

THE DESTRUCTION OF ARMENIAN CHURCHES IN 1551 IN MOLDAVIA DOCUMENTED BY THE FINDS OF 2000-2001 ARCHAEOLOGICAL CAMPAIGN IN THE DORMITION CHURCH (ARMENIAN) IN BOTOSANI

BY

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Abstract

The 1551 religious persecution of Armenians in Moldavia is sufficiently documented by written sources, although the archaeological evidence for the alleged destructions is lacking, in spite of a number of excavations carried out inside and around the extant Armenian churches in Moldavia. The campaign of 2000-2001 inside the Dormition of the Virgin Armenian church in Botoșani provided to some extent the archaeological proof for the fact, in form of construction, burnt, demolition and reconstruction stratigraphic units, as well as small finds pertaining to these processes, all associated with a pre-1551 building superimposed by the foundations of the present church.

Keywords: *Early Modern religious persecution, prince Ștefan Rareș, Botoșani, Armenian diaspora, urban archaeology, murals.*

The most notorious case of religious persecution in the pre-modern Principality of Moldavia is the 1551 one against the Armenians¹. The perpetrator was none other than the ruling prince of the time, Ștefan Rareș, the son of Prince Petru Rareș and grandson of prince Ștefan the Great. As for his motivation, the Moldavian Chronicle of Grigore Ureche (who was writing more than half-century later) indicates his desire to erase the shame of his brother's apostasy (Iliș Rareș ended his reign by abdication and conversion to Islam in 1551). In the Ureche's own words:

“And to not give any reason to the belief that (he) is stepping away from Orthodoxy, all the heretics within his country (he) wants to either turn, to be of the same Faith, or to leave the country. The Armenians, some by goodwill, filling them with promises, others by force he baptized, and turned them to Orthodoxy, and many others left the country out for the Turks, the Poles and other countries, wanting to preserve their own faith.”²

The Slavonic Annals of bishop Macarie (who was contemporary with the events and praiseful to prince Ștefan Rareș) recount as follows:

„In such way, fulfilling the will of God, (he) demolished the altars and closed down the churches in which the dark Armenians brought (their) empty offerings, and (he) put an end to the shameful uncleanness and filthy offerings and all (their) impurity, and themselves were brought (by him) to the God of wisdom and into the light of the true baptism, some by their goodwill and some by force”³.

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¹ The Armenian Apostolic, or Gregorian, Church, one of the Ancient Oriental Christian Churches, was regarded by many Greek Christians as verging on Monophysitism and, as such, heterodox at best, if not straightaway heretical. Only on 15 of May 1891 the Romanian Orthodox Church admitted formally that the accusations of Monophysitism brought against the Armenians by Euthymios Zigabenos in his *Panoplia Dogmatica* (12th century) were “inventions fuelled by hatred” (MO 1891: 2939).

² Ureche: 205.

³ *Cronicle Slavo-române*: 206

As of the violent outcomes of this anti-Armenian persecution, the main source is the Lament of Minas of Tokat, an Armenian deacon who was supposedly in Suceava at that time and witnessed the events. His *Lament of the Armenians in the Country of the Walachians* is a poem of 110 stanzas and makes heavy use of rhetorical and poetical devices. However, Minas was a longtime secretary of the Armenian Archbishop of Lemberg (present-day Lviv, in Ukraine) and a clerk of the Armenian Court, so one cannot dismiss the historical reality under all the poetical language.

“And the Prince issued forth another order, / The cannons to be brought out, / And the churches in the town of Suceava / With these (cannons) to be destroyed. / ... The churches and the monasteries / Of the Armenians in the town of Suceava, / All were burned, demolished, / Down to the foundations.”⁴

“And he issued forth another order, / In all the towns he sent bailiffs, / Of the notables of the Armenians all were caught / And their churches were sealed, / They called in the priests and the aldermen / And they were baptized by force, / they were taken from the faith of the Illuminator / And with strength ordered / That all Armenians shall be baptized, / Women and girls together, / That shall be no more Armenians in my country, / All shall be of Greek faith. / The Armenian churches of Hotin and Siret / And of the town of Iași, / Of Vaslui, Botoșani and Roman, / All to their foundations shall be demolished, / This strong order he then issued / And the churches they destroyed, / And all the holy vessels they found were taken, / and the books of the Armenians they burned with fire”⁵.

