

The Church of Saint George in Sofia

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■ The oldest monument of art in Sofia, the church-rotunda of S. George, is the subject of this study. It has survived in the centre of the Bulgarian capital as a witness and contemporary of a great variety of changes down the centuries, and events affecting the destiny of the city; its place and significance in the history of our capital is indeed very great. The changes in this building, erected as early as the fourth century, as a great Roman architectural ensemble devoted to a cult, continued, but they were made chiefly in its central part, the rotunda, during the Middle Ages (9th—14th century). It existed in ancient Serdica, but by then as the Christian Church of S. George; later also in mediaeval Sredets, and today in Sofia, the last name of our capital, to be preserved, although badly damaged by time and human carelessness, as a picturesque architectural ensemble down to our own day.

The book begins with a short *Introduction: By the Author about the Monument*, which contains an appraisal of the great and unique importance of the monument for the cultural history of Bulgaria.

Chapter I: *The Church of S. George as an Architectural and Archaeological Monument*. The title indicates that attention is concentrated in this chapter on the architectural and the archaeological history of the monument. This is traced from the time the large antique Roman building was erected in the Roman city of Serdica in the fourth century, down to the last changes which the Turks made, when they turned the rotunda into a mosque in the 16th century. The situation of the building in the very centre of the ancient city is discussed in detail, as well as the researches made at the time when the centre of present-day Sofia was under construction in 1952—1954, and the entire area around the rotunda was dug up. The plan of the whole building is shown: the three narthexes (the west entrance, the square vestibule and the three-part narthex) and the rotunda (the Church of S. George itself) with the premises belonging to it on the north and the south.

The author studied the rotunda in particular, the principal part or 'central hall' of the antique building, i. e. the Church of S. George, its outer aspect and inner space and plan. She also assigns a place and its significance to the hypocaust system found in it, and indicates how it was used as a means of determining the initial purpose of the building. The dome which covers it is studied in detail. Its history, its demolition and reconstruction is followed, as are the changes made in the dimensions of the windows in the dome, the structure of the building, etc. Much place is given in this chapter to the initial purpose for which the building was intended, its reconstruction and dating.

The author cites all the more important views of most of the scholars who have studied the monument, as regards its initial purpose, with a view to indicating how complex this question is and in the final count how open to discussion. And no matter how unsolved and still debatable they are in an architectural and

archaeological aspect, besides the question of the initial purpose of the building, there are a number of other questions, such as: when the cupola of the rotunda was first demolished, and how many times, because there are suppositions that this happened twice; when the western narthex was built, whether at the same time as the whole building or later; what the cutward form of the rotunda was, etc. At the same time she indicates in how far and up to what point the various opinions draw near one another and coincide, and when they diverge, while indicating in a number of cases her own opinion and conclusions, and defending them.

The following three chapters are devoted to the traces of mural paintings in the Church of S. George. It should be emphasized that the great attention paid to the paintings is fully merited. We have no other monument of art with such a long history, not only as far as its architectural existence is concerned, but also as mural paintings in a city and at such a high artistic level at that.

In Chapter II: *The Mural Paintings in the Church of S. George*, the author's researches are directed to a complete 'historical and iconographic review and documentation' of the paintings—this is the subtitle of the chapter. These studies are also directed at establishing the number of the individual layers of painting and the time they appeared, their former and present limits and state, and to establishing their iconography and exact documentation.

This difficult task, owing to the extremely damaged condition of the several layers of painting (badly destroyed, at some places completely so) at a most inconvenient site for examination (about 10 metres from the floor), was accomplished by the author with great care. She made a thorough study of the mural painting, availing herself to the full of the favourable conditions created between 1960 and 1973, when the very thorough work of restoration was put in hand in the church. Soundly based on the chemico-physical analyses made and the observations and conclusions of the restorers, the author many times discussed the problems of the painting with them. At the same time she thoroughly studied and made use of everything which had been revealed and established before her by other authors, depending on their observations and conclusions. As a result of many years of research work the author reached the following conclusions:

1. Traces of five layers of painting have been preserved in the church: the first layer, *the most valuable and antique*, is dated to the fourth century, when the rotunda was probably turned into a Christian church for the first time and decorated with mural paintings; three layers consecutively laid on in the Middle Ages: *the second layer, dating to the period of the First Bulgarian Kingdom (end of the 9th — most probably the 10th century); a third layer, from the time of Byzantine domination of Bulgaria (end of the 11th — to the 12th century), and a fourth layer, from the period of the Second Bulgarian Kingdom (end of the 14th century);* a last, *fifth layer of painting* originated in the period when the church was turned into a Turkish mosque.

