

= Church of the Holy Mother of God , Asen 's Fortress =

The Church of the Holy Mother of God ( Bulgarian : ????? " ????? ????????? " , tsarkva " Sveta Bogoroditsa " ) is the popular name of a medieval Eastern Orthodox church located in Asen 's Fortress . It lies near Asenovgrad in the Rhodope Mountains of Plovdiv Province , south central Bulgaria . Constructed most likely in the 12th century , it features two stories , of which the upper story is the church proper and the lower story is of unclear function . The rectangular tower over the church 's narthex is regarded as the earliest preserved of its kind in the Balkans . Fragments of frescoes are visible on the walls of the church 's upper story .

= = Location and history = =

The Church of the Holy Mother of God lies on an elevation near the road from Plovdiv to Smolyan , 2 kilometres ( 1 @.@ 2 mi ) south of the town of Asenovgrad ( medieval Stenimachos ) . It forms part of a now mostly ruined castle known as Asen 's Fortress , of which the church is the best preserved building . The church is dated by most scholars to the 12th century ; however , some researchers place its construction in the 11th century and a few others in the 13th century .

Though the church is commonly known as the Church of the Holy Mother of God , this may well not have been its actual name . The dedication is alleged based on a partial Medieval Greek inscription in the church , which may have been a donor 's inscription . In the early 20th century , the part of the inscription that was still visible was deciphered as " ? ??????? ???? ????????? " , equivalent to " or the Mother of God of Petrich " . However , this was the name of the main church ( katholikon ) of the nearby Bachkovo Monastery , which makes it more likely that the inscription references the monastery and its relation to the church in Asen 's Fortress in some way , rather than providing the name of the church .

At the turn of the 20th century , the Church of the Holy Mother of God was the terminus of two rival religious processions organised by the ethnic Greek and Bulgarian communities of Asenovgrad . A Greek procession took place in 1899 and a comparable Bulgarian one was carried out several years later . These processions began after a man claimed to have seen lights and heard chants while passing near the then @-@ abandoned church . Both processions ended with a Divine Liturgy observed at night by the church .

After suffering damage during an earthquake in 1904 , the church was reconstructed by a team directed by architect Aleksandar Rashenov in 1936 . As of 2008 , it continues to function as a place of worship .

= = Architecture = =

The Church of the Holy Mother of God measures approximately 18 metres ( 59 ft ) in length , 7 metres ( 23 ft ) in width and 12 metres ( 39 ft ) in height ( over 15 metres ( 49 ft ) according to other data ) . The walls of the church were constructed out of interchanging bands of stones and three rows of brickwork tied together with mortar . An exception is the north wall , which was built almost exclusively of stones , with only a single band of bricks . The walls vary from 0 @.@ 85 to 1 @.@ 15 m ( 2 @.@ 8 to 3 @.@ 8 ft ) in thickness .

The church features two stories : while the upper story was certainly the church proper and the place of liturgy , the role of the lower story is unclear . Its construction may have been necessitated due to the unfavourable rocky terrain , or it may have served as a tomb or a storage facility . The latter is considered more likely because no human remains have been discovered inside , even though the lower stories of similar churches were commonly used as tombs .

The church has a single elongated nave . It is surmounted by a dome and finishes with a single apse in its eastern part . The dome is supported by arches to the north and south and vaults to the west and east . The apse is five @-@ sided on the outside and round on the inside . To the west of it is the sanctuary which features three vaults which hosted the bema , the prothesis and the diaconicon . The sanctuary was separated from the rest of the nave via two pillars . Three

buttresses support the south wall and the apse . The entrance to the church is on the south wall . The church has a total of 16 windows : three on the apse , one on the south wall , four on the north wall and one on the narthex .

To the west of the nave is a small narthex , which is topped by an unusual rectangular tower . The tower was used either as a bell tower or watchtower , or possibly both . It was accessible via wooden ladders on the inside and the outside . It features four wide vaulted windows in its upper part and a rectangular dome covered with roof tiles . According to art historian Robert G. Ousterhout , the tower of the Church of the Holy Mother of God is the earliest example of a belfry integrated into a church building and arranged above the narthex in Balkan architecture . This design would later establish itself as standard in the Balkans . The construction of an integrated tower has been attributed to either Western European or oriental ( Syriac or Armenian ) influences .

= = Decoration = =

The church 's exterior appearance has been described as " harmonic " , " graceful " and " proportionate " . The Church of the Holy Mother of God is richly decorated on the outside . Blind arches , a design element very typical for medieval Bulgarian architecture , feature prominently on the south facade and the dome . A large arch on the south wall ties together the lower and upper story . The apse is particularly richly decorated . Besides rows of elongated bricks , it also includes triangular shapes and lattice patterns above , both made of red bricks .

The church 's upper story features fragments of frescoes , mostly on the interior , though there are traces of mural painting on one of the blind arches as well . The interior includes images of the Baptism of Christ , Pilate 's Court , the Dormition of the Mother of God and the Crucifixion of Jesus . Among the portraits of saints that can be recognised are John the Baptist , the apostles Peter and Paul , Constantine and Helena and the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste . Military saints were depicted on the south wall , while the north wall mostly features monks . All of the preserved frescoes were done in the 14th century and are an example of Palaiologan art . All captions to the frescoes are in Medieval Greek .