

## The Bishop's Basilica of Philippopolis: A New Generation In-Situ Museum

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**Abstract:** The article presents the process of creating the newest in-situ museum in Bulgaria – the bishop's basilica in Plovdiv. The stages of the discovery of the object and the course of its socialization are traced in the context of some actual museological concepts. The new museum is compared with other similar models and the first steps of its activity are shown. The idea of introducing the term „hybrid museum“ was launched as a summary of the successful start of the new cultural topos in Plovdiv.

**Keywords:** In-Situ Museum; Plovdiv; Philippopolis; Basilica; Archaeology; Museology; Hybrid Museum.

## Епископската базилика в Пловдив: In-Situ музей от ново поколение

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**Резюме:** Статията представя процеса на създаване на най-новия музей в България – епископската базилика в Пловдив. Проследени са етапите на разкриване на обекта, както и процесите на неговата социализация в контекста на актуални музеоложки концепции. Новият музей е сравнен с други аналогични модели. Открити са първите стъпки в работата му. Успешният старт на новия културен топос в Пловдив ме провокира да лансирам термина „хибриден музей“ като обобщение на първоначалния успех на епископската базилика.

**Ключови думи:** in-situ музей; Пловдив; Филипопол; базилика; археология; музеология; хибриден музей.

The contemporary museum theory and practice give a special emphasis to in-situ museums. As a rule, these museums are situated in the original historical place of the original civilization. The context and environment of the historical site are maximally preserved with special care for the archaeological remains. The exposition incorporates the preserved parts by upgrading them with other artifacts and contemporary museum components – information boards, digital devices, copies, models, sound environment, etc. (Ivanov, 2018: pp. 292-315) In-situ museums are also connected with the protection of immovable cultural values, as well as with their popularization and socialization in the current cultural spaces. Their management is generally complicated, but the strong

integration of the ancient strata in today's urban environment is undoubtedly a significant advantage of mentioned historical landmarks (Fouseki, 2015).

The principle of in-situ exposition is typical for the ancient and medieval archeological areas in Bulgaria and in the Balkan Peninsula as a whole. It ensures maximum authenticity and optimal care for the original strata of previous epochs. In order to bring the artifacts closer to modern audiences, in recent decades, most authentic archeological sites have been combined with classical and/or more innovative expositions of movable cultural values. Protective structures rise above the vulnerable sites. They also house visitor centers, conference rooms, exhibitions, and information points. Such is the case with the Neolithic Dwellings Museum in the city of Stara Zagora (Bulgaria), which is built around two Neolithic houses dating back to the 6th millennium BC. It was created by classical in-situ methods in 1979 and presents both the homes of the population in our lands eight millennia ago, and over 1800 movable artifacts in a standard designed exhibition. (Kalchev ed., 2005) Influential in-situ museums have been established in nearby countries. For example, in Skopje, the archaeological site at Tumba, Madzari, also displays prehistoric cultures from 8,000 years ago by the method described above (Kanzurova, 2017).



**Figure 1. General appearance of the archeological site after the archeological excavations of the Episcopal basilica**

Plovdiv is the second largest city in Bulgaria after the capital Sofia – approximately 350,000 inhabitants. It is located in the Thracian lowlands on the remains of ancient civilizations. Beneath the modern city lie settlements from Prehistory, Antiquity, the Middle Ages, and Ottoman period. The city center is highly urbanized and therefore it is difficult to preserve the archaeological strata from previous eras. (Minev and Kratchanov, 2019) However, in April 2021 in the heart of the millennial city a new museum was inaugurated – the Episcopal basilica of Plovdiv.



Following the well-established model of the archeological museum complex in-situ, the municipality of Plovdiv carried out a systematic and conceptual socialization of the discovered in the 1980s, during routine archeological excavations, a bishop's basilica in the center of the today's city – heir to ancient Philippopolis. (Figure 1) From the year 2016 to the beginning of 2021, a team of museum experts, architects, builders, restorers, and designers implemented a project to build an in-situ museum on the ruins of the ancient basilica. Remains of the early medieval temple were incorporated into the cultural infrastructure of the contemporary city through a well-thought-out combination of ancient archeological layers with a modern museum building.

The new museum in-situ in Plovdiv was inaugurated on the day of cultural monuments, April 18, 2021. From that moment it is open to the public. During the Covid 19 restrictions it was not closed to visitors. Due to its wide space, nowadays the museum welcomes guests who have a "green" certificate in compliance with all anti-epidemic norms. As the newest museum in the 2019 European Capital of Culture the bishop's basilica of ancient Philippopolis is emblematic with the fact that it exhibits one of the largest early Christian buildings on the Balkan Peninsula. In the present-day city it is located near the central square and near to the St. Ludwig Catholic cathedral; thus, it embodies continuity of the Christian tradition in Europe<sup>1</sup>.