2. In spite of the exceptionally bad condition in which the mural paintings are preserved — almost three-quarters of the wall area of the initial paintings have been destroyed — the author has succeeded in general lines in re-establishing the general iconographic and compositional distribution of the individual layers. Traces of the antique layer are quite insignificant. They are chiefly to be found in the north-western niche on individual small coloured pieces of plaster. The state of the fifth layer, the remains of the Turkish plastering, decorated in the 16th century when the rotunda was turned into a mosque, is about the same, with this difference that the Turkish traces (they are to be found on the western wall) are slightly larger, and clear traces of ornamental decoration are to be found on them.

Both layers — the first and the fifth — are only of documentary importance today.

The remaining three mediaeval layers of painting are distributed as follows: at the top, in the cupola, down to the beginning of the eight windows which cut the drum of the cupola, the third mediaeval layer of paintings has been laid on. Below it appear the remains of the first mediaeval layer of paintings and at the bottom we find the second 11th—12th century layer. Below it, down to the floor, comes a considerable area, bare of paintings, which, it is supposed, must once have been covered with marble panels.

The first mediaeval layer of paintings (10th century) consists of two friezes: an upper one including eight flying angels; of this only traces of the bodies of 6 angels and one of the heads have been preserved, all on the northern wall. The lower frieze is included between the eight windows. It consisted of 16 prophets, of whom only traces of three and part of the halo of a fourth prophet have been preserved.

The second mediaeval layer of paintings (11th—12th century) begins at the place of the first mediaeval frieze of the prophets and goes down along the wall. Today this frieze has a mixed composition: part of it shows the preserved traces of the first frieze (10th century, the three prophets on the north wall and the halo of the fourth), the remaining 12 prophets dating back to the period of the second layer of painting (end of the 11th—12th century). How did this come about? In the 12th century the church was entirely replastered and repainted. Before the 14th century, however, after the collapse of the cupola, the second layer of painting was obviously damaged at the place close to the collapse, and later began to crumble and fall off. It was then that the three initial images of prophets appeared. On the remaining wall surface, below the windows, up to a height of several metres above the floor, in the space above the niches, and the upper part of the niches New Testament scenes were painted and the images of the Four Evangelists.

The third mediaeval layer of paintings (14th century) is in the highest part of the rotunda, in its cupola. It was painted after the cupola was demolished and rebuilt. It consists of two parts: in the centre there is an image of the Pantocrator, surrounded by 4 flying angels and the 4 Evangelists, and under it there is a frieze of 22 prophets.

In Chapter 3: *The Miracle of Painting. Stylistic and Artistic Analysis*, the author analyses the paintings preserved from the point of view of its stylistic and artistic qualities. The highest appraisal is given to the first mediaeval layer of murals painted under the conditions existing in the First Bulgarian Kingdom immediately after the building was turned into an Eastern-Christian Church in the 10th century. The quality of these murals, brilliantly revealed by the remains of the frieze of angels and above all by the only angel's head preserved, is indeed remarkable. We discover in them the great artistic value of the Hellenistic heritage in combination with the spirituality and sense for monumentality inherent in Early Eastern Christian (Byzantine) art. The second layer of paintings (11th—12th century, the time of Byzantine domination in Bulgaria) has also preserved the qualities of the great Eastern Christian monumental art, but owing to its later and Byzantine origin it is stiffer, more statically treated as far as movement and composition are concerned, the figures are frozen in frontal attitudes, and appear more ascetic than before. Finally, the third layer of painting has all the special features of its time (the end of the 14th century), of the dramatic years preceding the Ottoman Conquest of Bulgaria. These are murals also painted in the great monumental traditions of the older art and by the greatest masters. Their size was, however, considerably reduced (the murals of the first and second mediaeval layers reach a height of about 3 metres, while in this case, they are no more than 2 metres high). On the other hand, the third layer of murals shows great movement, and is full of the anxiety of its time.

