

The Diocese of Morodvis



Being a country of rich history and vast cultural heritage, Macedonia does not readily reveal all of its past and has a lot of secret stories waiting to be discovered and told. One part of our forgotten past are the now extinct urban communities. Former seats of bishops and military commanders, they nurtured rich religious, cultural and economic life, but today they are awaiting their curious investigator, a local Indiana Jones, who will examine the traces of the old dioceses whose bishops were part of the most important Councils that determined the history of the Christian faith.

The first trace of those communities can be found in the surviving tradition of

Macedonian Orthodox Church to give its assistant bishops (vicar bishops, who do not have own diocese) titles of former eparchies. These titles lead us to the dioceses of Stobi, Heraclea, Veliqa and Polin. Another former diocese which at the moment is not associated with the title of a vicar bishop is Morodvis, which today is just a village in Zrnovci municipality at the foothills of Plackovica a few kilometres south of Kocani. The history of the lost diocese lies in the late antiquity archaeological site Morobizdon and the medieval Crkviste. The settlement was inhabited between the 5th and the 7th centuries and later abandoned. It was a rich Roman town in the fertile lands around the river of Bregalnica,

anđ an important point on the eastern roads. In the 9th century, the area was resettled by a Slavic population, and it was part of the Bregalnica region to which Christian missionaries attached a great importance. The hagiography tells us that St. Methodius, one of the creators of the Slavic alphabet, was an active missionary here together with his brother St. Cyril. It is believed that the first churches were built in the area by the Bulgarian commander Taridan, who received the order from the first baptized Bulgarian King Boris Mikhail to Christianize the region. In one of the churches near Bregalnica, the relics of fifteen early Christian martyrs from the neighbouring Tiberiopol (Strumica) were buried.

At the time of the Bulgarian rulers Simeon and Peter, Bregalnica Bishop was called *Morodviski*, that is 'of Morodvis'. During the reign of Tsar Samuil, Morobidzon, or Morodvis, became a bishopric centre, as part of the Samuil Ohrid Archbishopric. The eparchy possessed vast lands stretching across today's Osogovo and Malesevo mountains. Later, when the Byzantine Tsar Vasili II regained these lands, he kept the Archbishopric and its existing structure. The Byzantine historian Jovan Skilica writes in his *Short History* that representatives of Morodvis gave town keys to the Tsar in the year 1018. This is the first historical record of the bishopric. One year later, the Emperor issued an act confirming the existing territory of the bishopric with its lands, settlements and clergy. In the beginning of the 12th century Malesevo became the episcopacy seat of the Bregalnica region. This, however, did not affect the religious significance of Morodvis. In his *Theography* the 12th-century Arabic writer Idrizi mentions the densely populated town of Furumizdus (Morodvis) and its vineyards and fertile lands. In the 1260s the seat was again transferred to Morodvis. The spread of the Serbian Kingdom in the 13th and

14th centuries put an end to the life of the diocese of Morodvis. In different acts, Serbian kings take lands, pastures, vineyards and other properties from Morodvis and give it to the emerging monastic and church communities in the North: in Skopje, Prizren and Lipljan. In 1334 the ruler of the region, Despot Jovan Oliver built the St. Archangel Mikhail Monastery in Lesnovo, which very quickly became a new religious centre with a huge library and scriptorium, where many books were copied by dozens of monks. With the crowning of the Serbian King Dusan, his native Pec Archbishopric was promoted to a Patriarchy. This, in turn, demanded a new reorganization of the church structures. Thus, in 1347, the seat of the bishopric was moved from Morodvis to the emerging Zletovo. Later rulers, including Konstantin Dragas in 1381, gave the monastery a few properties, but it never regained its former glory.

As a result of the area's religious prominence, archaeological excavations reveal multiple remains of churches from different periods build almost one on top of the other. Fragments of at least four churches have been excavated since the 1980s: from the 5th, 11th, 13th and 16th centuries. The first church had marble *opus sectile* floors, decorated pillars and capitals. The superb church construction and decoration leads to the conclusion that it had a high profile. A tomb of an important person was found in its centre. Other remnants revealed carved stones and frescos. A smaller church was probably erected in the 13th century, on the foundations of an older one. A graveyard with 350 tombs with artefacts made of gold, bronze, bone, glass and textile was also discovered. The municipality has come forward with the initiative to continue the excavations and protect the site, so that it can become the focus of the development of cultural tourism, attract visitors and create new jobs in the area.