

# The Acropolis Basilica church, Sparta: the broader research issues

*Rebecca Sweetman*

## INTRODUCTION

As Evi Katsara has discussed (Chapter 34, this volume), recent fieldwork and research undertaken at the Acropolis Basilica church, Sparta (FIG. 35.1) has highlighted the importance of the monument for our understanding of the development of Byzantine architecture.<sup>1</sup> It is clear that the basilica displays a number of architectural features which are both innovative and crucial for a broader understanding of the chronology, function and status of the monument. Following on from Katsara's discussion, the overall aim of this paper is to contextualise a number of the new theories by means of an examination of the architecture of the basilica within the broader research framework. Consequently, this paper will focus on two main areas for discussion: first, an application of the study of the function of space within the basilica complex; and second, a study of the architecture in

the context of Early Christian churches in the Peloponnese. Only six out of some 130 Peloponnesian churches share a number of unusual features in common with the Acropolis Basilica, and as such, these six will form the focus of the comparative analysis. These discussions will shed light on key issues such as the nature of the liturgy (through spatial analysis) and the role of basilican churches in the Peloponnese. Ultimately, this paper will illustrate how our methodology can be applied to other similar edifices in the Peloponnese, thereby providing a clearer context for the Acropolis Basilica.

## FUNCTION OF SPACE

The detailed cleaning and planning fieldwork undertaken in 2000 and 2001 enabled an interpretation of the function of different areas in the basilica, thus leading to possible reconstructions both of the use of space and of the basilica building overall. Katsara has described the plan and phasing of the basilica; hence the focus of this section will be the application of a study of a number of specific features such as the northern room complex, the ambo, location of the doorways in the basilica and finally, the West Building, to a discussion of the function of space.

### *The northern room complex*

The northern room complex consists of the north apse, north annex and north room (FIG. 35.1). In the north apse, the discovery of a layer of waterproof cement in the east niche and the identification of a well to the W suggests that this room may have been used by the clergy for washing and preparing the communion (FIG. 35.2). In his notebook Cuttle also noted the discovery of a number of mosaic fragments in the east niche, suggesting that this contained a font decorated with mosaic.<sup>2</sup> In addition to the proposed preparation area of the north apse, the north room may have been a space for the deposition of offerings: the column, which appears to be *in situ*, may in fact have functioned as an offering table.<sup>3</sup> Given the location of the doorways in

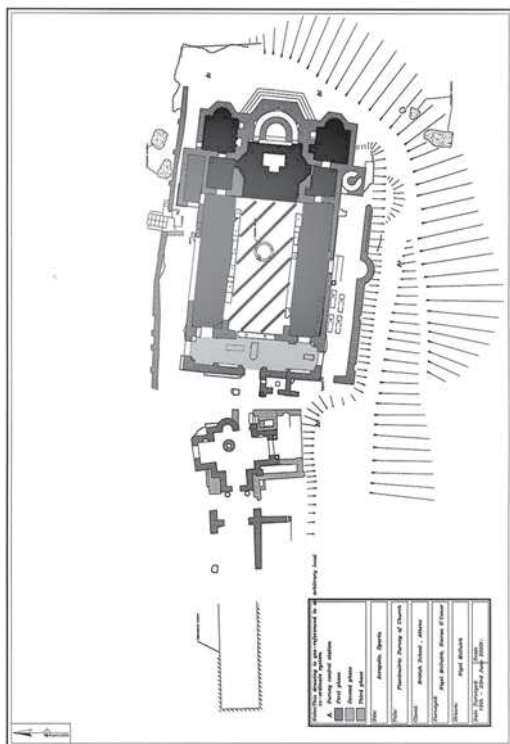


Fig. 35.1. Acropolis Basilica; plan showing degrees of public and private space.

<sup>1</sup> See also Sweetman and Katsara 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Sweetman and Katsara 2002, 446.

<sup>3</sup> Cuttle notebook pl. 47a. **[[not in Refs]]**



*Fig. 35.2. Northern room complex.*



*Fig. 35.3. Acropolis Basilica, ambo from s.*



*Fig. 35.4. Acropolis Basilica, nave showing ambo and monumental doorway.*



*Fig. 35.5. Entrance into narthex.*

the north annex, it is possible that this was a later addition for the offerings of the faithful (discussed in more detail below).