At the end of the chapter the author also considers certain features of the artistic

and technical execution of the several layers of paintings in the church, citing certain chemical analyses of the plasters of the three mediaeval layers.

Chapter 4 begins with a subtitle — *The Inscriptions in the Church*. This part of Chapter 4 is written by Professor Ivan Duičev. He establishes the existence of two types of inscriptions: older ones, connected with the first and second mediaeval layers of murals in Greek, and Slav inscriptions connected with the third layer. Prof. Dujčev has succeeded in deciphering part of the inscriptions, in spite of their severely damaged condition. The most valuable quality of this part of the fourth chapter is the comparative deciphering of the great Greek inscription on the frieze encircling the church wall, connected with the second mediaeval layer of murals and establishing its character of a donor's inscription. Unfortunately the inscription is badly damaged and the most valuable data in it have disappeared: the date when the layer was painted and the name of the bishop 'thanks to whom' the murals were painted.

The remaining part of chapter 4 is devoted to several important problems, including two new subchapters: one devoted to the dating of the five layers of murals, and the other, to the origin of the name of the church — S. George.

Chapter 5: *The Monument and the City of Sofia down the Centuries*, has been planned as a concluding and summarizing chapter. The basic idea here is the following: from the moment of its appearance as an architectural ensemble at the turn of the third and fourth centuries A. D. 'the history of the monument develops parallel to the history of the city, in true closeness with it, reflecting the spiritual and cultural features of the various epochs in which it existed'.

In studying the history of the city of Sofia from the period of Antiquity (Roman Serdica) through the Middle Ages and the period of Ottoman domination down to our own day, the author establishes the truly continuous cultural and historical links between the city and the monument discussed here. She draws the conclusion that the latter has always occupied an important place in the city centre of Sofia, reflecting the most remarkable and highest cultural achievements of the city as well as of the entire art which developed in our country.

Tracing the development of the monument and the city, the author also touches upon some interesting new features, connected with the specific character of Bulgarian art in the Middle Ages. She observes that in this early period, particularly in the first mediaeval mural layer from the period of the First Bulgarian Kingdom (end of the 9th to the early 11th century), the monument was linked rather with the cultural development of the south-western regions of the Balkan Peninsula and the school founded there by S. Clement in the 10th century. On this basis we can explain the artistic and stylistic proximity which exists between the first mediaeval paintings in our monument and the murals in the Church of S. Sophia in Ohrid, the Church in Vodocha, S. Vrači in Kostour, etc.

Considerable space and attention is also devoted to the archaeological researches and findings in recent times in the region of the mediaeval city of Sredets, as a serious basis for conclusions and generalizations not only as regards the history of the city, but also the history of this monument.

In the process of work, in establishing the history of the city and the monument, numerous books and works of reference, beginning with Antique, mediaeval, down to contemporary literature, have been made use of by the author who has done her best to cover the ground thoroughly and to be exhaustive in her documentation and argumentation.