The *Lament* is, however, corroborated by the text of the oath taken in 1553 by prince Alexandru Lăpușneanu to renew and observe the peace treaty of 1538 between Moldavia and the Kingdom of Poland:

“Moreover, we shall permit the German and Armenian churches to be rebuilt in our country, which were destroyed by Ștefăniță the evil prince.”⁶

Consequently, the *Lament* of deacon Minas should insert a discontinuity in the middle of the 16th century in the building history of the old Armenian churches in Moldavia, if the said sources should be taken at face value. Up to the present, the archaeological and documentary data do not confirm the information of the *Lament*. The purported destruction in the 16th century of the Armenian monastery of Zamca (near Suceava) and its subsequent rebuilding in 1551 are unsupported, given that the death in 1551 of Agopșa son of Amiras, one of the founders of the monastery, is the result of an incorrect reading of the date in the inscription on his tombstone (1061 ArE / 1612 AD.) and the foundation of St. Oxent monastery of Zamca is dated in 1606 by Armenian sources⁷.

So far, as indicated by the available literature, only the archaeological finds of Botoșani provide evidence for the 1551 destruction of the Armenian churches in Moldavia.

The Armenian church in Botoșani, which is included by deacon Minas among the ones destroyed by Ștefan Rareș, might be the Dormition of the Virgin, which, according to the foundation inscription⁸ placed after the reconstruction of 1826, was built around 1525, i.e. during the last years of Ștefan IV the Younger's reign or in the first years of Petru Rareș'. The same church is regarded as the oldest Armenian church and, as it were, the oldest stone church in Moldavia. Its foundation date is pushed as early as 1350, although, lacking any documentary basis, even the father of the Armenian historical studies in Romania, Hagop Djololian Siruni, does not believe it to be sustainable⁹. Nota bene, the historical mentions referring to the Armenian community in Botoșani (as is the case with the notorious privilege issued in 1407 by Prince Alexandru cel Bun for the Armenians of Lemberg, or

⁴ BUIUCLIU 1895: 34-35

⁵ BUIUCLIU 1895: 39.

⁶ CORFUS 1979: 175.

⁷ SIRUNI 1943: 518-519.

⁸ „The church of the Holy Virgin, which was built some 300 years ago, now, by the all-mightiness God, is renewed, preserving <though> the ancient walls and adding the tower and the belfry, with funding from the parishioners of Botoșani, and with the great endeavor of honorable Ștefan Goilav, on 1826 June 21” (IORGA 1905: 24)

⁹ “The church of the Holy Virgin was built around 480 years ago” (Minas Pșijghiant, 1830). „... les plus anciennes sont celles de Botochany bâtie en 1350 et celle de Iassy qui date de 1395” (Nicolae Șuțu, 1849) (SIRUNI 1943: 491).

the controversial letter of 1418 by which the same Prince calls for Armenians to immigrate to the towns of his country¹⁰) should not be taken for granted as proof-of-date for the church of Dormition.

The inscriptions of 1826 are quite relevant regarding the amount of reconstruction done and the parts of the old church in preserved and reused. The pre-1826 church dates most probably from before 1669, when the Italian Jesuit Luigi Maria Pidou, traveling through Moldavia, passes through Botoșani and sees the Armenian church¹¹.

The shape of the Dormition church in its present state does not leave any doubt about its 19th century construction. A summary investigation of the uncovered masonry revealed that the arches separating the interior of the church in canonical partitions, as well as their supporting pilasters, are built in different phase than the walls they abut to. This fact is proven by the total lack of interleave between pilasters and walls, as well as by the clearly different manner of construction of the two structures. The masonry of the walls consists of quarry stone (various types of limestone) bound with a grey lime mortar with high sand content that includes crushed brick. The arches and pilasters are built exclusively of bricks bound with white lime mortar. The walls of the southern chapel show the same (modern) brickwork, as well as all the window and door frames, which situation indicates that the arches, pilasters, vaults, turret and window and door frames of the main body of the church, as well as at least the southern chapel (if not the northern also) and the exonarthex and its bell-tower, were constructed (or re-constructed) in 1826, as the inscriptions affixed to the eastern faces of the naos-pronaos pilasters and the doorframe of the southern chapel attest.

