, and so on) are visible in the much more bigger and representative cases, like the church of "St. Peter and Paul" in Sopot (again done by Bratsigovo clans in 1846 [10]).

In 1872 Sephardic community built the synagogue "Grande" in the Danube town of Ruse (our third case). At the time of its creation its huge two-storey silhouette was a noticeable accent in between the surrounding blocks and neighbourhoods. Today the building exterior has completely lost its authenticity, and it is no longer property of the Jewish community.

Its interior decorative solution incorporated an ancient visual stereotype - the symbol of the Sun disk, mounted in the center of the dome. Similar solar creations and ornaments could be seen even in stone tombs from the Roman Palmyra region. (In the Balkans, the Sun motif, located centrally in main ceiling field, is widely distributed in the interior of the cult and residential architecture of the 18th and 19th century, but most often it had been executed with carved wood.)

Inside the Ruse synagogue, there were also plastic decoration approaches, that followed major European styles of the 18th and 19th centuries, as for example in the stone relief decoration of the ark. [4 p. 93-99]

Our fourth case is the Jewish temple preserved in the town of Dobrich (in

northeastern Bulgaria), which was built in 1887 [4. p.18-19]. Its exterior composition (Figure 6) and its modest scale and outlook is resemblant to some examples of Jewish religious buildings, located in present-day Romania - as the one in Orastie, from 1867 [11], or the Great synagogue in Viseu de Sus, Maramures, built in 1890 [12].

These similarities could be easily explained by the territorial, cultural, ethnic and religious parallels between the two neighboring countries of Romania and Bulgaria. In fact, even at the beginning of the XX century, the town of Dobrich itself was placed within the boundaries of Romania for about 30 years - the period between 1912-1940.

The Black Sea port city of Varna is located near Dobrich. In 1890 a Sephardic



Figure 6. Case 4. Dobrich synagogue, 2011 [13]

synagogue was built there [5. The Sephardic Synagogue in Varna], and it is the fifth case in our study. Under its current decaying image, we are still able to see its design originality and brightness. Its exquisite oriental plastic in the entrance area, same as the forms of its decorative friezes could be easily related with a much older iconic models: Islamic (eg, mausoleum Samanids in Bukhara), Romanesque, Gothic (such as Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris). At the same time, deep plastic designs of entrance spaces were used in Mediterranean representative buildings even from the distant past, reflecting on

the climate and cultural feature of the region.

The architect of the synagogue in Varna is not known for sure. But we can see how expertly he handled the artistic and architectural plastic register of cult buildings' elements (used in temples from the Antiquity to the later periods of European eclecticism). The elegant mix of old and new styles and decorations include prominent baroque cornices and "scenographic" façade sculpture. Today the building is in reconstruction [14].

Our sixth case is the synagogue in Plovdiv, which was built in 1892. The temple was created in a relatively small scale, and had a modest exterior, but at the same time it was equipped with a remarkable (well preserved) interior space, enriched with painted wooden surfaces and various ornamentations in murals. The simple building plan features a single storey volume of the prayer hall flanked by arcade windows, and there are four central supporting columns. But unlike the ceilings in the synagogues of Pazardzhik and Samokov, under the roof of Plovdiv synagogue, a small central dome is hidden.

The interior decoration of Plovdiv synagogue incorporated both common features from the Oriental heritage of the Balkan region, same as elements in close relations with the style of European Orientalism developed in second half of the XIX century. Thus, a parallel with the interior decoration of the Great Synagogue in Florence from 1882 is even possible, despite the substantial differences in the overall architectural design, and in the social, ethno-confessional and cultural context. The stylistic links between their ornament motifs and interior logic are obvious, even regardless of the applied type, quality and processing of the materials: in Plovdiv - there were

mainly mural ornaments and in Florence - embossed ornaments, mosaics and frescoes.

Two years later (1894) the Jews from northwestern Danube city of Vidin also completed the construction of their synagogue - our seventh case study. [15] Its appearance was radically different than the already discussed five synagogues.

A postcard from the end of 19th century reveals the authentic entrance



Figure 7. Vidin synagogue postcard.[16]

facade of Vidin Synagogue (Figure 7). Here the building design followed the model of a three-nave basilica church (as an architectural shape for synagogues and churches, basilica building models are widespread in Europe until the beginning of 20th century). Except the common brick walls, arches and vaults, bronzed columns of cast iron were used in the interior, following 19th century tendencies of incorporating metal structures. Its interior space was richly decorated with and polychrome ornaments, but now all of these are long gone (Figure 8).