### *The ambo*

One of the most striking features exposed during fieldwork was that of the ambo, which was revealed in the centre of the nave. Given the presence of a long rectangular feature to the w, it is likely that a walk-up walk-down ambo would have been positioned here (FIGS. 35.1, 35.3, 35.4). The central location of the ambo might be construed as something of an obstruction for liturgical practice (FIG. 35.3). Such a position is not unique to the Acropolis Basilica. For example, the basilica at Aboba, Pliska,<sup>4</sup> which already shares a number of common features with the Acropolis Basilica such as the triple apse arrangement, has the foundations of a similar ambo in the same position in the nave. Importantly for the discussion here, the location of the ambo provides evidence to allow a better understanding of the nature of the liturgy in the basilica, discussed in conjunction with the doorways in more detail below.

### *Doorways and application to the function of space*

Through a study of the architecture alone a number of theories concerning the function of space can be postulated;<sup>5</sup> some generalisations can be made regarding the definition of space as public or private and for some areas a more definitive purpose of rooms can be ascribed. In turn this can be applied to an interpretation of the use of the basilica overall, particularly the nature of the liturgy.

The location and type of doorway can provide good indications as to whether a given area was public or private and from this, degrees of privacy can be ascertained. The northern room complex provides a good example of the application of the methodology. A combination of a study of the surviving architecture and the doorways allows a reasonable reconstruction of the function of space of the northern room complex. Within the three rooms different levels of public and private space can be seen (FIG. 35.1).<sup>6</sup> Access to reach the north apse was through an intermediate room, suggesting that right to use to these areas was limited and therefore is more likely to have been private. This same feature is mirrored in the south apse (FIG. 35.1). With a combination of the evidence of the water features in the north apse and niches in the south apse (FIG. 35.2), it is likely that these areas would have functioned as preparation areas for the clergy. The north and south rooms, each with three doorways, would have had a greater degree of access than the apses. Access to these intermediate rooms could be from either the north or the south aisle or from the bema. Although only a single threshold is preserved in this area (between the north apse and the north room), it is likely that doors could have mediated access and sight-lines

between the aisles and the apses.<sup>7</sup> It is possible that admission from the bema was much freer, for the purposes of the clergy moving between the holy areas. As such, these rooms could have been used by both the clergy (for passage) and the faithful (as suggested by the accessibility from the aisles) as a less transitory space. The offering table in the northern room supports such a theory and it is possible that a similar function might have been applied to the south room. Due to later consolidation work,<sup>8</sup> it is difficult to ascribe the north annex either to the original or a later construction phase of the basilica, although the latter scenario is most likely. Although a precise function is not easy to define, it is possible to postulate who would have used the room. The north annex is accessible from two doorways; one from the north aisle (a space for the faithful) and one from the north terrace. This combination of doorways marks the north room as the least private space in the northern room complex and so it is possible that it would have been accessible to a range of people from the public. Given the accessibility of the room it is possible that the north annex was used for deposition of offerings by the faithful, perhaps superseding that of the north room.

A monumental entrance way marks the transition in space from the narthex to the nave. It is interesting that its grand size is not reflected in the remains of the doorway into the narthex from outside the basilica (FIGS. 35.4, 35.5). Thus the main impact of the doorway was intended to be viewed from inside, rather than outside, the church. Smaller entrances from the narthex lead into the north and south aisles. It is still unclear as to whether or not there was easy access between the aisles and the nave and it is likely that there was a gallery in the upper level.

Given the likely location of the ambo in the middle of the nave obstructing direct movement in this area (FIG. 35.3), a liturgy with the focus on procession can be reconstructed. Having entered the narthex (FIG. 35.1), it is likely that the baptised congregation was encouraged to gather in the north and south aisles, access being through the smaller doorways in the narthex. This means, therefore, that there is generous space for processional entrances by the clergy into the basilica through a monumental entrance from the narthex. The grandeur of the doorway no doubt would have been intended to reflect such stateliness on to those who processed through it. Catechumens may have stayed in the narthex area (which can be seen from the number of doorways is likely to have been the least

4 Vocotopoulos 1975, pl. P.

5 The two seasons' work at the Basilica included cleaning and study of the monument rather than excavation.

6 The plan shows degrees of public and private space; the darker the colour the more private the space was likely to have been.

7 Sweetman and Katsara 2002, 466.

8 Sweetman and Katsara 2002, 448.





Fig. 35.6. West Building complex from w.