The archaeological research inside the Dormition church started in November 2001 ended in January 2002, by a team (the author of this paper and Eduard Setnic) led by Voica-Maria Pușcașu, with the crucial support of the Armenian Community of Botoșani¹².

The excavations were carried out in the Pronaos and the Naos, in two trenches with the total surface of 27.6 m², with another small sounding executed in the NE corner of the southern chapel.

In the naos, the research was carried out in the SE corner, by excavating a rectangle of 5.2 by 3.8 meters, in order to investigate the relation between the southern chapel and the main body and to obtain an axial stratigraphy and a cross-sectional one as close to the sanctuary as possible. The horizontal reference was taken on the face of the altar base. The modern cement floor was laid over a layer of compacted gravel, superimposing a leveled thick layer of rubble (sandy daub and small pieces of lime rendering), which carried the imprints of beams from a former plank flooring. Within this leveled rubble layer, the excavation uncovered (-0.25 m) a feature consisting in the remains of a stone-and-brick base for a heating installation (post-1826). The construction layer of 1826 was uncovered at -0.4 m, as a band of compacted mortar starting from the southern wall and thinning progressively away. The shoulder of the ante-1826 foundation was uncovered at -0.6 m, with a variable width averaging on 30 cm. This foundation was seated on a top of a body of masonry significantly different in structure and appearance, at -0.8 m. The cleaning of this body of masonry revealed that this was a foundation, preserving scarce remains of the wall it supported. This wall was systematically dismantled and the construction material extracted, digging below the contemporary treading level and destroying the shoulder of the foundation in the process. The face of solid foundation was covered by a 10 cm thick layer of stone and mortar debris, which cleaning produced a large number of wall-rendering fragments bearing traces of fresco painting. The demolition layer linked to this feature is thick and covers a large surface. It is based on a layer of burned soil of variable thickness, with lentils of charcoal. It thickens towards the axis of the church, unlike a construction layer, which is thicker at its wall end. This demolition layer is separated from the construction layer of the pre-1826 church by a layer of gray artificial soil containing fragments of lime mortar, brick and stone. The excavation uncovered 11 graves (4 of these were reburials), all of which without any grave goods.

The excavation in pronaos was carried out in the SE corner of this room, on a 2 by 3.8 m rectangle. Here, as well, the foundation structure of the existing wall was laid on top of the demolished feature. Due to the

¹⁰ SIRUNI 1944: 26

¹¹ SIRUNI 1943: 492.

¹² HRIBAN 2003: 19-26

misalignment of the two, the older foundation is here overstepped by the newer one. All the stratigraphic features appeared in this excavation as well.

The layer of destruction by fire, overlaid immediately by the demolition layer, could be very well linked to the events of 1551. This might be the first archaeological proof that the persecution of Armenians by Ștefan Rareș was, in fact, violent and destructive. The demolition layer in the church of Dormition is thick and follows the hollowed-out top of the uncovered ancient foundation. The succession of events indicated by the stratigraphy is: fire then demolition followed by the extraction of the stones down to and into the foundation. This first church was not only put to fire, and it did not lay in ruins afterward¹³, but it was torn down as soon as the fire was extinguished and used as an ad-hoc quarry for construction materials. Two orthodox churches were then raised in Botosani under princely patronage: St. George, in 1551, and the Dormition of the Holy Virgin (Uspenia), in 1552, by Princess Dowager Elena Rareș. The readily available construction materials might explain the speed with which these two churches were raised.

As for the date of the date of foundation of the Armenian church of Dormition, as well as the date of construction of the church seen by Luigi Maria Pidou in 1669, these are issues that have no bearing on the problem of the archaeological evidence for the destruction of Armenian churches in Moldavia during the 1551 persecution by Ștefan Rareș, and these might be approached in a future paper.