Figure 8. Case 7. The synagogue in Vidin. Pictures: courtesy of Ventsislav Petrov, 2016

Probably in 1896, a synagogue was re-built in the town of Yambol (located in the southeastern part of the country). It repeated the already familiar pattern of one-storey volume building with centrally located four columns in the prayer hall. Today the building is completely renovated and functions as an art gallery, so the nature of its ceiling or coverage are probably changed. Only its facade walls and some elements of their decoration are preserved close to their originals. [4, p. 178-179]

In 1909 the construction of the central Sofia synagogue was completed. It was designed by the famous Austrian architect Friedrich Grünanger [17, p. 57], who had also been an author of a number of notable architectural examples in the capital city of Bulgaria.

Located in the old center of the town, within the narrow, densely built urban space, the synagogues captivates its observers with its compact size, harmonious proportions and magnificent decorations. It is now considered not only the most representative preserved religious building of the Jewish community in Bulgaria, but also one of the best examples of these buildings in Europe.

It is composed with a simple rectangular plan, still in bigger scale: there is a central prayer hall, flanked by blind apses, internal galleries on two levels and narthex. There are no free-standing columns. The building form is cubic and the main hall is covered with a huge dome (the diameter of the dome is 27, 50 m). Its prayer space and the adjacent galleries could gather about 1,200 people [4, p. 139] (Figure 9).

The Sofia synagogue fully features its own author's artistry and knowledge, as Grünanger was well acquainted with building traditions of Europe, same as with the popular then quests of architectural



Figure 9. Case 9. Sofia Synagogue, 2016.

historicism and eclecticism, incl. Neo - Byzantine style. Still Bulgarian researchers often define the artistic style of the Sofia synagogue (and of some other Grünanger's buildings), as secession influence, or even as the so-called style of "national-romanticism" (which was typical of regional architecture during the establishment of all "nation states" in the late XIX century). In our view, the synagogue design is an organic, highly successful mix of diverse stylistic trends, concepts and plastics, and therefore is again a subject of numerous analyzes and interpretations.

At the same time - in 1909 - a local synagogue was also consecrated in the South Black Sea port city of Burgas (our last tenth case study). The authorship of the project is attributed to the Italian professional Ricardo Toscani [4, p.10], who designed in parallel other buildings in this area. Its plan is a bit smaller and again rectangular; the building consists of a single volume prayer hall with narthex and higher galleries on two levels. The hall coverage is completed with a spherical central dome. Some elegant exterior decoration and parts of interior ornaments: mural fragments in the timpani and on arches' sides, carved ceilings and more are still preserved, although nowadays the building functions as an art gallery.

The heterogeneous - eclectic - design details in Burgas exterior decoration

(cornices, pilasters, arches) has a European origin. However, there are also some oriental features (for example, the horseshoe shaped facade arches) which again brings us to possible connections and prototypes associated with traditional - Indian (Islamic) architecture. On the other hand, its cupola interior space and scale reminds many earlier examples of Ottoman religious buildings, like the interiors of preserved today Cuma mosque in Plovdiv (1436) or Buyuk mosque in Sofia (1494), although their various planning schemes and impressive scale.

3. Conclusions

Regardless of the rather small number of currently preserved Jewish religious buildings in Bulgaria, built in the chosen period, we can still make some conclusions about their typological development and stylistic and plastic outlook. We believe, that the found synagogue designs reflect mostly on:

- archaic models of temple architecture applied in its simple, vernacular form;
- traces of representative Ottoman architecture and its evolution;
- influences of European architecture from the 18th and 19th century.

As a rule, in each particular synagogue those style-plastic tendencies are somehow merged. Some synagogues (eg in Pazardzhik and Samokov, cases 1 and 2) were executed with elements of the so-called National Revival style in Bulgaria - using a Balkan mixture of regional and vernacular architectural features. Traces of some western styles from the 17th century onwards, like Baroque, Rococo, Empire and others also penetrate the former Ottoman Empire lands, and are found in synagogues. (Like cases 3,4 and 7 - in Ruse, Vidin, Dobrich). However,

another (secondary in its development) oriental touch is also present in Jewish temples in Bulgaria (like the synagogues in Varna, Sofia and Burgas - cases 5, 9,10). Here, the Orient is in the form of links to the European Orientalism, as part of the development of Eclecticism (Historicism) styles of the 19th and early 20th century.

