

Dafina GERASIMOVSKA

THE NYMPHAEA IN THE CONCEPT OF ROMAN PROFANE BUILDINGS IN STOBI

UDK: 904:725.948(497.713)“652”

Faculty of Philosophy – Skopje
dafina@fzf.ukim.edu.mk

Abstract: *As an integral part of the profane buildings in the Roman period there were fountains that in the ancient world have a religious, functional and decorative role. The best-explored ancient city of Stobi in the Republic of Macedonia gives us examples that best illustrate the meaning of water and fountains in the life of Roman citizens. In most of the profane buildings in this city, the fountains were an integral part of the spatial organization. Located in the representative spaces they were the focus of the visitor's field of view. These fountains were accompanied by a variety of decorative elements such as niches with mosaics and sculptures.*

Key words: nymphaeum, water, peristyle, fountains, profane, Antiquity

Water has always an important role in the human life. During the ancient period, for the entire population, the water had primarily utilitarian character. The main fountains in the cities, for public use in streets and squares, as well as the wells in the antique houses, were the main sources for all needs of the household with water. Besides this primary role of water in the ancient world, it was inevitably related to religion. The Nymphs, who could give eternal life, were most closely related to the water which gives life. The cult of the Nymphs is present in the whole ancient world.¹

In the Roman period, the architectonic buildings with pools, filled with water, had not only a ritual role, but much better a functional and decorative role. Such buildings could exist as independent buildings in the settlements, which associated with Nymphs, hence the name nymphaea, but also they are present as a part of the profane buildings in the cities and outside of them. The water was also used in the decoration of the favourite rooms, giving the masters and guests pleasure. As a part of the impluviums, fountains were the first places for location of decorative sculptures in the house atrium. Such fountains, with monumental facade, were populari-

¹ They lived in caves and on shaded places by the springs and rivers. They have a divine nature closely related to water and vegetation. The cult of the nymphs had a private character.

zed in the Augustus period and became a regular installation in all rich roman houses in the periods that followed.²

The presence of fountains is recorded in the conception of the most profane Roman buildings, explored on the territory of the Republic of Macedonia. They are present in the great part of buildings in the best-explored ancient settlement, the city of Stobi.

Fountains in the peristyles

In the peristyles of the most residences in Stobi there are lavish fountains. Most of them are on many levels, so the water ran from one basin to another, making the air fresh and pleasant in summer. In addition to flower arrangements, decorative and fertile trees, in the inner yard, the songs of birds and the bubbling of water from the nymphaea give the feeling of tranquillity and peace to all the senses and the soul of the masters and their guests.

At the bottom of the south-eastern part of the court, in the large peristyle of the **House of Parthenios**, there was a luxurious fountain - a nymphaeum.³ This elaborate nymphaeum has a large central basin flanked by two small basins of the left and right sides (fig.1, 2). The side basins have an apsidal front end. The water ran from one basin to another as small waterfalls, refreshing the surrounding area. The central basin, plated with white marble slabs, held eight semi-circular brick piers along its three sides, to support large spirally fluted bases, made of marble. All semi-circular piers that supported spirally fluted marble bases and raised them to the high of the top of the basin were made from bricks. On the top surface there is a canal extending from front to back. It is probably that on the top of some of the fluted bases stood slender pillars to hold the roof above the fountain. The found remains of the parapet slabs show the luxurious relief decoration of this nymphaeum. Between the positions of the fluted bases there are parapets made of white and grey/rose marble, decorated with stylized amphorae with palms and sacrificial vessels.⁴ The front of the central basin was decorated with parapets in the form of shells and palmettes. The backdrop of the nymphaeum is a wall with seven niches with polychrome glass mosaics.⁵ The niches were divided by small serpentine columns, placed on white marble bases, and crowned with ionic capitals. Above the niches there was a marble cornice embedded. The niches contained bronze and marble sculptures, from the collection of the owner of the house, brought from all regions of the

² M. George, 1998, 88-89.

³ F. P. Hemans, 1986, 87-89.

⁴ I. Mikulčić, 2003, 175.

⁵ Fragments of the mosaics were found in the past excavations of this building.