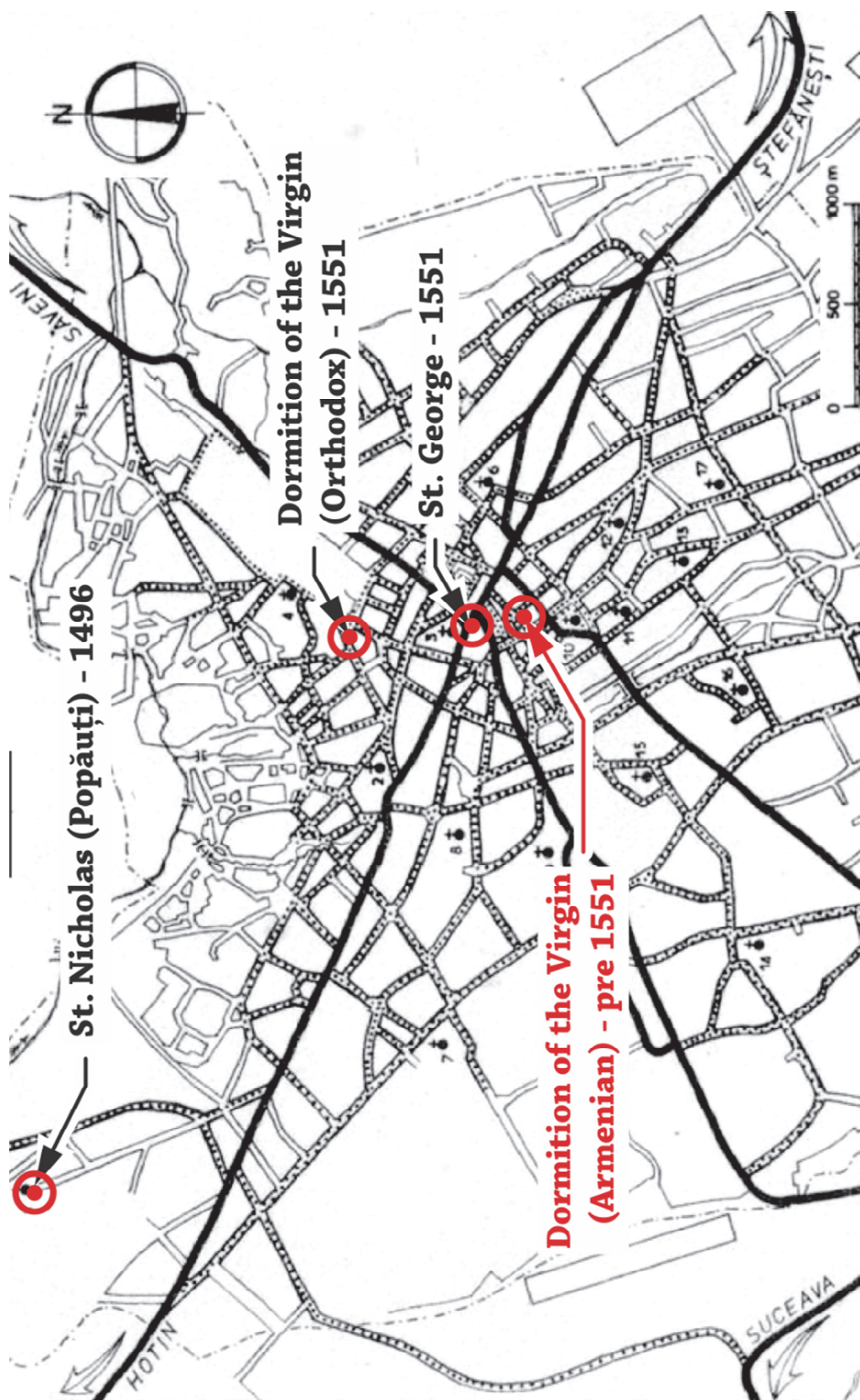
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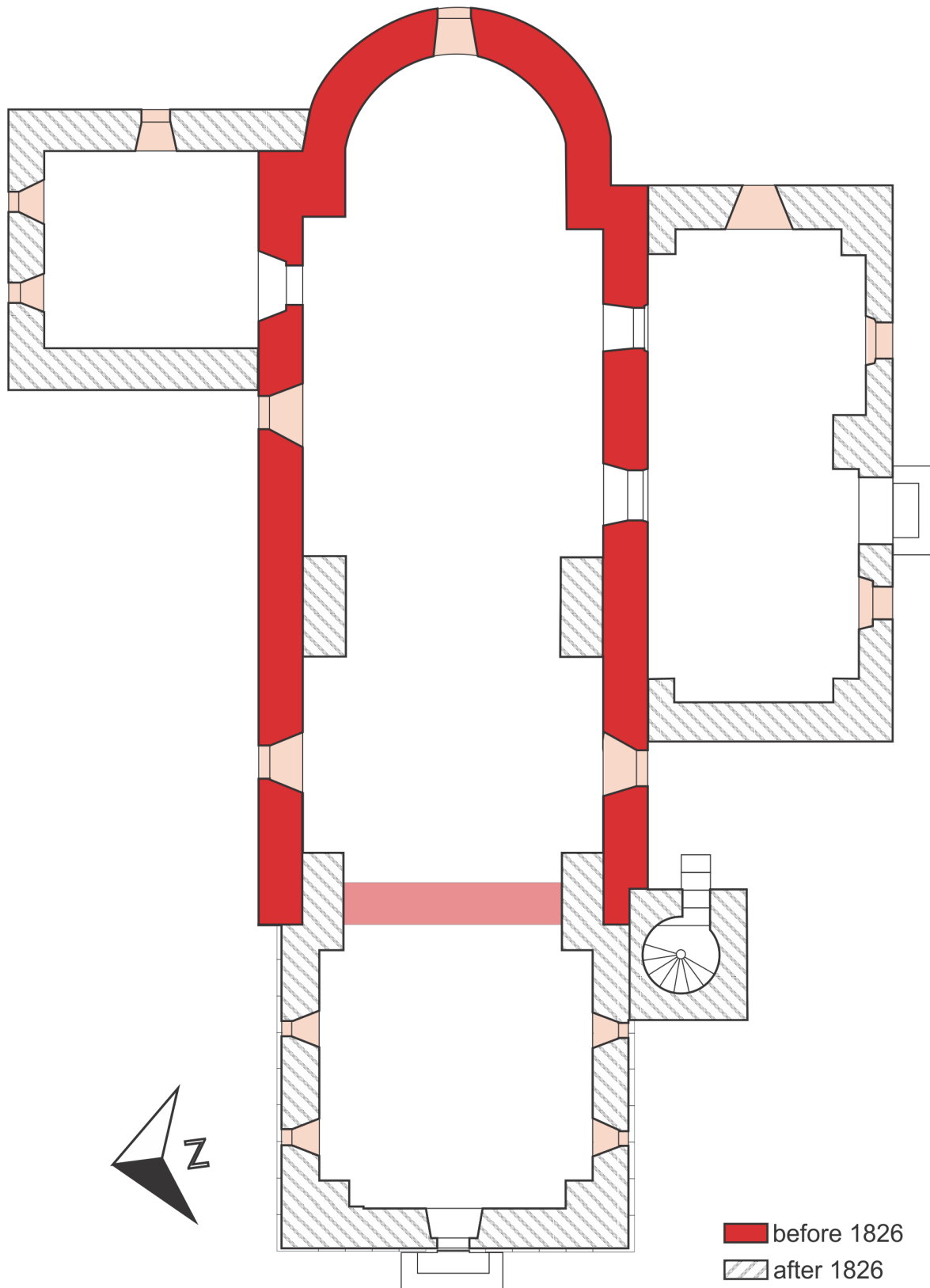
¹³ Which might have been the case if the church was destroyed in one of the Polish raids, of 1509, 1529 or 1538, which torched the town (GRECEANU 2009: 32)

