

**The Medieval Churches in the Diocesan Centre of the Sape****Archaeology**

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**Abstract**

The city of Sapa was the centre of today's Zadrime region. Before this province got this Slavic toponym, it was known as Sapa's field. For this, Ljubic writes that, on the left side of the Drin River, lies the area of Zadrime since the Middle ages; Shat Field, with the Sati Castle. This city was part of the list of medieval Albanian cities mentioned in the works of the prominent albanologists. The settlement of Sapa in which the bishopric's seat is located is thought to have been between two sides of the mountain, the Mount of St. Mehilli (western side of the mountain) and the Mount of Saint Ejlli (the eastern side of the mountain). Various historical sources show that the Sapa episcopal headquarter has moved several times from one place to another at different times and different historical circumstances. Based on these data, we can identify three dwellings located at different points of Mount St Mehilli, of the Suburban village of Shkodra district Nenshat.

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The Diocese of Sapa occupied a very strategic geographical position, it stretched between the diocese of Shkodra and the diocese of Lezha and initially it included only a part of the mountainous and plain area of the province of Zadrime. Sapa was the capital of this province and the Episcopal Sappatensis, depended on the Archbishopric of Tivar<sup>1</sup>.

Often, we come across this diocese also comes as Sappa, Sappa, Sapata and Sappatensis, where controversy has continued to emerge from its name. Milan Shuflaj, among other things, points out that in the Middle Ages (1291) it is the reconstructed episcopal city of Sappa in the area of Zadrime, where this name also remembers the northern Illyrian tribe of Sardinians or Thracians. In trying to give an answer to this problem, Dom Gaspër Gurakuqi emphasizes that the word Sapa is derived from the Illyrian language, in the Albanian language the word Cap means Skjap or Cjap, which then connects it with the helmet of Skanderbeg and other Albanian leaders that carry a goat on it<sup>2</sup>.

Sapa was of great importance because it served as a point of contact between the two important dioceses of Shkodra and Lezha and served as an institution of Christianity for the population of this region.

This diocese also had a particular political, economic, religious and cultural significance at that time, which we find reflected in the relations of the XVII-XVIII centuries and in the writings of the wellknown albanologists<sup>2</sup>.

The first data on the establishment of the diocese of Sapa are found in the works of Hungarian Dr. Ludwig von Thalloczy<sup>1</sup>. In these works except the year of the foundation of the diocese, it is also written about the circumstances in which they were created. From these it emerges that the beginnings of the diocese of Sapa date back in 1291, the year in which the early Catholics of the city of Sapa, whose city was ruined in 1240 by Tartu Kaduan, together with others revived the city and sought an episcopate, whom, after the prayers of the Roman Queen of Serbia Helena and the Archbishopric of Tivari, and in co-operation with the Dominican Order of Francis of Ragusa, Pope Nicholas IV, was given Episcopus Sappatensis (the first bishop of Sapa) June 11, 1291<sup>1</sup>. Likewise Milan Shuflyay says that great attention was paid to the Albanian line in the north, there it collided with the Slavs and was heavily disturbed by the schismatics<sup>1</sup>, which means that it was in a frontal position to the risk of Slavicism.

From the year of establishment to the year 1376, only the bishop Paul is mentioned, and it is not known in what year, and from 1376 to 1473 we have several bishops in this diocese. From the writings of Gasper Gurakuqi it emerges that the Sapat Church had been demolished and destroyed before 1473 and had almost no income and no produce, the time that Deja also had also been invaded in 1431<sup>1</sup>. In November 1489, the diocese of Sapa was left under the administration of the diocese of Lezha, the bishop called Blazin (Vlash), who held this position until 1490, where on January 13, 1490, a new reorganization was made: the Sapadiocese was recently abolished from Lezha with his bishop each, for Sapa was named bishop Prodocimimi. A year later, 1491 it was united with the border diocese of Sardis<sup>1</sup>. From 1491 to 1521, the chronology of the diocese bishops continues uninterruptedly.

