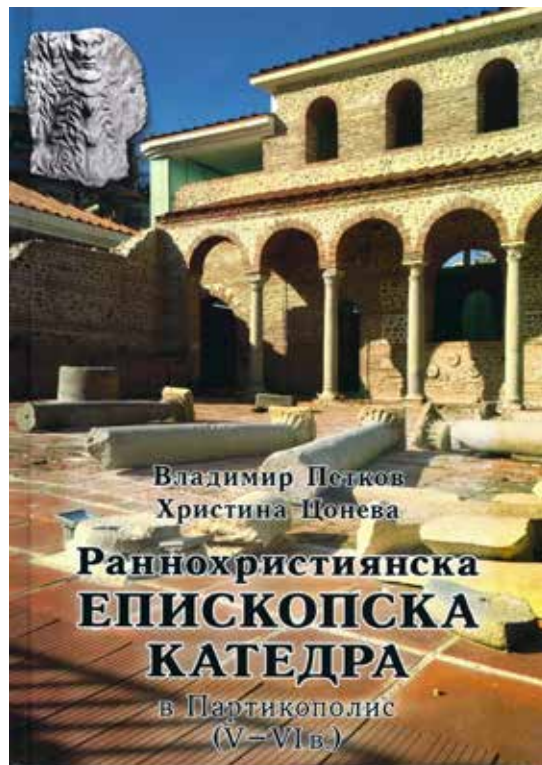


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ВЛАДИМИР ПЕТКОВ, ХРИСТИНА ЦОНЕВА, РАННОХРИСТИЯНСКАТА
ЕПИСКОПСКА КАТЕДРА В ПАРТИКОПОЛИС (V-VI В.), Фабер,
Сандански, 2025, 170 с.



The book by Vladimir Petkov and Hristina Tsoneva, entitled *Раннохристиянската епископска катедрa в Партикополис (V-VI в.) (The Early Christian Episcopal Cathedral in Partikopolis (5th–6th c.)), comprises 170 pages and may be regarded as the culmination of the thirty years of investigations carried out by Vladimir Petkov (up to 2022) on the episcopal residential complex located in the center of modern Sandanski. The volume consists of four chapters, the main three of which are further divided into multiple sections and subsections.*

The volume under review presents the results of three decades of archaeological research on the episcopal complex of Partikopolis, situated in the center of modern Sandanski. As the authors note, the book “may be regarded as the culmination of the thirty years of investigations carried out by Vladimir Petkov,” and it indeed offers the most extensive synthesis to date of the site’s architectural development, stratigraphy, and liturgical topography. The work is clearly structured into four chapters, the main three of which guide the reader through the historical context, excavation history, and architectural analysis of the complex.

The Introduction provides a concise historical overview of the episcopal see from the 4th to the 6th century, with references extending into the 10th century. The earliest attestation of the bishopric—Bishop Jonah in the synodal letter of the Council of Serdica (342–343)—is presented with appropriate caution. The discussion of the Christian community’s origins is deliberately restrained, avoiding speculative links to Pauline or Lucan missionary activity. Particularly valuable is the stratigraphic evidence from the southern nave and apse, which documents a Late Helladic IIIC necropolis and subsequent layers from the 7th–5th c. BC and 3rd–4th c. AD. These observations provide an important chronological and topographical framework for understanding the later Christian construction.

The analysis of the first construction phase (pp. 33–100) is among the strongest sections of the book. The authors reconstruct the basilica as a three-aisled structure without a narthex, with an inscribed apse and a shortened nave—likely dictated by spatial constraints. The detailed discussion of the colonnades, composed entirely of spolia (Attic Ionic bases, columns with profiled apothesis and apophysis, Romano-Corinthian capitals), is particularly noteworthy. The identification of locally produced Kempfer-type impost capitals decorated with crosses contributes to our understanding of regional workshop practices.

The treatment of the mosaic floors, which reveal two distinct phases, is careful and well documented. The expansion of the complex in the mid-5th century with a richly decorated narthex is convincingly argued, as is the interpretation of the atrium and semicircular peristyle as forming a monumental architectural ensemble comparable to that at Stobi. The baptistery, with its octagonal piscina and elaborate decoration, provides the clearest evidence for the phasing of the complex.

The discussion of the dating of the first construction period, however, remains somewhat inconsistent. While the authors oscillate between a late 4th-

and early 5th-century date, they simultaneously reject construction in the later 4th century. A more rigorous engagement with comparative material from the wider Balkan region would have strengthened this section.

The chapter devoted to the western sector (pp. 101–122) presents a detailed analysis of the rooms added during the second phase of the first construction period. The interpretation of Room 5 as a martyrium is cautiously advanced, supported by its rich decoration, niches, masonry bench, central altar table, and the presence of an ayazmo. Yet the authors themselves acknowledge that this remains a working hypothesis. The adjacent Room 6, with its chapel-like form and mosaic program, is convincingly interpreted as a liturgical space. Rooms 9 and 10 are plausibly identified as an antechamber to the baptistery and a diakonikon/prothesis respectively.

The final chapter (pp. 123–157) examines the second construction period, likely triggered by an early 6th-century earthquake. The authors document substantial repairs, including the construction of a synthronon, a new presbyterium, and the raising of floor levels. The creation of pastophoria at the eastern ends of the side aisles is well argued. The discussion of declining water supply and the construction of new fountains, including a thalassidion and a large courtyard fountain, is supported by clear archaeological evidence. The prefurnium decorated with coarse opus sectile is a particularly interesting feature, as is the new building south of the baptistery, richly adorned with wall paintings and inscribed marble panels.

The destruction of the complex by fire—probably during barbarian incursions toward Thessalonica in the late 6th or early 7th century—is presented with appropriate caution. The absence of evidence for violence suggests abandonment rather than forced destruction. The question of later habitation within the ruins remains open.

The volume's principal strengths lie in its meticulous architectural documentation, careful reconstruction of building phases, and integration of stratigraphic and decorative evidence. The authors succeed in presenting a vivid and materially grounded account of the site's development.

Nevertheless, certain interpretative aspects would benefit from greater methodological rigor. The identification of the martyrium, while plausible, rests on arguments that are not fully conclusive. The chronological framework of the first construction period remains insufficiently resolved, with competing datings presented without a definitive synthesis. A more sustained engagement with comparative material from the Balkans and the wider Eastern Mediterranean would have enhanced the interpretative depth.

Despite these reservations, the book constitutes the most comprehensive study of the episcopal complex at Partikopolis to date. It significantly enriches our understanding of the Christian topography of the region and provides a solid foundation for future research on Late Antique ecclesiastical architecture in the Balkans. The volume will be of considerable value to archaeologists, historians, art historians, and scholars of Early Christianity.

