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A CHURCH FROM 1737 IN THE FORTRESS OF NIŠ*

Abstract: Shaped in its permanent form in the 18th century, the fortress of Niš was an area inhabited exclusively by the Muslims, a part of urban Niš filled with buildings of Islamic religious and profane architecture that housed the bodies of the Ottoman high city administration. Neither of the two Austrian occupations of Niš (1689–1690, 1737) significantly affected the urban organization of the fortress, although they left the marks whose traces can be found even after the restoration of Ottoman authority over this city. One of the most interesting examples of this is the existence of Austrian church in fortress of Niš and its fate after 1737.

Keywords: Niš, church, mosque, fortress, Ottoman Empire, Austria

Introduction

After the unsuccessful siege of Vienna (1683) the Ottomans lost their upper hand in conflicts with Austria, over which they had largely triumphed in earlier wars during the 16th and 17th centuries. This gave the opportunity to the Habsburgs to take the initiative, transfer warfare to the regions of the Ottoman Balkans and begin to penetrate into its deeper hinterland. In the further course of the Great Vienna War (1683–1699), the Austrians managed not only to reach the distant centers of Rumelia (Niš, Vidin, Sofia, Skopje and Priština), but also to put some of them under their rule, thus challenging Ottoman authority in the region. One of the places which was under Austrian administration for a longer period was Niš, where the Austrians stayed for from September 24, 1689 till September 10, 1690.¹ During the war of 1737–1739, the Austrians again managed to take over Niš, but in a much shorter period, from July 28, till October 18, 1737.² Although they were of unequal length, both Austrian governances over Niš showed that the Austrians knew how to quickly organize the places they conquered from the Ottomans and customize them as they deemed fit.

Customizing Niš

Taking as an example the Austrian organization of Belgrade in 1718–1739, it seems that Niš under the Austrians was organized in a similar way as under the Ottomans, with a slight

* The research was financially supported by the Ministry of Science, Technological Development and Innovation of the Republic of Serbia (contract no. 451-03-66/2024-03/200371).

¹ Ранђеловић 2022, 22, 23.

² Ранђеловић 2022, 28, 29.

difference that the Austrians did many things from pragmatical reasons and with a purpose, expecting further struggle with the Ottomans. During the first conquest of Niš (1689–1690), the Austrians had to upgrade the city fort (*palanqa*) into a fortress and then arrange the city; in 1737 the fortress was already there, so they only had to spatially polarize the city on a part which was settled by their army, military personnel and colonists who came with them (merchants, Serbian militia, Serbian, German and Hungarian civilians), while on the other side were the local Christians, who remained in their households (the Muslims moved out by agreement during the summer of 1737).³ According to the urban pattern of Austrian Belgrade at that time, in 1737 Niš had a fortress on the right bank of Nišava river, while a bazaar with the residential quarters (*mahalles*) and a Serbian town were on the left bank. The bazaar with the residential quarters was surrounded by a palisade, separated that way from the Serbian town, like in Belgrade. This part of Niš was probably inhabited by the civilians who came with the Austrians and were loyal to them. The local Serbian population remained, as in Belgrade, outside the safe city palisades in the Serbian town on the outskirts of Niš.⁴ Also, there were two smaller quarters on the right bank of Nišava, next to the fortress. The quarter west of the fortress was Beograd Mahalle, formed by the Muslims from Belgrade who fled to Niš in 1718. The quarter east of the fortress was Jagodin Mahalle. It was formed before 1735 and was almost entirely inhabited by the Christians. In wider vicinity of fortress, behind those two quarters, were several hamlets (*çiftlik*s) owned by the Muslim landlords. Considering how close all those communities were to the fortress, it is highly possible that the Austrians also settled their colonists there, due to strategical reasons.

The fortress was the main military complex in Niš. Aside from the engineering projects which increased its ramparts and defensive power, its inner infrastructure also went through adaptations to ensure the smooth functioning of the new masters of the city. One of the basic needs that had to be settled was of a spiritual nature and concerned providing a place where the Austrian, i.e. the Roman Catholic population could profess their faith. In other words, it meant building a church for them.