Fig. 35.7 (right). West Building complex; cistern in s.



Fig. 35.8. West Building complex from s.



Fig. 35.9. West Building complex from e.

private space) with only an obscured view of the actual ceremony, but the sight of the clergy and aspects of the processional entrance may have been intended to encourage them to become fully baptised.

#### ***Application of architectural analysis to an understanding of the liturgy***

The doorways throughout the complex would have both mediated access as well as creating a sense of mystery and awe through the manipulation of lines of sight. Those congregated in the narthex would only have had glimpses of main proceedings in the bema; those in the aisle and galleries would have had interrupted views of the bema area but clearer views of the nave, and thus the procession and the ambo would have been possible. The *parabemata* would have been accessible by those in the bema and the act of walking through the north and south rooms during the ceremony with possible glimpses available to those in the aisles

through open doors would have heightened the sense of occasion.

Although our understanding of the Early Christian liturgy is poor, a reconstruction of the use of space can allow us to make a few suggestions concerning the rituals involved. Consequently, it seems reasonable to suggest that there was a focus on a processional entrance of the clergy. The *kyklion* (discussed by Katsara, Chapter 34, this volume) and the access from the bema to the *parabemata* suggest that there was an emphasis on preparation and presentation, with a great deal of privacy.

#### ***West Building***

In its earliest phase the West Building (FIG. 35.1) is likely to have been used as a baptistery. Both the font in the room and the arrangement of the doors and the apse are indicative of baptistery types found in Greece (FIG. 35.6). Connected with this phase may be the long

rectangular cistern (FIG. 35.7), which could have fed the baptistery and the long west room with water.

A second construction phase is evident from the different building styles. Ascribable to this phase is a vault built under the steps leading to a second floor and perhaps a second construction enclosing a grave (FIG. 35.8). These tombs are clearly set apart from the standard simple grave cuts found in the south aisle and south terrace.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, it is possible that in its second phase the West Building was used as a moratorium. Although it is unclear whether the steps (FIG. 35.5) belong to the second or indeed a third phase, they are likely to have led up to the second floor of the basilica via a passageway, perhaps contained within the arch which may have linked the two buildings.<sup>10</sup> The precise function of the long west room which extends directly out from the baptistery remains unclear. A number of features are of note. The long west room is directly linked to the baptistery but not likely to have been part of the original construction. A monumental doorway marked with a pair of columns separated the two spaces (FIG. 35.6). A second substantial doorway was located in the northern wall, and finally the long room was subdivided into three rooms by two further interior doorways (FIG. 35.9). A set of steps which ran along the exterior of the northern wall indicates that there would have been a second storey on this long room (FIG. 35.1). The size of the cistern to the S of the complex would be more than ample for a fully functioning baptistery, so it is likely that this cistern would have also served more domestic needs perhaps associated with the long west room. Until we can undertake more work in the area, a working suggestion is that it functioned either as a hostel or a bishop's quarters, or indeed both.

## CONTEXTUALISATION OF THE ARCHITECTURE

As Katsara has outlined (Chapter 34, this volume), the Acropolis Basilica displays a number of unusual architectural features, such as the triple apse arrangement, the interior monumental doorway between the nave and the narthex, and a centrally placed dome over the bema area (FIG. 35.10). In order to assess the extent to which these features were particular to the Acropolis Basilica and what the potential significance of them was, a broader contextual study of the churches of the Peloponnese was begun.

### *The upper levels*

Although the upper levels of the basilica do not survive well, it is possible to deduce that there would have been an upper gallery level and a pitched roof. It is likely that the steps in the West Building would have led up to a second floor of the basilica (FIG. 35.8), thus giving us a possible reconstruction of a gallery area accessible from the W.<sup>11</sup> The study of three large fallen chunks of

masonry (FIG. 35.12) has provided clear evidence of the existence of a dome over the bema and semi-domes over the protruding north and south apses of the east wing (FIG. 35.11). The load-bearing walls in the bema (FIG. 35.13) provide further support for the presence of a central dome.

### *The broader role of the Sparta basilica and how this fits with the Peloponnesian examples*

As a result of the fieldwork undertaken in 2000 and 2001, the phasing and function of the architecture of the Acropolis Basilica can now be reconstructed and understood. The role of the basilica in the broader community was not well understood, although its size and the existence of the *synchronic* might suggest that it was the seat of the bishop. The baptistery and the possible moratorium in the West Building might suggest a different function and there is always the possibility that the basilica had a combination of functions, or changed its primary purpose over time. To understand better the role and function of the basilica within the wider context of the Peloponnese, it is necessary to provide a comparison with similar edifices.