Frontispiece: The Church of S. George
Photographed in 1977

1. Situation of the Church of S. George (A) in the general plan of present-day Sofia. East of it are the ruins of an archaeological complex (B)
2. Longitudinal section of the antique building along the west-east axis. Plan: T. Ivanov and S. Bobchev
3. Reconstruction of the Centre of Sofia in the '50s. The building seen from the West with the western narthex-vestibule (now destroyed)
4. Discovering the main entrance of the western narthex-vestibule (now destroyed)
5. Part of the main entrance of the western narthex-vestibule (now destroyed)
6. General plan of the antique building according to I. Venedikov and T. Petrov
7. Cross section of the antique building without premises B, C and D, after I. Venedikov and T. Petrov
8. General plan of the antique building without the western narthex, after architect St. Yanev
- 9, 10, 11. The eastern, western and southern façades of the Church of S. George, after architect St. Yanev
12. The Church of S. George seen from the south-east. Photo taken in 1977
13. The Church of S. George with the archaeological complex to the east of it
14. The rotunda of S. George seen from the west
15. The mural paintings. The central cupola of the Church of S. George
16. Mural paintings on the north-eastern wall
17. Mediaeval murals and traces of the Turkish plastering on the western wall
18. Part of the murals on the northern wall (first and third layer of mural paintings)
19. Part of the murals on the east wall above the altar
20. First layer of mediaeval paintings. 10th century. The angel on the eastern wall
21. Graphic schema of the bandlike three-layer composition of mediaeval murals in the Church of S. George. 10th—14th century
22. Murals on the south-eastern wall. Below: Part of an angel (10th century). Above: Part of a frieze of Prophets
23. The first mediaeval layer of murals on the north-eastern wall before the restoration and the uncovering of the 10th century head of an angel
24. State of the paintings on the north-eastern wall after restoration and before the uncovering of the angel's head. First sounding out
25. The process of uncovering the angel's head. Removing the third mediaeval layer of murals
26. The process of uncovering the angel's head. Removing the third mediaeval layer of murals
27. Head of the angel after removal of the third mediaeval layer of murals. Traces of damage by an iron point
28. The angel's head after complete restoration
29. The first 10th century mediaeval layer of murals. The Prophet Jonah, photographed at the end of the '20s
30. The first 10th century mediaeval layer of murals. The Prophet Jonah, photographed in the early '70s
31. The first 10th century mediaeval layer of murals. Part of the frieze of the angels and the frieze of the Prophets
32. The first 10th century mediaeval layer of murals. An unknown prophet and S. John the Baptist
33. Graphic schema of the band-like compositions in the Church of S. George. Schemata A, B and C
A. The frieze of 22 Prophets
Third mediaeval layer of murals, 14th century
B. The frieze of the angels
First mediaeval layer of murals, 10th century

- C. The frieze of 16 Prophets between the windows of the Rotunda
- Prophets Nos 13, 14, 15 and 16 — first mediaeval layer of murals, 10th century
- Prophets Nos 1 to 12 — second mediaeval layer of murals, 12th century
34. First mediaeval layer of murals. 10th century. Traces of the image of an unknown Prophet on the north-eastern wall
35. Second mediaeval layer of murals. 12th century. Two Prophets on the north-eastern wall
36. Second mediaeval layer of murals. 12th century. Part of the frieze of Prophets. Prophet No 1
37. Second mediaeval layer of murals. 12th century. Part of the frieze of Prophets. Prophet No 2
38. Second mediaeval layer of murals. 12th century. Part of the frieze of Prophets. Prophet No 3
39. Graphic schema of part of the frieze of Prophets — second mediaeval layer of murals. 12th century
40. Second mediaeval layer of murals. 12th century. Images of Prophets on the southern wall
41. Graphic schema of part of the second mediaeval layer of murals on the western wall. 12th century
42. Second mediaeval layer of murals. 12th century. Part of the frieze of Prophets on the south-western wall. Prophets Nos 7 and 8
43. Second mediaeval layer of murals. 12th century. Images of Prophets Nos 9 and 10 on the north-western wall
44. Second mediaeval layer of murals. 12th century. Images of Prophets Nos 11 and 12 on the north-western wall
45. Second mediaeval layer of murals. 12th century. Images of five saints on the western wall above the entrance
46. Second mediaeval layer of murals. 12th century. Two saints from the group of five saints on the western wall
47. The monk-saint from the group of five saints on the western wall (detail)
48. The young saint from the group of five saints on the western wall (detail)
49. Second mediaeval layer of murals. 12th century. Image of *Christ Blessing* on the western wall. Photographed at the end of the '20s
50. Second mediaeval layer of murals. 12th century. Detail of the scene of *The Annunciation* on the altar arch
51. Second mediaeval layer of murals. 12th century. Scene of *The Dormition* above the southern entrance. Photographed at the end of the '20s
52. Second mediaeval layer of murals. 12th century. Scene of *The Dormition* above the southern entrance. Photographed in the early '70s
53. Second mediaeval layer of murals. 12th century. In the niche: traces of the scene of *The Nativity* and *The Dormition*. Above the niche — an Evangelist
54. Murals in the north-western niche. Traces of antique (6th century) paintings and of the 12th century scene of *The Baptism*
55. Second mediaeval layer of murals. 12th century. Scene with an Evangelist above the north-eastern niche
56. Second mediaeval layer of murals. 12th century. Scene with an Evangelist above the south-western niche. Photographed at the end of the '20s
57. Second mediaeval layer of murals. 12th century. Scene with an Evangelist above the south-western niche. Photographed in the early '70s
58. Second mediaeval layer of murals. 12th century. Scene with an Evangelist above the north-western niche
59. Second mediaeval layer of murals. 12th century. Image on the arch in front of the apse
60. Graphic schema of the central part of the 10th century frieze of the angels and part of the frieze of the 22 Prophets (14th century) on the eastern wall. Prophets Nos 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5
61. Third mediaeval layer of murals. 14th century. Part of the frieze of the Prophets, below it part of the frieze of the angels (10th century)
62. Third mediaeval layer of murals. 14th century. Part of the frieze of the Prophets on the eastern wall. Prophet No 1
63. Third mediaeval layer of murals. 14th century. Part of the frieze of the Prophets on the eastern wall. Prophet No 3
64. Graphic schema of part of the frieze of the Prophets (14th century) and traces of two angels (10th century) on the southern wall
65. Third mediaeval layer of murals. 14th century. Part of the frieze of the Prophets. Prophets Nos 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 and 11 on the southern wall
66. Third mediaeval layer of murals. 14th century. Part of the frieze of the Prophets. Prophet No 7
67. Detail of Prophet No 7. The Prophet's hand
68. Third mediaeval layer of murals. 14th century. Part of the frieze of the Prophets. Prophets Nos 8 and 9
69. Third mediaeval layer of murals. 14th century. Part of the frieze of the Prophets. Prophet No 10
70. Third mediaeval layer of murals. 14th century. Graphic schema of part of the frieze of the Prophets (Nos 11, 12, 13, 14 and 15)