Church in the fortress

The first information about this Christian temple comes from the only one surviving Ottoman document which indirectly mentions it. The document is from 1738, and it is kept in the Collection of the ledgers for the classification of monetary transactions (*Maliyeden müdevver defterler*, MAD) in the Archives of the Presidency of the Government of the Republic of Turkey (former Ottoman Imperial Archives, BOA). As this group of ledgers consists of lists of a wide variety of money flows, from the collection of the non-Muslim tax (*cizye*) to the janissary quarterly wages (*mevâcib*) and expenses for construction projects, the document ended up here most likely as part of the financial response that followed it.

According to the content of the document, the Muslims from the Hacı Hüseyin Ağa Mahalle in the Fortress of Niš addressed the Imperial Council of Ottoman Empire (*Dîvân-ı Hümâyûn*). Although no original letter has been preserved, but its summarized and short content, it is likely that the address was in the form of a collective petition to a higher administrative instance (*mazbata*).⁵ It is dated on Safer 6 of the Hicran 1151, i.e. on May 26, 1738 according to the Gregorian calendar.

As the document states, in the bastion of the infidels (*kefere tabyasında*) near the place where Muslims dwell, there was a monastery called a church (*manastır tabir olunan kilisa*).

³ Ранђеловић 2013, 287.

⁴ Riedler 2024, 216.

⁵ Недков 1966, 164.

Muslims lived near it in the Hacı Hüseyin Ağa Mahalle, and they appealed to the Imperial Council that the monastery was too close to their mosque, so it had to be converted.⁶

On behalf of the Imperial Council, Grand Vizier Yeğen Mehmed Pasha (1737–1739) responded to the petition. He ordered that the church should be converted and adapted into a Muslim seminary (*medrese*). The converted church should also have a dwelling room for one of the titular descendants of Prophet Muhammed (şerif). Moreover, the Grand Vizier said that he would pay for this adaptation project himself. This is all what the document contains.

Now, the document opens several questions related to this Christian temple. Where was it located in the fortress? Was it built from scratch or was it an adapted Islamic edifice? How do we know that it was meant for the Roman Catholic congregation? Why did the Grand Vizier use his personal incomes to convert it?

None of the muster polls (*yoklama defters*), property ledgers (*tahrir-i emlak defters*) or construction cost reports (*keşif defters*) we used for Niš in the 18th century gave us information which could help us to locate this edifice. Apart from containing direct or indirect information about various kinds of estates, these Ottoman documents do not contain any particular descriptive details that could aid our research. In addition, many mosques and Muslim seminaries changed their names from century to century, often taking the name of current benefactor. In such overlaps it is difficult to identify and locate city toponyms in densely populated area such as the Fortress of Niš.

What is certain is that the temple was not built from scratch, but represented an Islamic building converted into a Christian church intentionally.⁷ The order to convert a mosque in Niš into a church was given by Emperor Carl VI (1685–1740), who was particularly inspired by religious verve in the wars with the Ottomans.⁸ Thus, the Austrian authorities repeated in Niš what they had done in Belgrade after they took it in 1719, when several mosques were converted into churches for Austrian colonists and Roman Catholic monk orders.⁹ It is also certain that this church in fortress was meant for the Roman Catholic congregation to which the larger (i.e. commanding) part of the Imperial army belonged. Orthodox Christians, local and those who came with the Austrians, had at their disposal the Church of St. Nicholas in the Serbian town on the left bank of Nišava, outside the palisades. This Orthodox church was destroyed in 1690 by the Ottomans, but it was rebuilt in 1722 by the bishop of Niš Joanikije.¹⁰ With the establishment of the Roman Catholic church in fortress, the two largest Christian congregations in Niš during the Austrian administration in 1737 were spiritually reconciled, so the city was able to function smoothly and without religious tension.

After the Austrian capitulation of Niš to the Ottoman army on October 18, 1737, circumstances changed dramatically for the Christians and Muslims who happened to be in this city. While the fate of the Orthodox Church of St. Nicholas was known – the Ottomans converted it into the Victory (*Fethiye*) Mosque – there is no record of the Roman Catholic Church in the fortress until the appearance of the document we have analyzed in this paper. Certainly, after the Ottoman occupied the fortress, this church received another purpose, as was the practice among the enemies of different faiths in the Balkans. In that sense, it might have served as a warehouse, storage or armory.¹¹ This phase lasted less than a year, during which the interior of the building

⁶ BOA, MAD.d., 5340/288.

⁷ Ранђеловић 2013, 175. At the time of the second Austrian governance of Niš (1737) there were five mosques in the city's fortress.