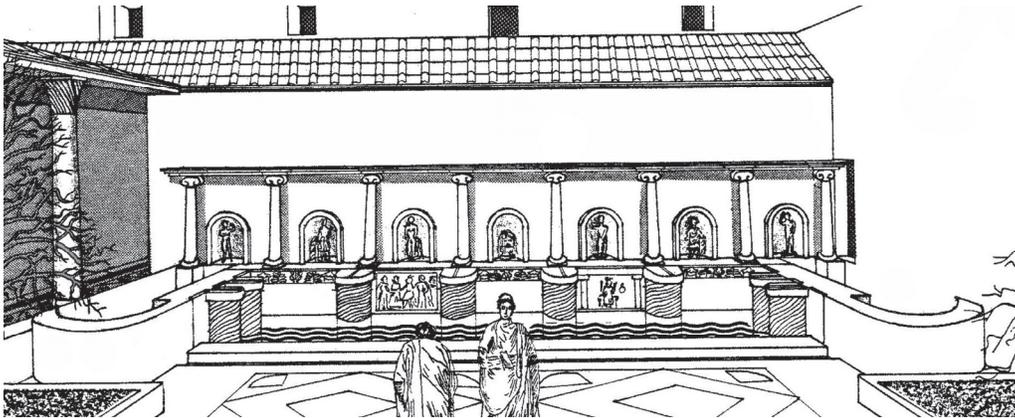


Fig.1. The House of Parthenius, the fountain in the large peristyle, reconstruction



Fig.2. The House of Parthenius, the fountain in the large peristyle

empire. The large collection of sculpture found in the peristyle court contains pieces dating from Hellenistic times through the late Antique period. Unfortunately, the exact location where any were installed cannot be determined. Long after the establishment of Christianity, we have a large and prominent display of pagan sculpture in the residence of a wealthy Stobean, an owner with cosmopolitan education, perhaps a district governor or magistrate.⁶ It is worth to mention bronze flute playing and dancing satyrs, the marble head of Serapis, the statues of Aphrodite (Venus) and Artemis (Diana).⁷

⁶ F. P. Неманс, 1986, 117.

⁷ В. Петковић, 1937, 12-32.

In the neighbouring smaller part of the same house⁸, as a counterpart of this fountain, there is a fountain in the north-western end of the small peristyle (fig. 3, 4). In many respects, this nymphaeum is an imitation of the big one.⁹ With smaller dimensions and a more modest decoration, this fountain refreshed the space around the small peristyle. Sunken basin and the decoration of the facade behind the nymphaeum with a cornice and vaulted niches are all smaller versions of the features found in the large peristyle. Running the length of the cornice, on the three sides of the central basin, there is a canal. The canal allowed water to run over the outside edge of the cornice in a cascade. Above the cornice there were mounted sandstone blocks with carved seven niches.

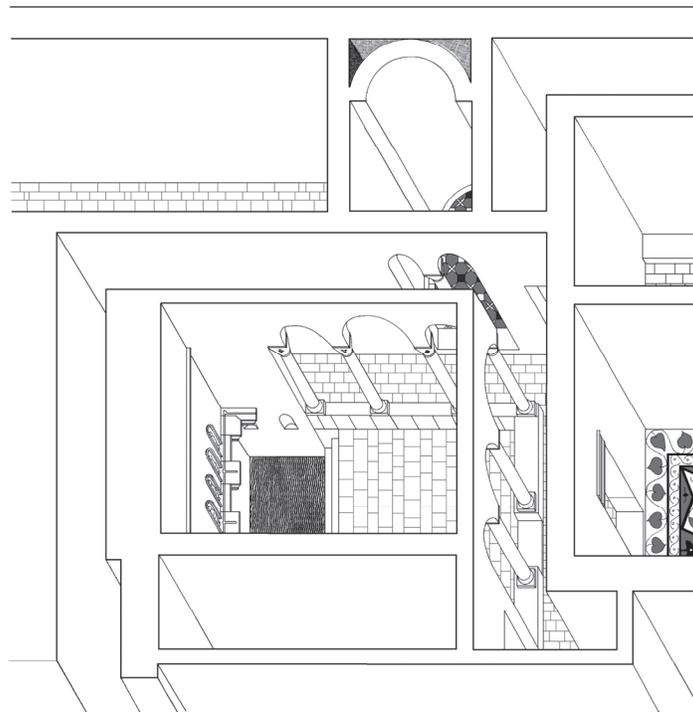


Fig.3. The House of Parthenius, the fountain in the small peristyle, reconstruction

The back of the basin is built of two separate walls. Behind the inner wall there is another wall lay holding the superstructure of the building. At the centre of the eastern side of the basin there is a platform apparently provided to allow taking water to the basin. The floor of the basin was covered with sandstone slabs.¹⁰ The mo-

⁸ Formerly, both residences were called the House of Parthenius, since 1970 the larger residence has been termed the Theodosian palace, while the smaller has retained the earlier name. This name is derived from a wheel stamp bearing the Greek inscription ΠΑΡΤΘΝΙΟΥ.