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

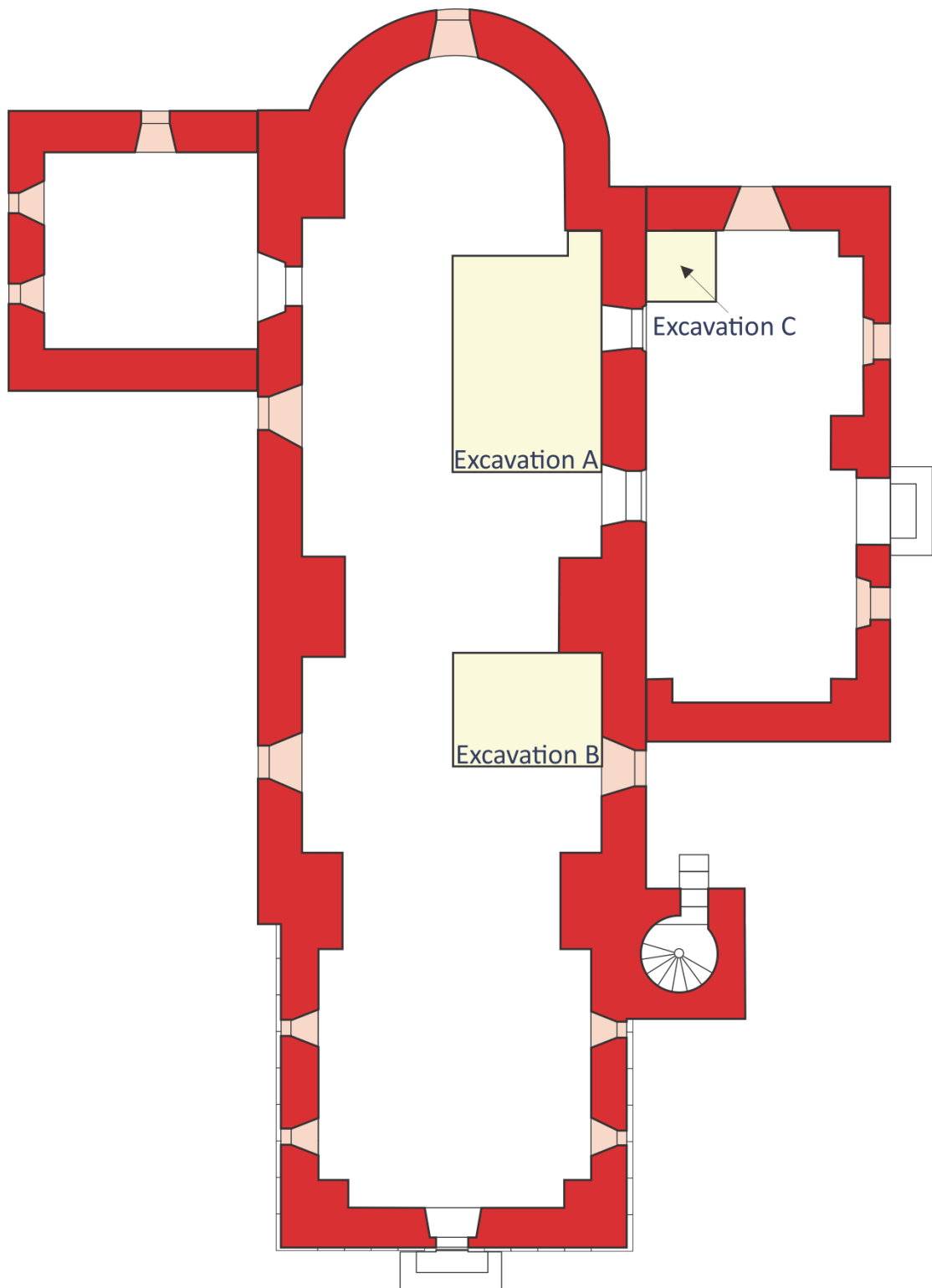
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Pl. I. The location of the Dormition (Armenian) church on the 1899 plan of Botosani (elaboration after GRECEANU 2009: Fig. 5).

