



Mesembria (Middle Ages), Monuments

Περίληψη :

The surviving churches in Mesembria with their exuberant exterior decoration became a kind of emblem of the coastal town though the well-preserved sectors of the fortress wall and some other monuments deserve attention too. Yet the peculiar fusion of metropolitan and provincial influence on one hand, and local building and decorative approaches on the other, defines the most distinctive characteristic of the architectural appearance of Mesembria.

Χρονολόγηση

6th -17th c.

Γεωγραφικός εντοπισμός

West coast of the Black Sea to the south of Haemus

1. General

Nesebăr, previously known as [Mesembria](#), is located on the west coast of the Black Sea 14 km southwest of cape Emona and 27 km northeast of the city of [Burgas](#) in Bulgaria. The ancient part of the town is situated on an island 850 m long and 350 m wide and occupies an area of 25 ha. It is connected to the mainland by a narrow man-made isthmus 400 m long ([Fig. 1](#)).

The geographical location predestined to a great extent the role played by Mesembria in the ancient and medieval history of the West Black Sea coast. On the one side, the location of the ancient city on the sea route and parallel land road linking [Byzantium](#)/Constantinople with the Danube delta defined Mesembria as an important harbor and commercial center throughout the centuries.¹ On the other side, the advantages of the peninsula for natural defense improved by a circuit fortress wall turned the city into a cornerstone of the strategy of defense and control over the west coast of the Black Sea for any of the rivaling powers from the Late Roman period until the time of the Ottoman conquest.

Chronologically, the surviving medieval monuments in Mesembria belonged to three main periods: the Early Byzantine period (5th -6th c.), the 11th c., and the 13th -14th c. Not surprisingly, the majority of them are churches yet one may note other interesting and important elements of the material culture of the medieval city either.

2. The walls

The earliest walls of the settlement were built by the Thracians in the 8th c. B.C. Their remains supplied with a gate constructed of rubble fitted with mud have been attested along the northwestern coast of the peninsula. The fortification of [Mesembria](#), however, was not a primary concern for the Dorian Greeks who founded a colony there in 510 B.C. As late as the end of the 5th c. and until the 3rd c. B.C. they have attempted the construction of a new fortress wall. The surviving sectors in the western part of the ancient city reveal a construction of facing of regularly arranged large stone blocks closely fitted together and a core of rubble and earth. In fact, that wall defended Mesembria throughout the entire Roman period either.

In the course of the large scale construction program attempted by Anastasios I (r. 491-518) Mesembria was reinforced with [new walls](#) constructed in *opus mixtum*. In now days sectors of the Early Byzantine walls preserved to a height of 8 m can be seen along the southwestern coast and southeast of the peninsula 80 m far out at the sea. The main gate of the Early Byzantine fortress arranged against the isthmus is also one of the fortress' structures that survived in a relatively good condition ([Fig. 2](#)). It is arranged in accordance with the Roman tradition protected by two flanking rectangular towers symmetrically to which were arranged semicircular and circular towers ([Fig. 3](#)). They projected 11.80 m in front of the curtain which made them very effective in active defense. The towers were vaulted and poternas were cut in their lateral walls.²

The earliest reconstruction of the fortress is dated to the time of Justinian I (r. 527-565).³ Then, following the Avar attack in AD 587,



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repairs of the walls were attempted at the end of the 6th and beginning of the 7th c (Fig. 4).⁴ An inscription on three marble slabs found in Mesembria notes a restoration of the city “from its foundations” by [Basil I](#) (r. 867-886). Indeed, some of the repairs of the city walls accomplished with bricks are dated to the last quarter of the 9th c. and might be related to the rebuilding activity of Basil I between AD 879 and 886.⁵ The next repairs have been also recorded by an inscription referring to the emperor [Constantine X Doukas](#) (r. 1059-1067) and his wife Eudokia.⁶ The last reconstruction works on the fortresses walls are dated to the first half of the 14th c.⁷

3. The Early Byzantine baths

The **thermae** are situated in the lowest northern part of the peninsula to the northeast of the church of St John the Baptist. They consisted of an **apodyterium**, central hall and three heated rooms supplied with basins yet the entire arrangement of the baths cannot be completely restored since a part of them remained under the foundations of a modern building (Fig. 5). The walls were marble faced on the interior. The central hall was either domed, or covered by a groin vault as evident from the four columns placed there. Built in the 5th -6th c., the **thermae** in Mesembria survived a number of reconstructions. They have been destroyed after the capture of the city by the Bulgarian khan Krum in AD 812 and overbuilt by dwellings and domestic buildings. The latest structures attested there are two kilns for melting the marble decoration of the baths arranged in the corners of the central hall.⁸