In 1518 the bishop of Sapa was mentioned in a document where the Kuria commanded him together with the bishops of Lezha, Shkodra, Pult, Drishti and Kruja to return to their residences as in all these provinces there were all those clerics and christians. But after this from 1521-1578, for a period of 50 years, the bishops of this diocese no longer appear in the documents. Perhaps this was the phase of Ottoman invasion that was even the toughest. In 1578 the house of Bardhajve of the village Nenshat continues to liberation<sup>2</sup>. Frang Bardhi, bishop of the diocese of Sapain 1636, writes that Zadrima is about 20 milestones, 1000 houses divided into 30 villages with 700 Catholics<sup>1</sup>. In 1671, the apostolic visitor to Shtjefën Gaspari notes that in that year the diocese of Sapa had 1075 houses with 9226 Catholics, later (1832-1834), Mons. Borci spoke about 2024 Catholic houses with 15 492 inhabitants and the last figures were written by Monsignor Nevjani 1893, with 17 550 inhabitants. At the time of Gasper Gurakuqi, a priest in some of Sapa's parishes, in 1929, diocese of Sapa had a surface of 1270 km<sup>2</sup> with natural boundaries from the northwestern Drin River and from the southeast was bordered by the diocese of Mirdita and Lezha<sup>3</sup>.

By 1940, around 60 bishops were counted in this diocese, of which 12 belonged to the Franciscan Order. In 1940, the last bishop of Sapa diocese, Gjergj Volaj succeeded him until 1947, who was murdered, and the diocese remained without bishop and passed under the administration of the bishopric of Shkodra until 1967.

The settlement of Sapa in which the bishopric's seat is located is thought to have been between two sides of the mountain, the Mount of St. Mehilli (western side of the mountain) and the Mount of Saint Ejlli (the eastern side of the mountain) in a flat area which is known as field Frange, Suma Stone in Tanusha, in the Bardhaj<sup>1</sup> neighborhood, while the headquarters of the Bishop of Sapa and St. Mehilli's Church had been very close to the ruins of this settlement.

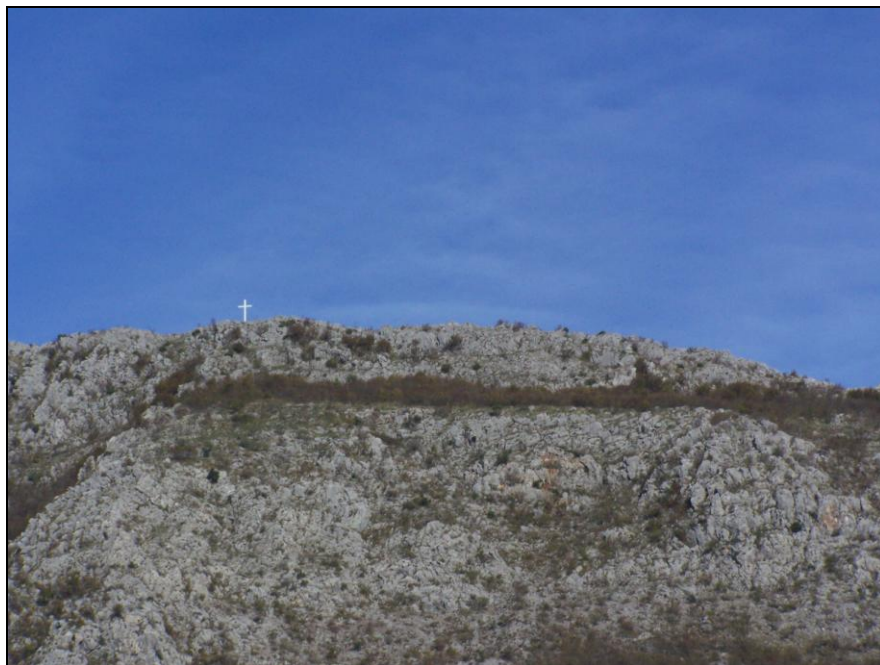
Various historical sources show that the Sapa episcopal headquarter has moved several times from one place to another at different times and different historical circumstances. Based on these data, we can identify three dwellings located at different points of Mount St Mehilli, of the Suburban village of Shkodra district Nenshat. (Picture 1).