Of the 130 Peloponnesian churches (FIG. 35.14) dating from so-called Alaric invasions at the end of the fourth century AD to the creation of the *theme* of the Helladic in AD 687–95, most are standard triple-aisled single-apsed types. There is naturally some variation on this in terms of size, from the massive complex of Lechaion<sup>12</sup> to the much smaller example from Methana;<sup>13</sup> there is also great variation in terms of the location of the churches, be it coastal or mountainous, isolated or in discrete groups.

Refining the chronology of these churches is difficult, since many of them were excavated in the first half of the 20th century or as a result of rescue work, and a number are obstructed by more recent church constructions (for example, Ayios Andreas in the Mani).<sup>14</sup> Consequently, a broad, imprecise chronology is often suggested for their foundation. Additionally, details concerning how the churches may have functioned and what their role in the broader community may have been are still pending.

There is an enormous amount of synthetic work to be done on the chronology, function and location of Early Christian basilicas, and the application of the evidence to a broader understanding of the Christianisation of the Peloponnese. However, for the purposes of this paper the focus will be on six particular churches

9 Sweetman and Katsara 2002, pl. 50a.

10 Sweetman and Katsara 2002, 465.

11 Sweetman and Katsara 2002, 465.

12 Pallas 1977, 165–71.

13 Koukoulis 1986, 31.

14 Avraméa 1997, 190.



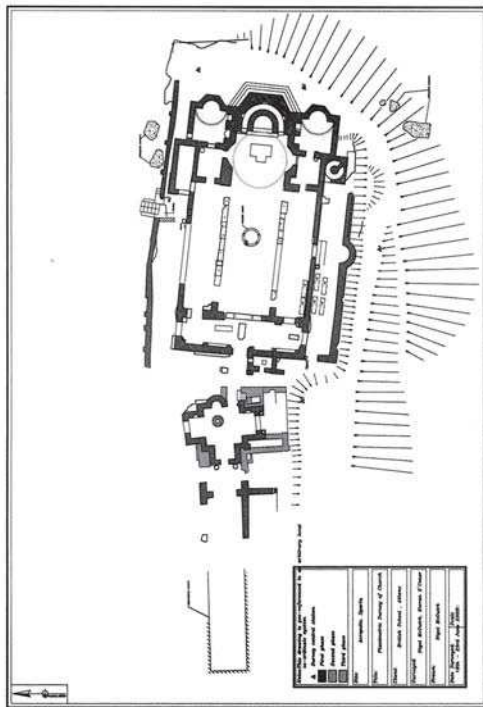


Fig. 35.10. Acropolis Basilica; plan showing location of dome and semi-dome.

Fig. 35.12 (below). Acropolis Basilica; fallen chunk of masonry.



Fig. 35.11. Acropolis Basilica; north section of s apse.



Fig. 35.13. Acropolis Basilica; load-bearing N wall in bema (from s).

which are notable because of their triple-apse arrangements and other particular features also seen at the Acropolis Basilica.

The six are all located in different areas of the Peloponnese (FIG. 35.14): Ayia Sofia in Korone,<sup>15</sup> Tigani in the Mani,<sup>16</sup> Apidea in Laconia,<sup>17</sup> Choutsa in northern Arcadia,<sup>18</sup> Skyloundia<sup>19</sup> in Elis and Ayia Marina in the Argolid.<sup>20</sup> **[spelling?]**

With the exception of Ayia Marina, the suggested foundation dates of these churches are in the late fifth and sixth century AD. In some cases, such as Tigani,<sup>21</sup> Ayia Sofia<sup>22</sup> and Choutsa,<sup>23</sup> there are certainly later phases. Only Ayia Marina has been dated later by its

excavator, to a period between 700 and 900, on stylistic grounds.<sup>24</sup> It should be noted that the pottery found

15 Stampoltzis 1976–8.

16 Drandakis 1979.

17 Orlandos 1927.

18 Konti 1985.

19 Lambropoulou 1999.

20 Oikonomou 1989, figs. 15–20.

21 Drandakis 1979.

22 Stampoltzis 1976–8.

23 Konti 1985.

24 Oikonomou 1989.



Fig. 35.14. Map of Peloponnese indicating location of Early Christian churches with triple apses.

dates between the sixth and seventh centuries, and since much of it was found in grave contexts it might be more reasonable to suggest a sixth century date for its foundation.