4. The Early Byzantine churches⁹

All together three out of the ancient churches in Mesembria have been identified as monuments from the 5th -6th c. The most impressive in that group is the so-called “Old Metropolis” (or St Sophia) situated in the center of the ancient city. The church was preceded by a square **atrium** enclosed by **porticoes** and flanked by single rooms to the south and the north. The church itself (25.50 x 20. 20 m) is a **three-aisled basilica** with a tripartite **narthex** and a single-apsed sanctuary (Fig. 6). The **nave** was divided from the **aisles** by two rows of five massive masonry piers supporting double-storey brick **arcades** (Fig. 7). The basilica was most probably timber-roofed. A three-stepped **synthronon** was arranged inside the **apse**. The **apse**, semicircular on the inside and three-sided on the outside, was lit by three windows. The construction technique employed was that of alternating bands of bricks and rubble joined with mortar with powdered brick—a technique recognized as typical for [Constantinople](#), the western coast of Asia Minor, the Balkans and Italy.¹⁰ Furthermore, the square nave, the three-sided **apse** and the entrances opened in the eastern wall find their closest parallels in the basilica of [St John of Stoudios](#) in Constantinople (ca. 450). The dating of the “Old Metropolis” varies between the second half of the 5th and the second half of the 6th c. It is considered that by that time it was related to the bishop’s residence not attested yet. A second phase of reconstruction is dated to the beginning of the 9th c.¹¹

The “Eleousa” basilica is situated in the north part of the city at the coast itself. It is a longer than the “Old Metropolis” (28 x 18 m) and its sanctuary was supplied with **pastophoria** accommodated in triconches (Fig. 8). Two rows of four masonry piers divided the nave from the aisles. The north aisle, however, was carried away by the sea (Fig. 9). Five masonry tombs were accommodated in the **narthex** (Fig. 10). The building technique is similar to that of the “Old Metropolis” yet much sloppier. Fragments of frescoes and interior marble decoration have been found in the course of the excavations. On the basis of the elaborate three-apsed sanctuary and the deep **bema** the “Eleousa” basilica is dated to the 6th c.¹²

Another Early Byzantine basilica has been unearthed to the north of the main city gate. It is interesting to note that the basilica overbuilt the temple of Zeus. Similarly to the two basilicas above discussed, it was also a timber-roofed three-aisled basilica (32 x 20.5 m) yet the interior division might have been accomplished by means of columns (Fig. 11). On the basis of analogies with the layout of the “Old Metropolis” and the Constantinopolitan churches of the 5th c. St John of Studius and Virgin [Chalkoprateia](#) the construction of the basilica is dated to the late 5th c. In light of the archaeological evidence, the church was damaged in the time of the Avar attack on Mesembria in AD 587 but was reconstructed mostly likely only in the third quarter of the 7th c. In the course of that reconstruction it was reshaped into a **cross-domed church** the dome of which was supported by rectangular piers. The church functioned until the beginning of the 9th c. when it was destroyed after the capture of Mesembria by khan Krum. The ruins were occupied by a cemetery in the 10th -11th c., while in the 13th c. there appeared a small single-nave church.¹³



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5. The churches of the 11th c.

Two churches in Mesembria have been safely dated to the 11th c. One of them, St Stephen (the "New Metropolis"), is one of the most remarkable medieval churches in the coastal city. Its construction in the late 11th c. had been related to the act of promotion of Mesembria as a metropolitan see by that time. Indeed, its layout of a three-aisled basilica, rather untypical for the Middle Byzantine period, can be seen as a reference to the "Old Metropolis" and further, a demonstration of the continuity in the Christian architecture in the city. The "New Metropolis", however, was much smaller (12 x 9.50 m) than the Early Byzantine basilicas in Mesembria and the nave was separated from the aisles by means of rows of alternating columns and piers. The tripartite sanctuary was articulated in three semicircular apses. The builders employed the construction technique of alternating bands of rubble and bricks (Fig. 12). It is argued that initial patron of the church was the Mother of God. The strongest evidence is provided by the iconography of the earliest layers of the fresco decoration dated to the 13th c. Perhaps by that time the church was largely renovated and its façades were decorated with colored glaze ceramic *rossetes*. In the 16th c. the nave was elongated and the interior was redecorated with new frescoes as witnessed by the ktetor's inscription from AD 1559 placed above the main entrance. The wooden *iconostasis* decorated with fretwork dated also to that period. The last reconstruction of the church took place in the 18th c. when the narthex was added and furniture was complemented with an ambo and an episcopal throne richly decorated with woodcarving.¹⁴