Thus, at least three “Orient” vectors in the architecture of synagogues were used in the chosen period:

- regional mix - (influenced by local and vernacular traditions);
- historical evolution - adapting to the development of the Ottoman Empire and the East;
- and European - following the western orientalism.

At the same time, the synagogues in the chosen period and region (though

less in number compared to churches and mosques) were truly comparable in their typologies and significance in the respective townscapes.

These observations and conclusions can be extended, enriched or even corrected if other monuments of the era are included, following the trends all over the Balkans (in Romania, Serbia, Macedonia, Greece and Turkey). It is also possible to explore the buildings of some regional mixes of the religious communities - like “The Dönme” people in Solun and their Yeni Camii (Figure 14). This will be however, a subject of a separate investigation.



Figure 10. Yeni Camii / New Mosque in Thessaloniki, 2016

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ВЫЯВЛЕНИЕ ВОСТОЧНЫХ ЧЕРТ В АРХИТЕКТУРЕ СИНАГОГ(И) В БОЛГАРИИ

Аннотация

Работа сосредоточена на синагогах на территории Болгарии, построенных в последние десятилетия XIX и в первые годы XX веков. (Болгария являлась частью Османской империи с конца XIV века до завершения русско-турецкой войны в 1878. Тем не менее, страна официально признана независимым в 1908 году) Священные еврейские архитектуры в Болгарии были более активно исследованы в конце XX и в начале XXI веков. Обычно исследования были проведены в трех направлениях: выводы новых данных; обновления старых записей; публикации о известных и сохранившихся памятниках. Поскольку существует лишь несколько попыток по типологическому, архитектурному или стилистическому анализу синагог в выбранный период, наша статья направлена на определение и «размещения» еврейских религиозных зданий как в местном, так и региональном (культурном) контексте Болгарии, и в более широких границах Османской империи. Статья исследует их внешний вид, архитектурные стили и характеристики, и их пространственные решения и декоративные профили. Таким образом, выявлено, что болгарский дизайн синагоги отражает в основном: общие архаические модели храмовой архитектуры, применяемой в его простой, общеупотребительной форме; следы репрезентативной османской архитектуры и ее эволюции; влияния европейской архитектуры XVIII и XIX веков. Результаты исследования в области истории искусства и архитектуры, а также открывают новые перспективы для исследований более разнообразного культурного наследия выбранного периода.

Ключевые слова: храмовая архитектура, синагоги, болгарская архитектура, Османская империя, искусство востока

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БОЛГАРИЯДАҒЫ СӘУЛЕТ ҒИБАДАТХАНАСЫНЫҢ ШЫҒЫСТЫҚ СИПАТЫН АНЫҚТАУ

Аңдатпа

Жұмыс XIX ғасырдың соңғы онжылдығы және XX ғасырдың алғашқы жылдарындағы Болгария территориясында салынған ғибадатханаларға бағытталған. (Болгария XIV ғасырдың соңынан бастап 1878 жылғы орыс-түрік соғысы аяқталғанға дейін Осман империясының бір бөлігі болды. Соған қарамастан, 1908 жылы ресми түрде тәуелсіз ел болып танылған). Болгарияда қасиетті еврей сәулеті XX ғ. соңы мен XXI ғ. басында белсенді зерттелген. Зерттеу үш бағытта: жаңа деректер қорытындысы; ескі жазбаларды жаңарту; танымал және сақталған ескерткіштерді жариялау; болып зерттелді. Аталмыш кезеңде ғибадатхананың тек бірнеше мүмкіндіктері болды: типологиялық, сәулет немесе стилистикалық. Мақала Болгария контекстіндегі жергілікті және аймақтық (мәдени) еврейлердің діни ғимараттарын «орналастыруға» анықтауға бағытталады. Сондай-ақ, олардың сыртқы көрінісін, сәулет стилі мен ерекшеліктерін және кеңістік шешімдері мен сәндік профильдерін зерттейді. Осылайша, болгар ғибадатханасының дизайны негізінен: ғибадатхана сәулетінің жалпы көнерген моделі; оның қарапайым түрінде қолданылуы, осман сәулеті және оның эволюция өкілінің ізімен; XVIII-XIX ғасырдағы еуропа сәулетінің әсер етуі; анықталады. Зерттеу нәтижесінде, сәулет пен өнер тарихы шеңберінде аталмыш кезеңнің әртүрлі мәдени мұрасын зерттеу үшін жаңа перспективалар қолға алынды.

Трек сөздер: шіркеу сәулеті, ғибадатхана, болгар сәулеті, Осман империясы, шығыс өнері

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