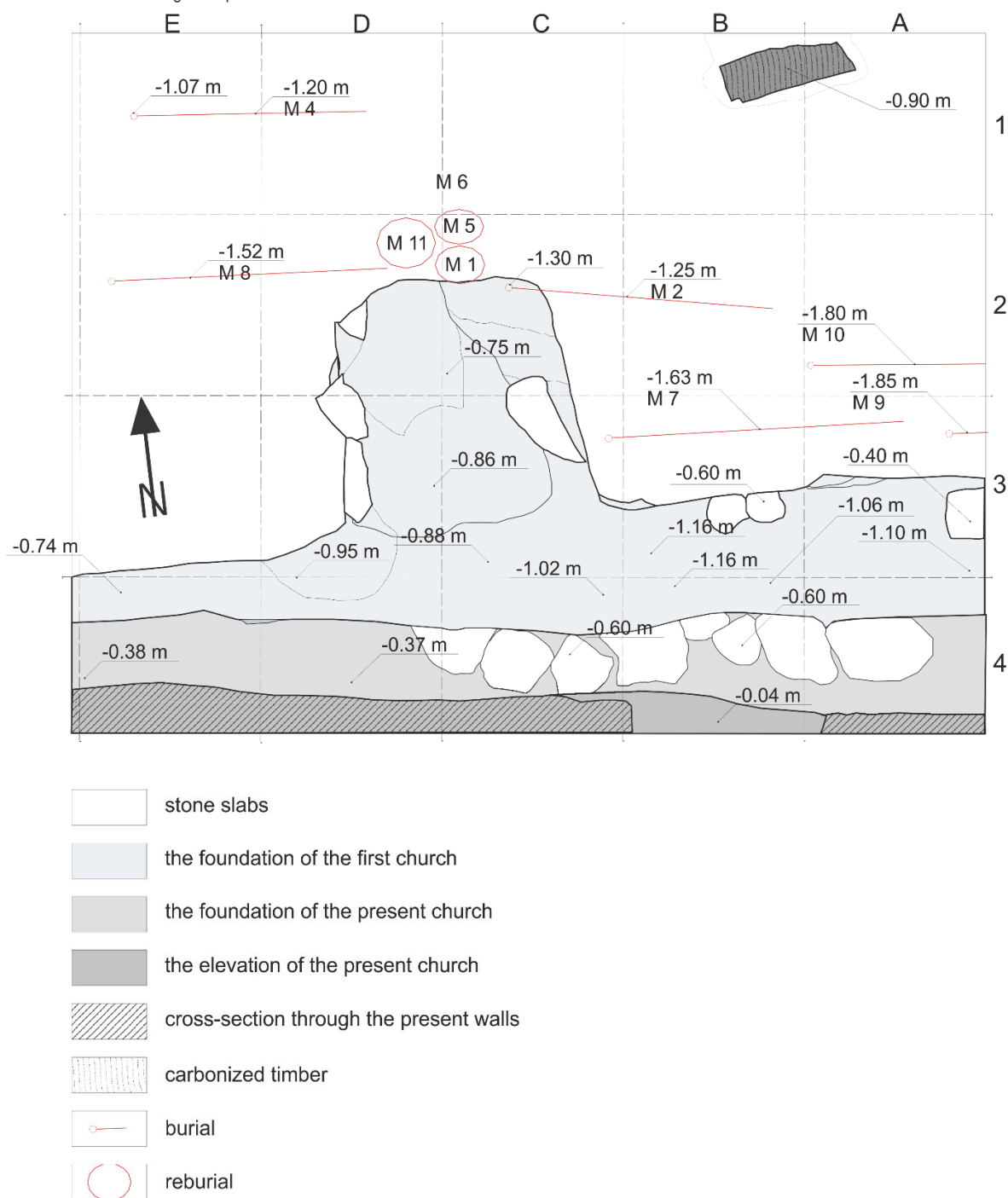


Pl. II. The Armenian church of Dormition – the proposed succession of the construction stages.



Pl. III. The location of the archaeological excavations on the church ground plan.

Botosani, the Armenian church "The Dormition of the Virgin"
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 Excavation A / ground plan



Pl. IV. The ground plan of Excavation A, showing the relation between the foundations of the pre- and post- 1551 churches.