The other church of the 11th c., St John the Baptist, is situated near the northern coast of the peninsula. It is a *cross-in-square* (14 x 10 m) on piers with barrel-vaulted aisles and three-apsed sanctuary (Fig. 13). The church lacks a narthex. The latter feature as well as the overall appearance of St John the Baptist find parallels in the provincial church architecture in Greece, such as Laconia (southern Peloponessus). The exterior, built of coursed rubble, was enlivened with single tall slender niches on the western, southern and northern façades. Rather unusual is the tall drum that covered the centre of the naos (Fig. 14). Layers from the 14th and the 17th c. have been recognized in the frescoes on the interior.¹⁵

6. The churches from the 13th -14th c.

The five churches representing the style of the Late Byzantine architecture comprised the largest and the most picturesque group of medieval monuments in Mesembria. Since no direct evidence for their patronage and date of construction is available, the only ground for their dating is provided by the arguments based on the construction technique and the style of exterior decoration.

One of the churches dated to the 13th c. is the church of St Theodore (11.00 x 5, 15 m) situated in the northeastern part of the town. It is a single-nave church, *barrel-vaulted*, with a single-apse sanctuary (Fig. 15). At a later stage it was enlarged to the south. The walls were built of alternating bands of brick and stone reinforced with wooden beams within the brick courses (*pseudo-opus mixtum cum ligno*). The lateral façades were enlivened by arched *niches*. Their *lunettes* were decorated with various brick patterns (checkerboard, zigzag, and herringbone). The western façade was also enlivened by three niches the middle of which was higher and accommodated the door (Fig. 16).¹⁶

There is one more single-nave church in Mesembria, St Paraskeva (14.70 x 6. 60 m) dated to the 13th c. yet it yields some differences in comparison to St Theodore. One of them is the enforcement of the *barrel vaulting* of the nave by two arches supported by two pairs of *pilasters* on the lateral walls. In addition, the sanctuary was not separated from the nave and thus, appeared larger in size. The apse was pentagonal on the exterior enlivened by slender niches. The *prothesis* and *diakonikon* were articulated only on the interior by means of small round niches in the eastern wall. The most remarkable peculiarities, however, appeared in the narthex. Its central bay was covered by a calotte surmounted by a belfry. Two round niches were shaped to the south and the north of the entrance to the nave (Fig. 17). The construction technique is similar to that of St Theodore yet the facade decoration is more elaborated. A double *arcade* of eight slender niches ran along the north and south facade, the apse was also flanked by two niches, while three were arranged on the western wall in the way employed in St Theodore church. The *lunettes* of the arches were also decorated with brick patterns and their tops outlined with ceramic plastic decoration (Fig. 18).¹⁷

The churches of Pantokrator (16 x 6. 90 m) (Fig. 19) and St John Aleitourgetos (18.50 x 10.25 m) (Fig. 20) are the best preserved medieval churches not only in Mesembria. Both are four-column churches of somewhat elongated shape. The surviving *dome* of the



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Pantokrator church was divided into sixteen segments and raised over a drum lit by eight windows. The narthex was surmounted by a belfry (Fig. 21). In contrast to the St Theodore and St Paraskeva, the Pantokrator and St John Aleitourgetos churches were built in opus mixtum (Fig. 22). The lateral facades of the Pantokrator were decorated with a sort of "aqueduct" system with overlapping decorative arcades of slender niches outlined by glazed rosettes and plates (Fig. 23). Ceramic plastic decoration and dentils were also employed in the decoration of the drum (Fig. 24). Yet St John Aleitourgetos had the richest exterior decoration—brick decorative patterning was employed in the heads and the spandrels of the slender niches, checkerboard, herringbone, and zigzag patterns appeared in the lunettes as well as two rows of coble table inspired by Romanesque models (Fig. 25). In the scholarly literature the dating of the Pantokrator and St John Aleitourgetos churches vary between the first half of the 13th c. and the beginning of the 14th c.¹⁸