71. Third mediaeval layer of murals. 14th century. Part of the frieze of the Prophets on the south-western wall (Nos 10, 11, 12, 13, 14 and 15)
72. Third mediaeval layer of murals. 14th century. Part of the frieze of the Prophets (No 11)
73. Third mediaeval layer of murals. 14th century. Part of the frieze of the Prophets (Nos 15 and 16)
74. Third mediaeval layer of murals. 14th century. Part of the frieze of the Prophets (Nos 14, 15, 16 and 17). Photographed at the end of the '20s
75. Third mediaeval layer of murals. 14th century. Part of the frieze of the Prophets (Nos 15, 16, 17, 18, 19 and 20). Photographed at the end of the '70s
76. Third mediaeval layer of murals. 14th century. Graphic schema of part of the Prophets (Nos 18 and 19)
77. Third mediaeval layer of murals. 14th century. Part of the frieze of the Prophets (Nos 18 and 19)
78. Graphic schema of the murals on the northern wall. Above: Part of the frieze of the Prophets (Nos 20, 21, 22 and No 1). 14th century. Below: remains of two 10th century angels
79. Third mediaeval layer of murals. 14th century. Part of the frieze of the Prophets (Nos 20, 21, and 22)
80. First mediaeval layer of murals. 10th century. Head of an angel after restoration. Photographed in the '70s.
81. Murals on the north-eastern wall: Above: Part of the third layer of 14th century murals. Below: part of the 10th century frieze of angels
82. Murals on the eastern wall. At the top: part of the third layer of murals (frieze of the 22 Prophets. 14th century). In the middle: the central part of the frieze of angels (1 and 8), 10th century. Below: Part of the frieze of the Prophets (Nos 3 and 4, 10th century, and No 1, 12th century)
83. First mediaeval layer of murals. 10th century. Angel No 1 on the eastern wall
84. First mediaeval layer of murals. 10th century. Part of the frieze of 16 Prophets
85. Second mediaeval layer of murals. 12th century. Head of Prophet No 10 in the frieze of 16 Prophets
86. Second mediaeval layer of murals 12th century. Part of the frieze of the Prophets (Nos 9 and 10) on the western wall
87. Second mediaeval layer of murals. 12th century. Head of a monk-saint in the group of the five saints on the western wall
88. Image of an angel from the frieze of angels in the Church of S. Sophia in Ohrid. Turn of the 10th and 11th century
89. Image of an angel from the frieze of angels in the Church of S. Sophia in Ohrid. Turn of the 10th and 11th century
90. Head of an angel from the frieze of angels in the Church of S. Sophia in Ohrid. Turn of the 10th and 11th century
91. Head of S. Sylvester from the Church of S. Sophia in Ohrid. Turn of the 10th and 11th century
92. *The Ascension*, mural on the vault of the Church of S. Sophia in Ohrid. Turn of the 10th and 11th century
93. Image of an Archangel in *The Ascension*. Church of S. Sophia in Ohrid. Turn of the 10th and the 11th century
94. Head of an angel in the composition in the cupola of the Church of Spass Nereditza, Novgorod, dated 1199. Destroyed during the War
95. Portrait of the son of Yaroslav the Wise, detail of fresco in the Church of S. Sophia in Kiev. 11th century
96. Murals in the central cupola of the Church of S. George
97. Third mediaeval layer of murals. 14th century. Central image in the cupola, *Christ Pantocrator*. Photographed in the early '70s
98. Third mediaeval layer of murals. 14th century. Image of *Christ Pantocrator* in the centre of the cupola. Photographed in the early '70s
99. Third mediaeval layer of murals. 14th century. Part of the frieze of angels and Evangelists in the central cupola
100. Third mediaeval layer of murals
101. General view of the murals. Central part of the cupola, frieze of the 22 Prophets (14th century) and the 10th century frieze of the angels
102. Third mediaeval layer of murals. 14th century. Part of the frieze of the Prophets (Nos 7 and 8).
103. Third mediaeval layer of murals. 14th century. Part of the frieze of the Prophets, the hand of Prophet No 8
104. Third mediaeval layer of murals. 14th century. Frieze of the Prophets. Head of Prophet No 8
105. Third mediaeval layer of murals. 14th century. Part of the frieze of the Prophets. The hand of Prophet No 10
106. Third mediaeval layer of murals. 14th century. Part of the frieze of the Prophets (Prophet No 10)
107. The mediaeval layer of murals. 14th century. Part of the frieze of the 22 Prophets
108. Third mediaeval layer of murals. 14th century. Part of the frieze of the Prophets (Nos 13 and 14)
109. Third mediaeval layer of murals. 14th century. Part of the frieze of the Prophets (Nos 16 and 17)