**Picture 1.** Three residences of the Sapa bishop

### **First Residence of the Headquarters of the Bishop of Sapa XIII<sup>th</sup> century**

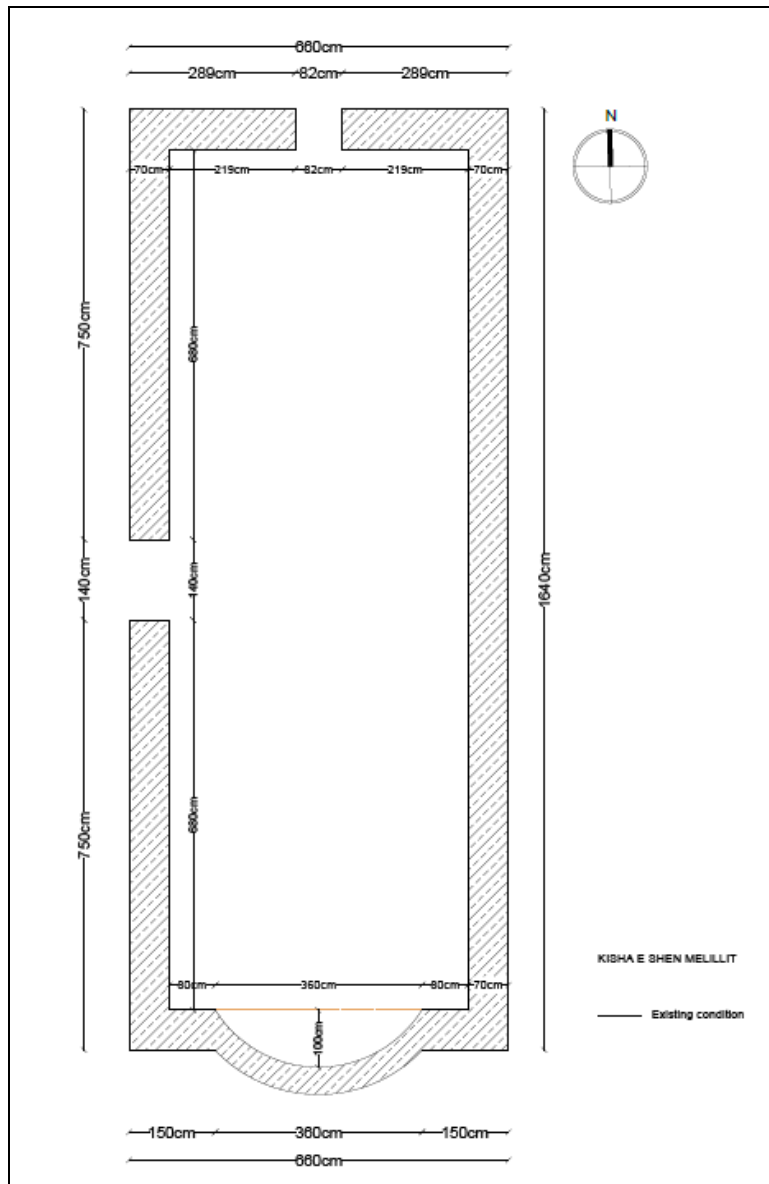
The first residence of the headquarters was located near the medieval town of Sapa in a flat area on the top of St. Mehilli's Mount. In the words of Archbishop VilimAdae in 1332, Sappa was inhabited only by Albanians<sup>1</sup>. Since the time of reconstruction in 1291 this city continued to exist until it was destroyed by the Turkish before 1473<sup>2</sup>. (Picture 2).