The same unspecified dating is suggested also for the Holy Archangels church situated in the proximity of the northern coast of the peninsula. It represents the shortened variant of the cross-in-square type with a dome resting on two pairs of pilasters (Fig. 26). Similarly to St Theodore and St Paraskeva, the narthex was surmounted by a belfry. The walls were built in opus mixtum the decorative effect of which was emphasized by arcades of slender niches outlined by triple bands of ceramic plastic decoration and doubled by Lombard arcades above the cornice (Fig. 27).¹⁹

The group of the surviving late medieval churches in Mesembria can be completed with two single-nave churches from the 17th c., St Clement church and the Savior church (Sv. Spas) (Fig. 28). A ktetor's inscription at the southern entrance of the Savior church indicates that it was built and painted in AD1609 in the time of the metropolitan Kyprianos. On the order of the metropolitan the remains of the Byzantine princess Mataissa Kantakuzene who died in AD 1441 were moved there and thus, her tombstone can be seen in the sanctuary.

7. Stylistic characteristics of the religious architecture in Mesembria

The variety in the architectural types demonstrated by the surviving medieval churches in Mesembria cannot be seen as a local peculiarity but rather a reflection of the development of the perception of the liturgical space. Yet the execution of the architectural elements brings forth the specific appearance of the churches there. For instance, the employment of masonry piers in the interior division of the Early Byzantine basilicas in Mesembria perhaps may be considered a method linked to local workshop practices. As for the Late Byzantine period, one can distinguish two architectural elements which appeared in both single-nave and cross-in-square churches and thus, might be viewed as typical for the local architectural design in general—the belfry surmounting the narthex (St Theodore, St Paraskeva, St John Aleitourgetos and the Pantokrator church) and the two round niches flanking the entrance from the narthex to the naos (St Paraskeva, the Pantokrator church, and the Holy Archangels church).

The religious architecture in Mesembria is characterized by employment of brick and stone for massive walls yet in various construction techniques. While the opus mixtum cannot be considered a chronological indicator since it was employed both in the Early Byzantine basilicas and the Late Byzantine churches (the Pantokrator church, the Holy Archangels church, and St John Aleitourgetos), the pseudo-opus mixtum cum ligno appeared a construction technique typical for the medieval churches such as St Theodore and St Paraskeva. Moreover, the use of wooden beams in the brick courses there instead in the stone courses as usually done in the contemporary [Constantinopolitan buildings](#) seems to demonstrate the practice of a local workshop.²⁰ In the same time, however, the walls of the Mesembrian churches demonstrate the same integrity of construction one attests as typical for Constantinople.

Perhaps the most distinctive feature of the churches in Mesembria dated to the 13th -14th c. was the external articulation of the buildings the purpose of which was predominantly decorative rather than structural. Thus, the picturesque effect of the construction technique featuring alternating bands of brick and stone was lavishly enriched with arched niches and Lombard arcades that articulate the facades. The lunettes of the niches were decorated with multiple motifs such as checkerboard, zigzag, cross-stitch, "sun-bursts", herringbone, etc. Ceramic plastic decoration was preferred for friezes dividing the tiers of the facades and outlining the arched niches. All those decorative principles, however, cannot be viewed as particularly characteristic for the religious architecture in Mesembria. As has been already stated, the exterior decoration of the churches in Mesembria is closely related to the Palaeologan monuments in [Constantinople](#) and Thessalonica and moreover, a technical analysis supports the presence of Constantinopolitan masons and



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workshops in the coastal city.²¹ In fact, that peculiar combination of metropolitan and provincial architectural influence is the most illustrative manifestation of the historical faith of Mesembria granted with care and wealth throughout the ages by both the Byzantine emperors and the Bulgarian tsars.

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Γλωσσάριο :

	aisle
The part of the naos of a church set off by the internal rows of piers or columns, namely by the structures supporting the roof.	
	anta or pilaster, the
A shallow rectangular feature projecting from a wall, having a capital and a base and architecturally treated as a column.	
	apodyterion, -a
An undressing room, next to the entrance in a bathhouse, or a gymnasium, or a palaestra.	
	apse
An arched structure or a semi-circular end of a wall. In byzantine architecture it means the semicircular, usually barrel-vaulted, niche at the east end of a basilica. The side aisles of a basilica may also end in an apse, but it is always in the central apse where the altar is placed. It was separated from the main church by a barrier, the templon, or the iconostasis. Its ground plan on the external side could be semicircular, rectangular or polygonal.	
	arcade
An arch is the opening formed between two columns or pillars. The rows of two or even more such openings are called arcades.	
	atrium
1. Antiquity: The large, open space within a building, which is envelopped by colonnades. 2. Byzantium: The forecourt of a church in early Christian, Byzantine, and medieval architecture. It was usually surrounded by four porticoes (quadriporticus).	
	barrel-vault
vaulted, semi-cylindrical construction used often as roof.	
	barrel-vaulted church



