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CROATIAN ART  
AND THE WEST:  
A VENERABLE  
WITNESS  
RECALLED



In 1978, I published an article in the *Cahiers archéologiques*, (27/1978) entitled “The Southeastern Border of Carolingian Architecture”. Following the line of research proposed in my doctoral dissertation at Cornell University in 1972, and developed in my books on Pre-Romanesque architecture in Croatia, published in London in 1987, and Zagreb in 1996, I discovered within the body of Croatian Pre-Romanesque and Early Romanesque architecture (9<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> century), a group of nine churches of fairly monumental proportions. They were linked with the Croatian royal court or the high dignitaries of the land, which, as I have demonstrated, clearly reveal elements of the contemporary Carolingian architecture of the West.<sup>1</sup>

The key feature of all those buildings is the appearance of a western tower, or massive – a westwork, a major contribution of the Carolingian architects to the evolution of the western facade of the standard basilican structure. Writing in 1963, Carol Heitz convincingly argued that the western massive, a *vollwestwerk* (including a tower and a gallery), were linked with the liturgy of the Savior (forming in fact a separate church dedicated to the Savior), and that the main liturgical events of the year, i.e., celebrations of Easter and Christmas were linked with the westwork. Terrestrial rulers, from the Emperor to lesser dignitaries, soon found their way into the symbolism, iconography and architecture of the westwork, and were given a seat on the second story of the western gallery overlooking the church nave. In addition to being a Savior's church, the westwork thus also became a *Kaiserkirche*.<sup>2</sup>

The Croatian royal foundations that have been mentioned are all in ruins or known through excavations. The only partially preserved monument of the group is the church of Sv. Spas (St. Savior's) at Cetina in the Dalmatian Highlands. For the sake of our argument, allow me to briefly recall this venerable witness from around the year 900.

Sv. Spas is an aisleless church, originally with a trefoil sanctuary, a concession to a local predilection for complex centralized forms. In front of the aisle, there is a two story gallery overlooking the nave, and a tall tapering tower. The walls are lined by heavy semicircular buttresses, a strong indication that the nave was vaulted. The gallery was accessible from the outside by means of a stairway landing in front of the second story of the tower. It communicated with the nave by three roundheaded openings, and the central one, taller than the rest, is enframed by pilaster-strips. Although the gallery is not visible from the outside, we are obviously dealing with a local version of a *vollwestwerk*.<sup>3</sup>

St. Savior's church was the central religious structure of the Cetina county. From the remains of a choir-screen inscription, we learn that it was founded by a *dupan* (Count, i.e., royal administrator of the county) named Gastica, who most likely had his seat in the gallery, wherefrom he observed the rites, or addressed the people. Around the church there is a huge cemetery of the county people, both noble and common.<sup>4</sup>

At a local level and in simplified local forms, Sv. Spas presents a complete program of a Carolingian westwork church – dedication to the Savior, a *vollwestwerk*, a place for a terrestrial ruler within the westwork setting. Together with the other monuments of the group, it is a witness of early Croatian society's highest strata's interest in the art of the West.<sup>5</sup> This is not surprising. In the ninth century, Croatian rulers were nominally subject to the Franks, and the Carolingian tradition was not discarded when full independence was gained around 870. The king, judging from the relief in the baptistery of Split, wore a Frankish costume and crown. The entire scene, with the count-swordbearer (the sword was obliterated at a later date) and a prostrated supplicant, was modeled upon the Carolingian and Ottonian ruler portraits, known from contemporary miniatures.<sup>6</sup> The spurs found at the ducal tomb of the Crkvina church in Biskupija were a local product resembling a Carolingian model.<sup>7</sup> The Croatian court was organized along Frankish lines, with the *Maior Domus*, Croatian *Ded* at its head; king's officers (*missi dominici*) who performed the king's commissions in the provinces.<sup>8</sup>

The “Royal Group” of early Croatian architecture represents the southeastern rim of western, Carolingian art. At a very early stage, as soon as Croats started building monumental structures in stone, around 800, it signaled the western orientation of the country's culture and art. Although one can find some interesting hybrids due to

the presence of eastern Christian, Byzantine influences in Croatia, this main, pro-western bias has never changed.<sup>9</sup> It remained the same throughout the Romanesque, Gothic, and Renaissance periods. Moreover, it was revived after the liberation of the occupied Croatian lands from the Turks in the Baroque, and it has continued until the present-day. The venerable old ruin of Sv. Spas at Cetina is a witness of that millennial development.

In the Early Middle Ages the rim lands of Europe – Croatia, Poland, Scandinavia, and the British Isles (also Hungary later), remained outside the European Union of Charlemagne and its successors. They did so on purpose, retaining their independence while acting as a bulwark of the West. However, they all embraced, in a local tongue, the forms of western culture.

The new Carolingian Empire centered in Brussels, has embarked upon the integration of those parts of Europe which failed to incorporate themselves into the old Charlemagne's Union. It is our hope that Croatia will not be left out for long. In a way, Croatia cannot *join* Europe. As its art and culture amply reveal, as witnessed in the example of Sv. Spas, it has been a part of it ever since the earliest attempts at European integration began twelve hundred years ago.

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Vladimir Gvozdanović, The South-Eastern Border of Carolingian Architecture, *Cahiers archéologiques* 27, 1978, pp. 85-100; Vladimir Goss, *Early Croatian Architecture*, London: Duckworth, 1987; and *Pre-Romanesque Architecture in Croatia*, Zagreb: Architectonica Croatica, 1996.

<sup>2</sup> Carol Heitz, *Les recherches sur les rapports entre l'architecture et la liturgie à l'époque carolingienne*, Paris, SEVPEN, 1963, p. 77ff, p. 92ff, pp. 102-106ff, p. 121ff.

<sup>3</sup> Vladimir P. Goss, *Pre-Romanesque Architecture in Croatia*, Zagreb: Architectonica Croatica, 1996, pp. 136-138. *Ibid.*, p. 136.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 127-152.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 128.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 127-128.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 128.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 118-122.