**Figure 2. Interior of the new museum with antique mosaics in the foreground**

<sup>1</sup> Official site of the museum – <https://www.plovdivmosaics.org/> (Viewed 29-11-2021)

The scope of this paper is to highlight the importance of Plovdiv as a center of Christian tradition in Europe. At the same time, sharing the experience of creating such a composite object is my essential scientific and educational motive. The important thing is that the municipality and the executors of the project succeeded to create an innovative cultural space, which essentially is a complex of socialized an archeological site, a classical museum exposition and innovative virtual information points. The specific location of the Christian building and its contemporary replica in the heart of the city is of great importance for the accessibility and attractiveness of the museum. The principle of objectivity requires to share some problem aspects. For example, the integration of mentioned historical topos with the now-existed architecture of the living urban community provoked public debate before and in the course of socialization. The final result turned out to be acceptable for most critics of the project. Thus, the basilica is now an innate part of the modern Plovdiv center.



**Figure 3. Exterior of the Bishop's Basilica**

The historical context of the site takes us to the late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages – 4th – 6th century AD. At that time Philippopolis was an important urban settlement in Thrace and in the Eastern Roman Empire as a whole. (Mitchell, 2018) A numerous Christian community has lived in the city. For this reason, an episcopal center was established here at the beginning of the 4th century. The monumental basilica was erected in the center of Philippopolis in order to demonstrate the dignity of the Christian religion. The building was immense – 36 meters wide and 90 meters long. Its architecture was remarkable. It consisted of a central and two side naves, an apse, a narthex, and an atrium with columns. Columns were decorated with Christian symbols. The covered area of the basilica was about 1000 sq. m. The most intriguing part of this protocathedral were the floor mosaics. (Kantareva-Decheva et al., 2020) They were created in two layers on top of each other – almost 2000 square meters. In the 6th century the building was



destroyed by the barbarian invasions. In the Middle Ages there was a Christian cemetery with a small cemetery church above the ruined basilica. (Tankova and Draganova, 2020) During the period between early 18th and late 20th century, mentioned place is the center of the city, filled with residential and commercial buildings. During routine excavations in the 1980s, the episcopal basilica was partially discovered, and at the beginning of the 21st century it is revealed completely. In the course of recent uncovering some significant fragments of the building were found and spacious parts of two mosaics layers were discovered. The decision for socialization of the emblematic historical topos is a result of the respectful aesthetics of mosaics – unique in size and picturesqueness. (Figure 2) Here is also important the ambition to present the great role of the early Christian culture in the region of the old episcopal center Plovdiv.

The main challenge in the process of the today's in-situ museum establishing are two mosaic layers, situated one above the other and preserved relatively well. This is a big provocation for specialists – architects, museologists, restorers. A part of the solution of the difficult task is based on the classical museum and archaeological methods. Fragments of mosaics from the upper layer have been removed and exposed in-situ near their main location. The other part is represented by digital technologies. Through technical devices and virtual reality, the modern exposition reconstructs each particular architectural stage of the basilica. On the boards – physical and electronic, additional textual and visual information on movable cultural property is given through captivating and understandable forms. The opus tessellatum technique, by which the mosaics were created, is explained via a special film. The chosen complex approach for the construction of the exposition corresponds to a number of avant-garde museological concepts (Dean, 2002).

The roof of the building and the outer structure are made of modern materials and with innovative technologies, but the architectural body of the premises imitates a medieval basilica. (Figure 3) Most of the preserved components from the different periods of the archeological site displayed in the attractive in-situ exposition. The restoration of the mosaics was carried out professionally, revealing all the brilliance of the unique floor covering. A combination of digital and in-situ methods is also applied in the explanation of the rich mosaic ornamentation – geometrical figures, and dozens of birds, symbolizing the Garden of Eden, to which every orthodox Christian is inspired. For both the public and the experts, the new museum in Plovdiv is a beautiful expression of the renewed approach to the cultural heritage in the city – a product of regenerated heritage policies, appeared in the creative atmosphere of the project 2019 European Capital of Culture Plovdiv (Tasheva, 2021).

As the first museological review of the new in-situ museum in Plovdiv, this short letter reveals my conviction that the combination of classical and innovative approaches in the socialization of archaeological sites can be effective. A precise balancing is needed between preserving the authentic remains, exposure of context-related artifacts, and incorporation of digital components in such a complex site. These principles have been observed in the creation of the new in situ museum in Plovdiv. The result gives me reason

to think that hybrid museum structures have a strong future in the European cultural space.


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