**Picture 2.** Near the top of the mountain in the area dominated by vegetation lie the ruins of the first residence of the bishop and the church of St. Mehilli.

Despite the destructions, there was a light of hope from time to time for his resurrection, just as Pope Gregory XI, in 1370, gave the Franciscan bishop permission to choose as assistants two Franciscan monks<sup>3</sup>. Historical sources show that the two Franciscans of the first mission who arrived in Albania in 1634 were housed in a flat on St. Mehilli's Church. From this we may think that it may have been rebuilt again and it has functioned some decades behind the invasion. In the writings of Shtjefen Gaspari, we find that on November 31<sup>st</sup>, 1671, he went to St. Michael's Cathedral, located above the Sapa Mountain, built of stones and walls in good condition. There is a need for a layer, Kelshey, mass clothes and mold for Oste. There are 6 biolchi land<sup>4</sup>, more than two vineyards in Hajmel and the other in Blinisht, all of them are bishop's<sup>5</sup>.

St. Michael's Church, which is located very close to the rocky peak of the mountain, protected by the northern winds, it's positioned on the southeast side of this lawn. This extended, rectangular church plan is NW-SE oriented. The walls are raised over a jamb and are stored on its four sides, somewhere better and somewhat worse, where the highest maximum height is in the northern wall that goes up to 2.80 m and has a thickness of 0.70 m. The dimensions of this church are: 16.40 m long with 6.60 m width, which is built of unprocessed stones of average size and bound with lime and with thick sand (Picture 3).



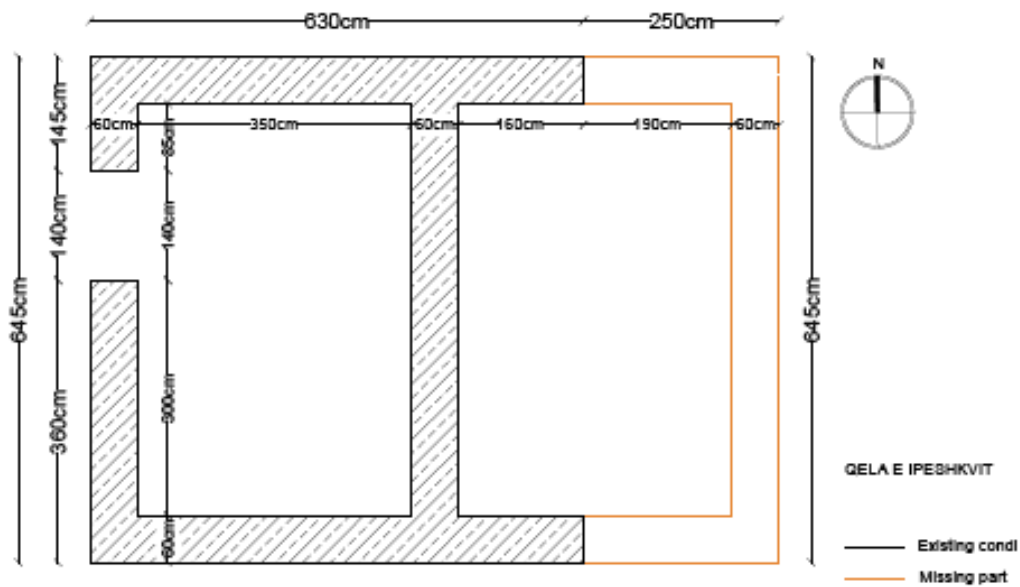
**Picture 3.** The Plan of St. Mehilli’s Church on St. Mehilli’s Mountain

There are two entrances one in the north and one in the west where the northern entrance looks a narrower entrance at a width of 82 cm while the western entrance, which was the main entrance, though it is very demolished seems to be wider and worked with scaled stone with a width of 1.40 m. This entrance could have been a vaulted arc, because near the western door to the inside of the church was found a sculpted stone that could serve as the arch of the vault (Picture 4).