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church domed by a simple semi-cylindrical barrel-vault.

bema

The area at east end of the naos in Byzantine churches, containing the altar, also referred to as the presbtery or hierateion (sanctuary). In these area take place the Holy Eucharist.

cornice

1. (Antiq. and Byz.) Member of the entablature or the architrave that projects in the elevation of a secular or religious building. As a horizontal member it may run along a wall. The cornice may also be the projecting part of the roof, protecting the building from rain.
2. (Byz. archit.) Decorative architectural element used to articulate the walls of a church, both on the inside and on the outside, by marking the division between the vertical wall and the spring of the vaults. It usually bears painted or sculptural decoration of vegetal or geometric motifs.

cross-domed basilica

Type of domed basilica. A church plan, whose core, enveloped on three sides by aisles and galleries with a transept, forms a cross. The core is surmounted by a dome in the centre.

cross-in-square church

Type of church in which four barrel-vaulted bays form a greek cross; the central square of their intersection is domed. The cross is inscribed into the square ground plan by means of four corner bays.

diakonikon

An auxiliary chamber of the church, also known in early years as *skeuophylakion*, which could be a separate building attached to the church. There were kept the sacred vessels but sometimes also the offerings of the faithful, the archive or library. In Byzantine churches the diakonikon becomes the sacristy to the south of the Bema, corresponding to the prothesis to the north, and forming along with them the triple sanctuary. It usually has an apse projecting to the east.

dome

A characteristic element of Byzantine architecture. The dome is a hemispherical vault on a circular wall (drum) usually pierced by windows. The domed church emerges in the Early Byzantine years and its various types gradually prevail, while they are expanded in the Balkans and in Russia.

drum of dome

Part of the church, semicircular or polygonal, on which rises an hemispheric dome

naos (nave)

The main part of the temple, between the *narthex* and the *bema*. It was the place where the congregation took part in the liturgy.

narthex

A portico or a rectangular entrance-hall, parallel with the west end of an early Christian basilica or church.

niche

Semi-circular recess on the surface of the wall.

opus mixtum (ουδ.)

Masonry consisting of small stones and abundant mortar, which often interchange with horizontal double rows of plinths.

pastophoria (parabemata)

Rooms or places that as a rule surrounded the apse, next to the Holy Bema, of the Paleochristian or Byzantine churches, namely the diakonikon and the prothesis.

portico

A porch or a structure consisting of a roof supported by columns or pillars, leading to the entrance of a building.

prothesis

In ecclesiastical architecture, the sacristy to the north of the sanctuary. Usually it has an apse projecting to the east. It is the chamber where the eucharistic elements were prepared (*Proskomide*) before the Communion.

rosette, the

An ornament with a generally circular combination of parts resembling a flower or plant.

synthronon

Rows of built benches, arranged in a semicircular tier like a theatre, in the apse of a church. On these benches the clergy sat during Divine Liturgy. The bishop sat on the cathedra at the top of the synthronon.


templon or iconostasis

A structure separating the sanctuary from the main church. At first, it simply divided the nave from the presbytery, but later it



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became higher, with small columns and an epistyle. From the 11th century onwards, icons were placed between the templon columns and, somewhat later, icons were also placed above the epistyle, thus forming the iconostasis. The templon were originally from marble. Wooden iconostases appeared from the 13th century.

 [thermae](#)

Building complexes dated in the Roman Period housing the public baths. Within the building there were three rooms, the frigidarium, the tepidarium and the caldarium and several other facilities rooms. The Roman bath-houses were also used as meeting places and they often included a palaestra and a gymnasium.

 [three-aisled basilica](#)

An oblong type of church internally divided into three aisles: the middle and the two side aisles. The middle aisle is often lighted by an elevated clerestory. In the Early Byzantine years this type of church had huge dimensions.

 [tympanum \(lunette\)](#)

(Rom., Byz.) The arched panel (lunette) inside an arch or an arcosolium.