- 110, 111. Traces of no longer existing decorative murals on the plinth of the Church of S. George. Photographed at the end of the '20s
- 112, 113, 114. Traces of the Turkish ornamental murals of the 16th century on the western wall (112) and the north-western and western window (113 and 114)
115. Part of the band-like Greek inscription above the windows with the texts mentioned by K. Ireček
116. Second mediaeval layer of murals. 14th century. Greek inscriptions on the scrolls of the saints painted on the western wall. Photographed after the last restoration done in 1960—1973
117. Greek inscription on the scroll held by the monk-saint. 12th century. Photographed after the last restoration (1960—1973) was done
- 118, 119. Greek inscriptions on the scrolls of the sixth and the eighth Prophets in the frieze of the 16 prophets. 12th century
120. First mediaeval layer of murals. 10th century. Image of S. John the Baptist with a scroll in Greek. Photographed after the last restoration
- 121 (a, b). Individual parts of the ring-like Greek inscription. 12th century
- 122 a, b). Individual parts of the ring-like Slav inscription. 14th century
- 123 (a, b, c). Graphic writing of the word Prophet from the second layer of murals, 12th century, (a) and the third layer of murals (b and c)
124. The Slav inscription on the right of the head of Prophet No 3 in the frieze of the 22 Prophets on the eastern wall. 14th century
125. Slav inscriptions on the scrolls of Prophets Nos 6 and 7 in the frieze of the 22 Prophets. 14th century
126. Prophet No 8 in the frieze of the Prophets (14th century) with a scroll on which there is a Slav inscription
127. The Slav inscription on the scroll held by Prophet No 9 in the 14th century frieze of Prophets
128. Slav inscription around the head and the scroll of Prophet No 10 in the 14th century frieze of Prophets
129. Prophet No 12 in the frieze of the 22 prophets (14th century) with a scroll on which there is a Slav text
130. Part of the archaeological complex east of the Church of S. George in Sofia
131. The Church of S. George when the work of restoration was in progress after the Liberation. Photographed from the southern side
132. The Church of S. George at the end of the 19th century. Water colour by J. Oberbauer. 1892
133. The Church of S. George photographed in the '20s on the southern side
134. The Church of S. George when it was being restored at the beginning of the present century. Photographed on the southern side
135. The Church-Rotunda of S. George with part of the archaeological complex to the east of it. Photographed in the '50s
136. The Church of S. George photographed in 1977 from its eastern apsidal side