⁹ F. P. Hemans, 1986, 125-127.

¹⁰ Ibid, 127.

dest decoration of this fountain indicates an unrepresentative space, that is, the private premises of the master of the building.



Fig.4. The House of Parthenius, the fountain in the small peristyle

The north-western part of the court, in the peristyle of the **House of Peristeria**, is occupied by a longitudinal fountain - a nymphaeum. The basin was enclosed with a wall built of stone and mortar. Below the water level in the basin, several ceramic vessels were set into the holes of the wall.¹¹ The basin of the fountain was skirted around with canals on three sides, constructed out of fifteen large marble blocks, like balustrade (fig. 5). The central marble plate is a re-used funeral tombstone, used as a spoliium, decorated with relief of one family.¹² The upper back wall was probably decorated with niches. The water run through the canal between the back wall and the parapet slabs and flowed into the rectangular basin from pipes that protruded from the holes in the balustrade. The decorative details of this fountain can only be assumed, due to the scant information that we received from the old reports.



Fig.5. The House of Peristeria, the fountain in the peristyle

¹¹ I. Mikulčić, 2003, 179.

¹² Д. Герасимовска, 2009, 69.

At the bottom of the court, in the peristyle of the **House of Policharmos** there was a luxurious fountain. It occupied the western end of the peristyle (fig. 6, 7).



Fig.6. The House of Policharmos, the fountain in the peristyle

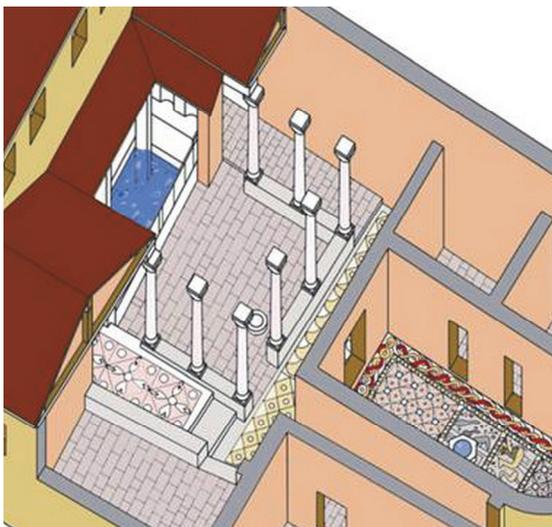


Fig.7. The House of Policharmos, the fountain in the peristyle, reconstruction

The basin was built of marble parapet slabs. Similar parapets enclose the canal that runs around the basin from three sides. The marble slabs were divided by small columns between them. The back wall was decorated with seven vaulted niches, probably with sculptures placed into them. Side walls were also decorated with niches. Statues used to stand in these niches. There is no information about the decoration in the niches and sculptures placed into them. Only one of these sculptures, a head of young women, was discovered in the basin during

the excavations in 1932 and a few fragments of other sculptures.¹³ Perhaps in the late Antique period, when this residence was adopted to serve ecclesiastical purposes, the decorative elements having pagan roots were removed. In the basin there were two double pillars carrying the eaves above the basin.

In the north-western part of the peristyle of the so-called **Casino** was a richly decorated fountain.¹⁴ The rectangular basin of the fountain was bordered by decorated parapet slabs (fig. 8). The back wall was made more attractive by five niches with mosaics and sculptural decoration. Part of the decoration of this fountain was the found stone slab with engraved gryphon.



Fig.8. The so-called Casino, the fountain in the peristyle

Fountains in the dining rooms

In the form of octagonal piscines, fountains are also found in the most dining rooms in the city of Stobi. This kind of fountains, from the eastern provinces, spread to the Balkan Peninsula. Thus we meet them at the same time in Apamea¹⁵ and

¹³ Unfortunately, the inadequate reconstruction of the fountain disturbs the perception of space in its entire brilliance.

¹⁴ The character of this building has different interpretations.

¹⁵ R. Burns, 1999, 50.

