

Space Recycling in the History of Dalmatia (conservator point of view)

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In Dalmatia, there are numerous more or less known examples of re-use of the same space throughout history. This is a short story about a few of such places, although there are hundreds of examples of more or less famous places whose history would be difficult to tell even in a text much larger than this one. The function of space changes in a variety of ways - sometimes gradually and slowly, sometimes dramatically and “violently”.

The first example is related to the church of St. Thomas in Zadar. The first church was built in the 5th century AD and it was functioning until the time of the French administration (beginning of the 19th century). After that, some statues from the church were “displaced” throughout Dalmatia. Then it was turned into a female school, and a few decades later it became a shop. Today there is a branch office of a bank - in that former three-nave Early Christian basilica!

Another example points to religious tolerance in moments when we would not expect it. The story is about the church of St. Anthony in Drniš, whose central part is actually a 17th-century Turkish mosque. The mosque builder and its donor had a very good relationship with the local friars. After the war with the Turks and their departure from Drniš, those friars left the mosque unharmed and it became a church dedicated to St. Anthony – the most popular saint in Dalmatia!

The Middle Ages (14th and 15th century) of the Dalmatian interior are characterized by stećci - unique tombstones we find only in a part of south-eastern Europe (Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro). In the later centuries (17th and 18th century), stećci were often used as building material for different kinds of buildings, mostly churches. But near the source of the Cetina River, they were used to build a very simple bridge across that river.

The most important monuments of Dalmatian prehistory are the numerous preserved stone mounds or tumuli - prehistoric tombs. Even in later centuries, they were used as burial sites, but also as border marks or simply a source of building material. However, the example from the Biokovo mountain is somewhat different. There, the prehistoric tumuli were used in the First World War as locations for military trenches (they were dug inside the tumulus), from where the main road leading from Makarska littoral to the interior was overseen and defended.

Dalmatian islands are also full of examples of the use of a space and its changes throughout the history. Thus, for example, the site Starine on the island of Šolta passed several different stages of development: from the Early Roman villa, over the Late Roman house with a water cistern, to the fort from the Late Middle Ages.

Starigrad field on the island of Hvar is the largest plain on the Dalmatian islands. In the 4th century BC, the Greeks from the island of Paros founded the colony there and named it Faros (today Stari Grad). The field was evenly divided into regular plots of land, each one measuring 900 x 180 meters. This division of land has been preserved to this date and is probably the best-preserved one in the entire Mediterranean. Field divisions continued in later centuries with special emphasis on the Roman period and the Middle Ages, when the field fed the entire island. On the other hand, agricultural crops in the field also changed, as well as the agricultural technology. Unfortunately, later changes are poorly researched but certainly worth exploring.

The “recycling” of a given space is most closely associated with its stratification. Most multi-layer spaces and sites are those that are always most interesting to us. From the conservator point of view, irrespective of the profession (archaeology, history of art, ethnology) such spaces are always the most difficult and therefore the most interesting to research and interpret. The results of that work will ultimately give us new knowledge and experience, thus repaying all of our efforts.

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