

Mosaics Garden

The ancient town of Stobi has become the most important landmark of present-day Macedonia. Different things contributed to its tremendous popularity. First of all, its location in the central part of Macedonia just off the highway makes it easily accessible. Second, the depiction of the peacock from Stobi Episcopal Basilica mosaic on the banknote of 10 Macedonian denars, as well as on the label of the fastest growing Macedonian winery made it overwhelmingly popular, arousing curiosity about Stobi in anyone who comes to the country. And the curious will not be



disappointed. Stobi is a most attractive site with well preserved ancient monuments and knowledgeable guides. It is spread over a big area and is perfect for a sunny day visit.

Built at the confluence of Erigon (today's River Crna) and Axios (today's Vardar), it became a crossroad on the important Roman routes of Via Egnatia and Via Militaris. This strategic position made the town develop as an urban, political and trade centre. The earliest written evidence of Stobi is found in Livy's description of the triumph of Phillip V over the Dardanians in *Ab Urbe Condita*. The battle happened near Stobi in 197 BC. Livi's second mention of Stobi takes us to the Roman occupation of Macedonia and the year 167 BC, when



the Romans defeated the last Macedonian king Perseus and divided the big kingdom into four provinces. Then Stobi became the capital of Macedonia Salutaris and also an important centre for salt trade. During the rule of Emperor Vespasian (69 -79 AD) Stobi minted its own coins with the inscription *Municipium Stobensium*, which were used in local trade.

Archaeological excavations uncovered several buildings from this period including the theatre, defensive walls, water supply system, the so-called Casa Romana, and a public building with arches known as "Roman Forum". The marble sculpture of Aphrodite found in the large room represents a real masterpiece of the Roman art from the second century AD. The House of Peristerius was a large living complex for several families. It also had rooms for shops. The central part of this complex is a yard with marble fountains and excellent examples of floor mosaics. The Big Bath (*Magnae Thermae*) had a big room and a swimming pool made of marble blocks. Stobi Theatre is one of the biggest buildings in the locality. The stage, orchestra and *skena* were built at different times. The stage is divided in two parts and is built with white marble. Many of the seats have names of the citizens who had reserved them. In the late third century the theatre became an arena for gladiator fights. They



stopped with the adoption of Christianity as the state religion. The marble seats of the theatre were used as construction material for reconstructing the porch on the street Via Sacra and the Heraklea Gate.

One of the most significant events in the history of Stobi was the advent of Christianity. The name of Budius, the first Bishop of Stobi, is noted at the first ecumenical council in Nicaea in 325 AD. The Old Episcopal Basilica in Stobi was built in the fourth century and is considered to be the oldest Christian church in Macedonia. The sacred architecture discovered in Stobi, especially the Episcopal Basilica of the Bishop Philip from the fifth century, show that Stobi was an important Christian centre with established traditions. Stobi is



one of a small number of towns from the late Ancient and early Christian period that kept a large number of mosaics. From the fourth to fifth century, several big churches known for their mosaics and frescoes were built. Decorative mosaics can also be found in private luxury buildings from the late Antiquity, such as the villas of Theodosius, Policharmosius and Peristerius. The peacock from the baptistery's mosaic floor is one of the most beautiful images of Stobi. The Bishop's Basilica or the church of Bishop Philip is built on a terrace and has three parts: narthex, exonarthex and atrium. The central part is separated by two colonnades. It has a luxurious interior with white marble and mosaic floors. The walls were

decorated with frescoes. In 388 the emperor Theodosius I visited Stobi issuing two edicts which banned the heretic gatherings and public discussions about religion. The Palace of Theodosius was where the emperor stayed. The floor of this palace is covered with marble blocks and the *peristyle* (columned porch) mosaics are executed in *opus sectile* technique. All the rooms are also beautifully decorated. This building is L-shaped and can be entered from three streets. Stobi at the end of the fourth century became a metropolis with three eparchies: Stobi, Bargala and Zapar. The bishops of Stobi took part in the Ecumenical Councils until the seventh century, long after the city ceased to exist.

The most famous citizen of Stobi lived in the fifth century. His name is Ioannes Stobaeus and he is known as an ancient scholar who compiled a four-book anthology of literature from Homer to his day. His book preserved numerous extracts from ancient works the originals of which were later lost. There was also a Jewish community in Stobi. From an inscription we know the name of Tiberius Claudius Policharmos who rebuilt the synagogue and erected his home next to it. He is described as the father of the Jewish community.

In 447 Stobi like many other towns on the Balkans was destroyed by the Huns. Recorded in the chronicles, this event is confirmed by the archaeological findings of the burned layer containing Hun weapons. This marked the beginning of the gradual demise of Stobi. In 479, on their way to Dyrrachium, Theodoric and the Ostrogoths ransacked Stobi but this was not as disastrous as the earlier attack of the Huns. The citizens rebuilt the town, but it was struck by a powerful earthquake in 518. The big Avaro-Slavic invasions in the sixth century totally ruined Stobi and brought the urban life there to an end. In the centuries that followed, Slavs settled the area, but judging by the discovered graves the population was quite poor.