Antioch¹⁶ far to the east, as well as in Philippi,¹⁷ Philipopol,¹⁸ Mediana¹⁹ and Stobi²⁰ in the Balkan Peninsula.

In the apsidal dining rooms of several profanes buildings in Stobi, remains of octagonal fountains were found. The water burst through the pipes in them.

Octagonal fountains of this type would have be an inspiration for the builders during the construction of the baptistry in the early Christian basilicas.

Such octagonal fountains, with refreshing water in the form of a waterfall, are present in the dining rooms in the Houses of Polyharmos and Peristeria, as well as in the so-called Casino in Stobi. They refreshed the space and entered the beauty of nature in the most representative areas of the homes.

In the middle of the older, southern apsidal dining room of the **House of Peristerias**, there was an octagonal fountain, bordered by an overflow canal (fig. 9). It is embedded in the richly decorated mosaic floor. The mosaic is divided into eight planes framed with guilloches and representing different scenes with Christian motifs. The fountain was decorated with marble incrustation.



Fig.9. The House of Peristeria, the octagonal fountain in the dining room

¹⁶ R. Stillwell, 1961, 53, fig.12; K. Dunbabin, 2002, 164-165, fig. 169-170; S. Hales, 2003, 240, fig. 108.

¹⁷ G. Gounaris-G. Velenis, 1994, 418, fig. 5.

¹⁸ M. Vospachieva, 2003, 85, 92, fig.8.

¹⁹ Г. Јеремић, 2006, 146, fig. 3.

²⁰ Д. Герасимовска, 1997, 416-417, 419.

The next residence enriched with an octagonal fountain in the dining room is the **House of Poliharmos**. In the centre of the dining room there is a small octagonal fountain standing (fig.10). It was made from travertine and perfectly fitted in the concept of the mosaic floor with Christian elements. Floor decoration refers to the function of this building as a residence of Christians, close to the church.



Fig.10. The House of Policharmos, the octagonal fountain in the dining room

The third profane building with an octagonal fountain is the so-called **Casino**. A decorative octagonal fountain stood in the middle of the ceremonial apsidal room (fig.11). The room is located on the southeast of the peristyle of this building. The piscine of the fountain was plated with marble. It was surrounded with an overflow canal overlaid with bricks.²¹ The water from this fountain additionally beautified the room and refreshed the air. The floor of this room was decorated with mosaics. Only small fragments of this mosaic decoration are preserved.

The two types of fountains are present in three profane buildings in Stobi: the *House of Policharmos*, the *House of Peristerias* and the so-called *Casino*. The *House of Parthenius* stands out of them with the absence of an octagonal fountain in the apsidal *oecus*, oriented to the large peristyle. The richness of decorative elements in the

²¹ I. Mikulčić, 2003, 164.

fountain, located in this peristyle of the house distinguishes from the other fountains of this type in the city of Stobi. The last excavations show the possibility of an octagonal fountain located in the room with the raised podium; oriented towards the small peristyle in the *House of Parthenius* (fig.12). Probably in the last reconstruction of this smaller part of this residence, the owner was inspired from the neighbour fountains in the dining rooms and ad such a fountain in the mien room. The owners of the residences inevitably influenced the choice of decoration in the premises.



Fig.11. The so-called Casino, the octagonal fountain in the main room



Fig.12. The House of Parthenius, the octagonal fountain in the room with a podium
(photo M. Tutkovski)

In the peristyles of Roman houses, fountains became an almost regular element. They were richly decorated with niches, sculptures, glass mosaics, decorative reliefs and affluent water. In general, in the residences in Stobi, fountains occupy an entire end of the peristyles. The walls that bordered them enclose the space at the end of the peristyle. Roman architects were planning pleasant gardens with river like, large water basins, with vine pergolas near them, flowers and many trees and fountains of all kinds and shapes.

Water was in fact included whenever possible in the residences in Stobi, the most interesting of which are the large dining areas.

Romans always washed their feet before dinner. In the house of rich men such as the mentioned houses at Stobi, the slaves rendered that service to all their master's guests. It is highly possible that guests had to do it themselves; they had running water and other comforts at their disposal.²²

Most of these buildings were constructed in the latter half of the fourth century. In the latter part of the fifth century, the residences at Stobi were rebuilt. In that period the courtyard of the *House of Peristeria* was remodelled adding a nymphaeum.

Some individual residences were adopted to serve ecclesiastical purposes, while those rebuilt as houses of the well-to-do show a wider range of size and luxury. The triclinium considerably enhanced by the addition of mosaic pavements and fountains in the centre of the room.