⁸ Ранђеловић 2013, 287.

⁹ Riedler 2024, 216.

¹⁰ Midić 2019, 47.

¹¹ We exclude the possibility that the church could have been a stable or a cattle pen, due to its proximity to

may have visibly deteriorated, so it resembled to a former church only by its exterior. We conclude that based on the fact that the petitioners from Hacı Hüseyin Ağa Mahalle describe the building they want to convert precisely as a (Christian) monastery, i.e. the church.

The question of why the Grand Vizier Yeğen Mehmed Pasha was willing to personally finance the conversion of this church into a Muslim seminary is not of key importance for our research, yet we have an answer to it. The circumstances that explain the engagement of the Grand Vizier are simple. On May 28, 1738, he issued an order to convert the church in the Fortress of Niš. Already in the first half of August of the same year he stayed in Niš with the army he led to the siege of Oršava, which was held by the Austrians.¹² The fact that as early as April 1738 he knew the route of his campaign, i.e. that, according to the old Ottoman custom, he would stop in Niš for the preparation of the army for war with Austria, there was also the possibility of directly seeing the building whose adaptation he paid for.¹³ This probably influenced him to make the earlier decision in May of the same year, regarding the church in the Fortress of Niš. In addition, Yeğen Mehmed Pasha was known for his warlike attitude and mistrust towards the Austrians, so it is not surprising that he used the case of the church in the Fortress of Niš to personally contribute to the destruction of the enemy's legacy.

The information about church-mosque in the Fortress of Niš is sparse, but still occasionally it might be found in Ottoman documents from later eras. However, none of these documents provide information about its exact location and capacity. For example, in January 1774, a request was made to the sultan to appoint Ibrahim Akif as the new preacher (*hatip*) in the church-mosque (*kilisa camii*) after his father, who held this position, had passed away.¹⁴ No information about the mosque itself. The title deeds ledger (*tapu defteri*) for the Hicran 1200 (1785/1786) reveals that in this period the church-mosque was called Victory (*Fethiye*) – Hüdavendigâr – Kilise Camii and that it was known to have once been a church.¹⁵ Neither this source provides further information about the church-mosque. As a matter of fact, it brings confusion. Referred as Hüdavendigâr and former church, it might also mean that this is not the Austrian church from 1737 at all, but the very first mosque in Niš founded by the emir Murat I Hüdavendigâr (1359–1386), after he conquered Niš in 1386 and turned one of the local churches into a Muslim temple.

Nineteenth century brings even bigger confusions. Due to Serbian local and national uprisings, complex political and economic circumstances, frequent epidemics and the migrations of both Muslim and Christian population to Niš and from it, the infrastructure of the city changed visibly. Many districts that did not exist in earlier centuries were founded at that time, while the old ones fragmented, thus creating new residential units with the new names. In addition, many city toponyms and particularly Islamic edifices in Ottoman Niš changed their names due to new generations of benefactors and donors. All those factors made it difficult to retroactively trace down the mosque which used to be the Austrian church in the fortress. Therefore, we can conclude that by this time the memories of the mosque which used to be a Christian church in the Fortress disappeared from the collective memory of the Muslim folk in Niš.

the mosque, as can be concluded from the analyzed document.

¹² Hammer 1979, 170

¹³ BOA, A. {DVNSMHM.d., 145/431.

¹⁴ BOA, AE. SMST. III, 77/5696/1/1.

¹⁵ Ayverdi 2000, 131.

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ЦРКВА ИЗ 1737. ГОДИНЕ У НИШКОЈ ТВРЂАВИ

О историји и развоју тврђаве у Нишу још увек нема јединствене студије иако она спада у значајније теме српске националне историје, с обзиром на то који је значај имала у средњем веку и периоду под Османлијама (1386–1878). Добивши у 18. веку форму какву данас има, Тврђава је била средина насељена искључиво муслиманима, део урбаног Ниша испуњен здањима исламске верске и профане архитектуре, у којима су била смештена тела османске високе градске администрације. Чак и две аустријске окупације Ниша (1689–1690, 1737) нису значајније утицале на урбанистичку организацију Тврђаве, али су оставиле последице чије трагове можемо наћи чак и након обнове османске власти над овим градом. Један од најзанимљивијих примера тога јесте постојање аустријске цркве у Нишкој тврђави и њена судбина након 1737. године.