**Picture 4.** Sculpted stone arch, found inside the church

The apse is almost destroyed 1 m out of the southern wall in a semi-circular shape of 3.60 m. By the form, manner and style of the building, and basing on the writings of A. Meksit<sup>1</sup> on this church, the construction time of this church belongs to the end of the XIII<sup>th</sup> century. The bishop's house was another important building in this city. It is located 22 m northwest of St. Mehilli's Church and has a different orientation with the church, west-east. The dimensions of this building are 8.80 m long and 6.45 m wide. The walls have a thickness of 60 cm, while the maximum height reaches 2.90 m. The entrance is located on the west side with a width of 1.40 cm (Picture 5).



**Picture 5.** Plan of the bishop's house

This building consisted of two different buildings separated by a wall of 5.30 m in length, then the walls continue almost to the rocky massif. This rock may have served as the bottom wall of the cell since not too high up from the ground there are some engraved hollow cavities that seem to be painted, which we think may have served for the maintenance of religious sculptures. (Picture 6)

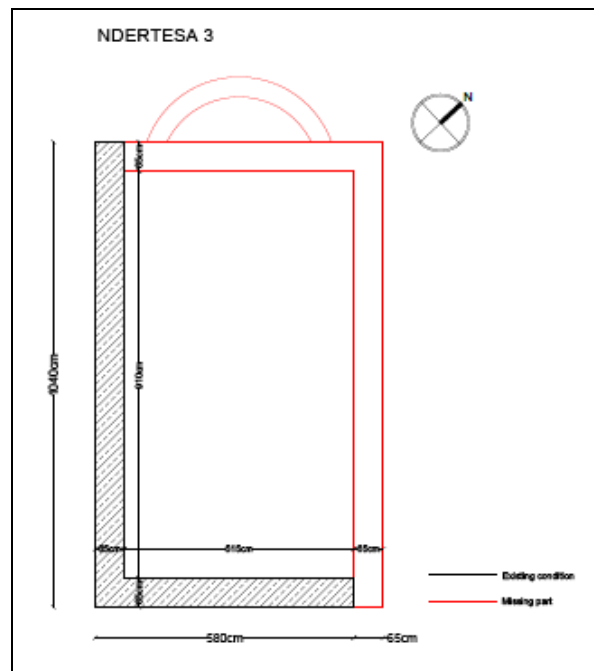


**Picture 6.** Rocky massif at the down the house

And in this flat area that residents of the Nenshat village call "The Lama of St. Mehilli" it is thought to have been the city of Sapa<sup>1</sup>, and we can confirm some of the old wall marks still identified today. This city is mentioned by Milan Shuflaj as a medieval city that was created on the line of Roman fortresses stretching from Tivari, relatively from Lezha, along the Drini and the ancient Roman road, which during the Middle Ages was called Via de Zenta, to Prizren. This range of medieval towns were; Suacium (Svaç), Drivastum (Drisht), Balcium (Balezo), Dango or Danji (Dejë), along with the Roman Fortress Διουάα (Sava, Sapa).

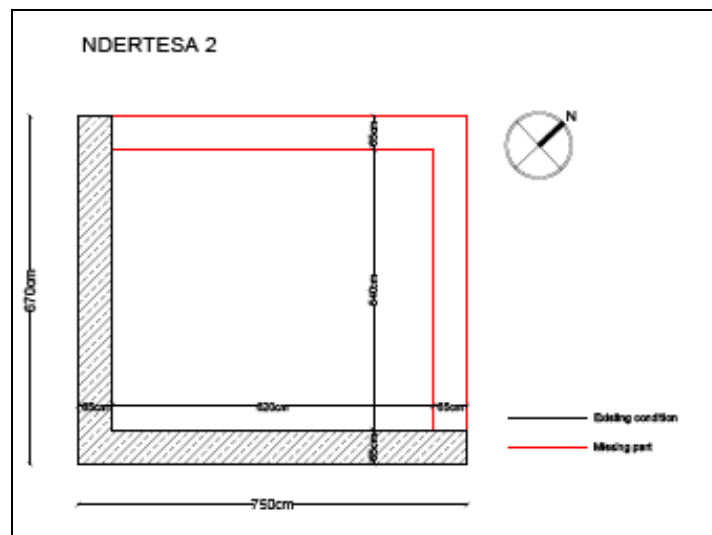
The vegetation is very dense that it has almost covered the buildings but there are still some lines on the sides of the apartments we could identify. In the survey we carried out in this area, we highlighted three dwellings but because of the great damage we can not identify what function those buildings had. Starting from the south side of the area in which St. Mehil's church is located, we will name these buildings with numbers:

1. "Building 1" or the tallest building is located to the west of the bishop's house. Although it is covered with vegetation, the footprints indicate a regular rectangular planimetry NW-SE, with a length of 10.40 m and a width of 5.80 m. The walls are preserved on all four sides of the building, but the southwestern section gives clearer details. The walls have a thickness of 65 cm and it is built with stone slabs of lime mortar, which is preserved only by a row of stones. (Picture 7)



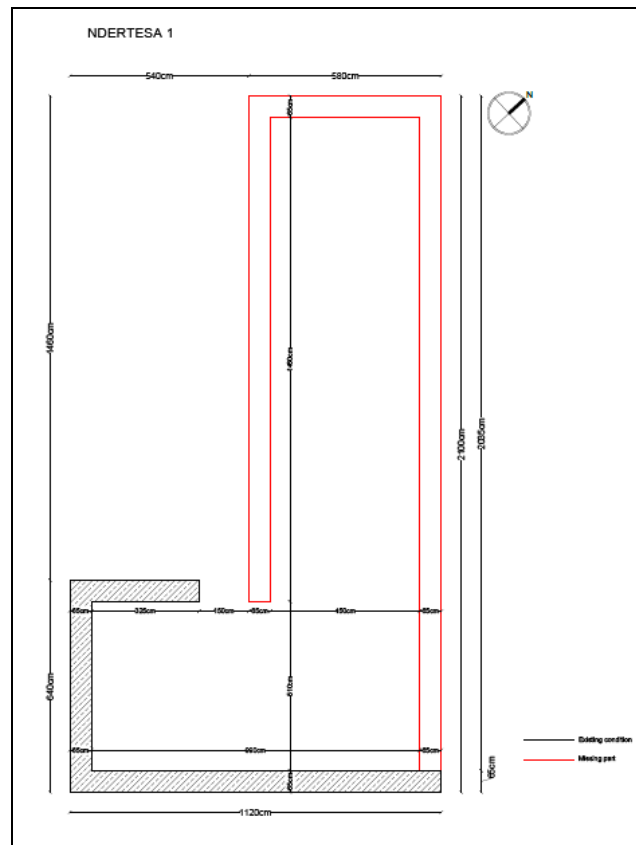
**Picture 7.** The plan of the first building seen in the city of Sapa.

2- At the distance 10.50 m in the N-E of the first building we distinguish the traces of a dwelling that we named "Building 2". In this building although the western and southern wall is preserved in a better condition than in all the other buildings on the eastern and northern side, there is no clear trace of them. This building has NW-SE orientation, the western wall has a length of 6.70 m while the southern wall goes over 7.50 m. The SW corner is also the most preserved segment in these buildings, which is stored in three rows of unspoilt and afforested land and lined with lime mortar at a thickness of 65 cm. (Picture 8).



**Picture 8.** The plan of the second building in the city of Sapa

3. "Building 3" is located at a distance of 16 m northwest from the north corner of the second building. This building is very demolished, a large concentration of stones is noticed at a length of 21 metres. By the edging of the walls it seems to be a large building with a tricky planimetry. Walls in this building have a W-E width of 11.20 m and length N-S 6.40 m. Starting from the N-W edge of this building at a distance of 5.40 m, a stonewall is distinguished in the vertical position to create the idea of a door threshold from which towards the north follows a tall wall of 14.60 m, only with a rare stones. The layout of this building makes us think that we are dealing with a large building and an important function (Picture 9).