It is obvious that the Romans managed to merge the utility with the decorative one in the residences in Stobi.

²² E. S. P. Riccotti, 1987, 173.

Дафина ГЕРАСИМОВСКА

НИМФАЈОНИТЕ ВО КОНЦЕПЦИЈАТА НА РИМСКИТЕ ПРОФАНИ ГРАДБИ ВО СТОБИ

Резиме

Во текот на целиот антички период, водата имала пред сè утилитарно значење. Покрај оваа примарна улога на водата, во античкиот свет таа е неизбежно поврзана и со религијата. Како составен дел од профаните градби во римскиот период многу често се појавуваат фонтаните. Во најголем дел од профаните градби во градот Стоби, фонтаните биле неизоставен дел од просторната организација.

Во перистилите на повеќето резиденции во Стоби се наоѓаат раскошни фонтани. Голем дел од нив се на повеќе нивоа, така што водата се прелевала од еден во друг базен, правејќи го воздухот во летните периоди свеж и пријатен. Вакви раскошни фонтани се присутни во *Куќиите на Парџениј*, *Полихарм*, *Перистиерија* и *и.н. Коцкарница*.

Во апсидалните трпезарии на неколку профани градби во Стоби се пронајдени остатоци од осумаголни фонтани - писцини. Низ цевките во нив, како водоскок избивала водата. Ваквите осумаголни писцини ќе бидат инспирација за градителите при изведбата на крстилниците во ранохристијанските базилики.

Вакви осумаголни писцини се сретнуваат во трпезариите во *Куќиите на Полихарм* и на *Перистиерија*, како и во *и.н. Коцкарница* во Стоби. Тие го освежувале просторот и ја внесувале убавината на природата не само во рамките на градските бедеми, туку и во најрепрезентативните простории во домот. Последните истражувања укажуваат на можноста дека во последната фаза на обновата на комплексот околу малиот перистил на *Куќата на Парџениј* била вметната октогонална фонтана и во просторијата со подиум ориентирана кон овој перистил.

Сопствениците на резиденциите неизбежно влијаеле врз изборот на декорацијата во просториите. Од овие причини, судејќи според богатството и раскошот на декоративни елементи во фонтаната сместена во големиот перистил на *Куќата на Парџениј*, оваа куќа отскокнува од другите во градот Стоби.

REFERENCES:

- BOSPACHIEVA M., "The Late Antiquity Building EIPHNH with Mosaics from Philippopolis (Plovdiv, Southern Bulgaria)", *Archaeologia Bulgarica* VII, No. 2, Sofia 2003, 96-102.
- BURNS R., *Monuments of Syria, An Historical Guide*, London - New York 1999.
- DUNBABIN K., *Mosaics of the Greek and Roman World*, Cambridge 2002.
- GEORGE M. "Elements of the peristyle in Campanian atria", *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 11, Ann Arbor 1998, 82-100.
- ГЕРАСИМОВСКА Д., „Доцноримски куќи во Стоби“, *Годишен зборник на Филозофскиот факултет* 24(50), Скопје 1997, 413-421.
- ГЕРАСИМОВСКА Д., *Улогата на живеалиштето во културата на живеење низ антиката во Р. Македонија*, Скопје 2009.
- GOUNARIS G. - VELENIS G., "The Excavation of the University of Thessaloniki at Philippi in 1991", *To Αρχαιολογικό Έργο στη Μακεδονία και Θραάκη* 5, Thessaloniki 1994.
- HALES SH., *The Roman House and Social Identity*, Cambridge 2003.
- HEMANS P.F., *Late antique residences at Stobi, Yugoslavia*, Boston University 1986.
- ЈЕРЕМИЋ Г., „Мозаици Медијане-нека разматрања“, *Ниш и Византија, зборник радова IV*, Ниш 2006, 145-158.
- MIKULČIĆ I., *Stobi an ancient city*, Skopje 2003.
- ПЕТКОВИЋ В., „Античке скулптуре из Стобија (из т.з. палате Партегиоса)“, *Стари нар XII*, Београд 1937, 12-32.
- RICCOTI P.S.E., "The Importance of Water in Roman Garden Triclinia", *Ancient Roman Villa Gardens*, Washington 1987, 135-184.
- STILLWELL R., "Houses of Antioch", *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* XV, Washington 1961, 45-57.