The Acropolis Basilica, for which we suggest a date of the middle to late sixth century,<sup>25</sup> contains a number of significant features such as a *synthronon*, a possible ambo and a monumental doorway leading from the narthex to the nave. A striking peculiarity of the Acropolis Basilica is what we reconstruct as a dome over the bema and possibly smaller domes over the north and south apses, rather than a standard pitched roof (FIG. 35.10).

Some of these significant elements can be seen in the six other Peloponnesian triple-apsed basilicas. Both Ayia Sofia (FIG. 35.15) and Tigani (FIG. 35.16) had *synthrona* and it is likely that Skyllountia (FIG. 35.19) had one also, although the remains are somewhat overgrown and it is difficult to establish conclusively. The excavations at Apidea (FIG. 35.17), Ayia Marina (FIG. 35.20) and Choutoussa (FIG. 35.18) have not revealed a *synthronon*, but in each case it cannot be firmly ruled out. In terms of possible ambo features, the only one of the six to have clear evidence for an ambo is Tigani, and in this case it is located close to the bema, thereby not causing a great obstruction in the centre of the nave.

Ayia Marina, Ayia Sofia and Apidea<sup>26</sup> have the same feature of a large doorway from the narthex to the nave as is present in the Acropolis Basilica. The amount preserved at Choutoussa and Skyllountia (FIGS. 35.18, 35.19) makes it difficult to say if there was such a monumental entrance, and this is not a feature at Tigani.

Only Tigani<sup>27</sup> and Ayia Sofia<sup>28</sup> share a similar size with the Acropolis Basilica. As for domes, the plans of Choutoussa<sup>29</sup> and Ayia Marina do not survive well enough to define how they might have been roofed; there is a semi-dome preserved at Apidea. The plan of Tigani is somewhat skewed,<sup>30</sup> which is not surprising given the rough ground landscape it was built on, but a dome is just about possible. More certainly Ayia Sofia and Skyllountia can be reconstructed as having domes over the bema area: in both cases there are load-bearing walls which would make such a reconstruction possible.

<sup>25</sup> Sweetman and Katsara 2002.

<sup>26</sup> Oikonomou 1989, Pl. II; Stampoltzis 1976–8, fig. 6; Orlandos 1927, fig. 10.

<sup>27</sup> Drandakis 1979, fig. 1.

<sup>28</sup> Stampoltzis 1976–8, fig. 6.

<sup>29</sup> Konti 1985, 119.

<sup>30</sup> Drandakis 1979, fig. 1.





*Fig. 35.15. Ayia Sofia.*



*Fig. 35.16. Tigani.*



*Fig. 35.17. Apidea.*





Fig. 35.18. Choutsa. [[spelling?]]

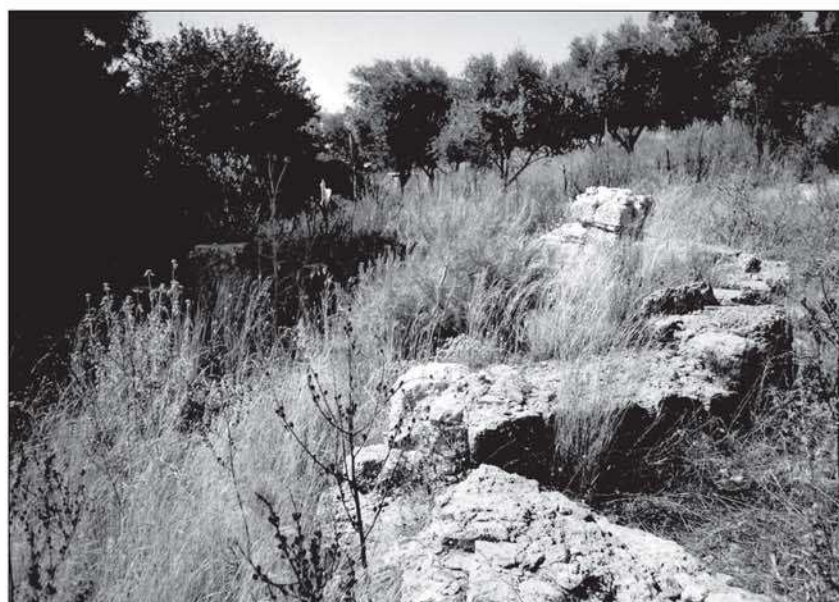


Fig. 35.19. Skyllountia. [[spelling?]]