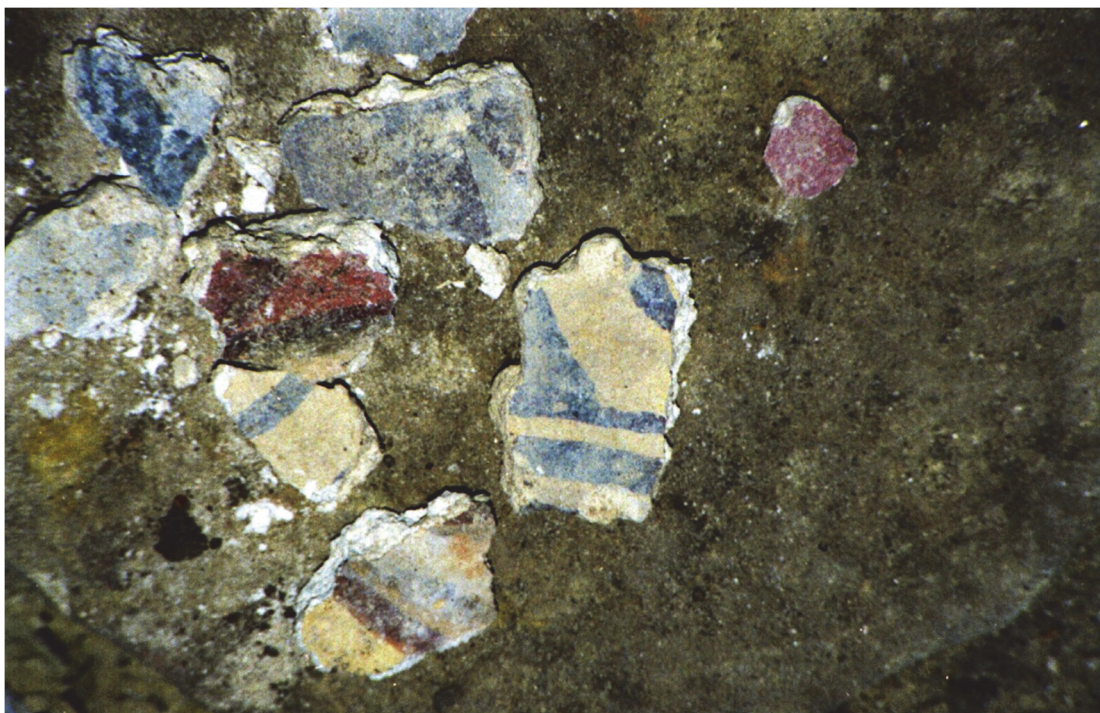


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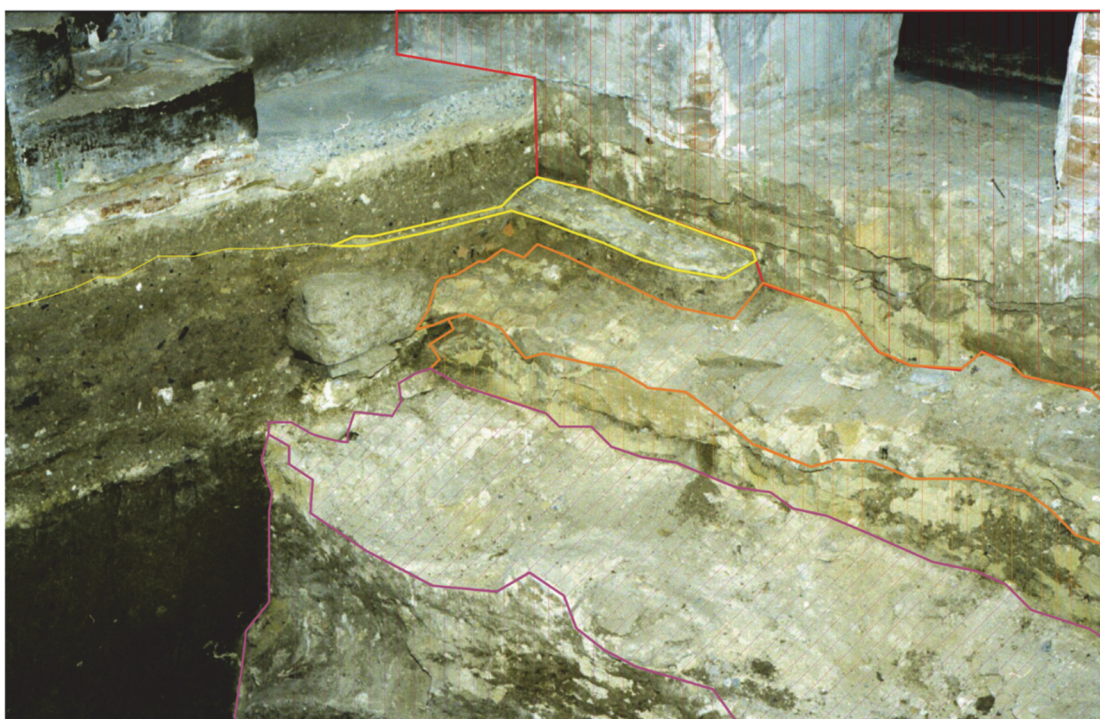


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Pl. V. 1. Excavation A, the northern section. 2. Excavation A, the eastern section.



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Pl. VI. 1. Fragments of frescoes recovered from the demolition layer of (most probably 1551);
2. The stratigraphy of the subsequent construction, demolition and rebuilding stages of the Armenian church of Dormition. **Red** – the elevation in place as of 1826; **Yellow** – the construction layer of 1826; **Orange** – the pre-1669 foundation; **Purple** – the foundation demolished in 1551.