Fig. 35.20. Ayia Marina.

The basilican churches do not appear to conform to a particular location pattern and they are widely dispersed throughout the Peloponnese (FIG. 35.14). The *synthrona* in Tigani, Ayia Sofia and **Skylountia** might suggest that they functioned as seats of the bishop at a certain period, and the other three may have had this feature, so it is possible that these six were important official churches. The common denominator of the triple-apse arrangement is not easy to explain: it could simply be a question of taste or it might suggest a particular liturgical practice requiring the feature. The washing area in the north apse in the Acropolis Basilica cannot be paralleled in the other examples, on present evidence. Until more is known about the Early Christian liturgy such questions remain. These six basilicas clearly have a combination of different elements in common with the Acropolis Basilica, but no one church shares all the elements. This suggests not only that the practice of the liturgy was reasonably fluid in relation to the architecture of the church, but also that different churches may have had different roles within the community.

The basilica of Ayia Sofia<sup>31</sup> is striking in that it is so close in plan to the Acropolis Basilica that we can suggest either the same architect is responsible for both, or one is an exact copy of the other. We are certainly not the first to make the association: Stamoltzi suggested this possibility,<sup>32</sup> although on the basis of incorrect plans, leading him to reconstruct a central dome over the nave. In fact, from the new plan of the basilica<sup>33</sup> it is likely that in both cases there was a dome, but over the bema area. There are further points of comparison such as the *synthronon*, the semi-circular conches in the bema and the arrangement of the sizeable narthex doorway and the stylobates, suggesting that the liturgy in both churches can be reconstructed in the same way.

This brief survey of the six comparable churches from the Peloponnese can help to contextualise and understand the role of the Acropolis Basilica better. The size, triple-apse arrangement and likely dome make it notable in terms of other Peloponnesian churches, but it is not an isolated example. The fact that there are six other churches exhibiting combinations of these unusual traits emphasises the suggested date of the sixth century for the foundation of the basilica. That there are at least two Early Christian churches that might have had a dome over the bema area shows that, contrary to traditional belief, it is possible to find domed Early Christian basilicas in the Peloponnese.

The size of the Acropolis Basilica, certainly the largest in the Sparta area, and the architectural elements of the *synthronon*, ambo, monumental entrance in the w and the associated west complex consisting of a baptistery and possible living quarters suggest that it was a building of significant importance during its time and possibly the episcopal seat. That such a

combination of elements is not so common in the Peloponnese further emphasises the importance of the monument. Because the Ayia Sofia basilica is so close in plan it is possible to suggest that elements of the Acropolis Basilica were copied. Although the chronology is not as yet refined, it is also possible that the Acropolis Basilica set a pattern of dome construction which was followed in the creation of other similar edifices in the Peloponnese.

As a result of our fieldwork we have been able to identify and categorise the several architectural phases of the basilica, in addition to being able to propose for the first time an architectural reconstruction of the original form of the basilica, with a dome over the bema and a gallery area accessible through the West Building.<sup>34</sup> Through the architectural analysis we have been able to make some innovative suggestions regarding the use of various rooms in the basilica complex, and we have been able to make a start on suggesting how the liturgy may have worked in relation to the architecture. Through our application of the methodology and evidence to an overall study in the Peloponnese we have also been able to suggest how the basilica complex functioned in this broader context.

We know from historical sources that Sparta was of principal significance in the Peloponnese during the Byzantine period, particularly in the ninth century. However, given the innovative designs of the Acropolis Basilica, which we can reasonably date to the mid-late sixth century AD, it seems time to reassess Sparta's role during the Early Christian period as well. Perhaps we could go as far as to say that the construction of the Acropolis Basilica, with its triple apse and possible dome over the bema, marks a turning point in Byzantine church architecture in the Peloponnese.

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31 Stampoltzis 1976–8, fig. 6.

32 Stamoltzi 1975. **[[not in Refs]]**

33 Sweetman and Katsara 2002, fig. 2.

34 Sweetman and Katsara 2002, 465–6.



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