**Picture 9.** The plan of the third building in the city of Sapa.

### The Second Residence of the Headquarters of Bishop of Sape, XVI<sup>th</sup> Century

From historical data we learn that the church of St. Mehilli of Sapa was attacked and destroyed by the Turkish invaders, and that in 1583<sup>1</sup> the mass took part in the church of St. George which has since then become a cathedral, where also here moved the headquarters of the bishop in a rocky massive near this mountain. St. George was a part of this church, and was among the greatest saints who are honored by Albanians. Among the 275 Catholic churches registered by Kordinjano in Albania, 19 of them were dedicated to St. George, more than other Saints, except St. Mary, Saint Nicholas, and St. Wenera.

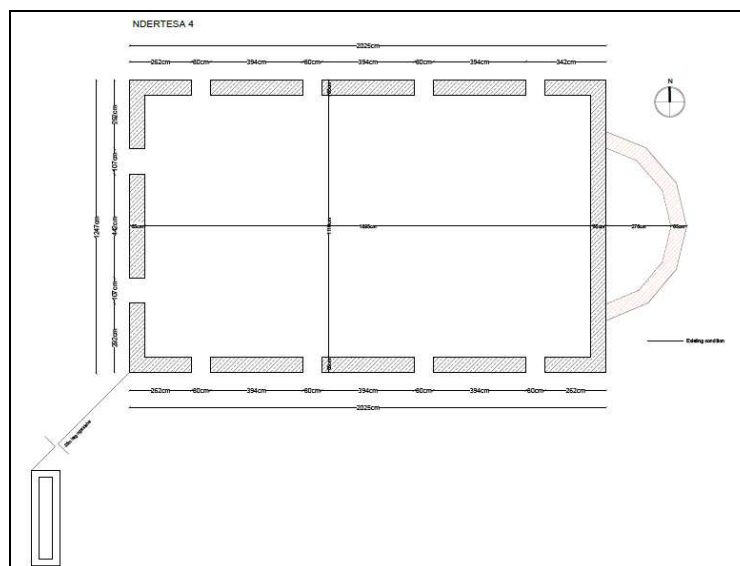
Among these churches was the church of Saint George in Sapa, marked in 1457. The church of St. George in Sapa is also known as the Church of Shkrepi, the toponym given from the inhabitants of the village.

In the report of Shtjefën Gaspar's visit to the diocese of Sapa in 1671, it is stated that the bishop's seat of this diocese is in Shat-Nënshat, but the bishop at this time left Shat and had moved to Mount St. Mehill, where he had been before the Sapa's bishopric seat. In this year, Gaspari writes that St. George's church was built with a stone wall and was in good condition. There are sacred things and some reservations. There are some fields around 12biolche but is not fertile soil and there are 30 houses with 350 inhabitants<sup>2</sup>.

In the 1905 earthquake this church was destroyed but the bishop, JakSerregji, had spent a considerable amount of money to rebuild it<sup>1</sup>. Since this church has been robbed and destroyed several times during its existence, it has changed her external appearance.

This church has a west-east orientation with a regular rectangular planimetry of 20.25m length and 9.30 m width. It has two entrances to the west of each and every one of 1.07 m and a door on the north side with dimensions 80 to 1.90 m. On both sides of the church at 3 m height from the ground are 4 rectangular windows while on the front there is a small round window and at the bottom end, in the apse, there is a small square window.

From the later restorations the church is decorated with stone blocks sculpted in regular cuboid outdoors while inside the wall is decorated with stones in irregular shapes connected with lime mortar since its construction. In the present the walls reach to a great thickness of 90 cm. The apse of this church is very special, it is 5 angular and has a perimeter of 8.10 m. (Picture 10).



**Picture 10.** The plan of the church of St. George

In this church there are many interior and exterior architectural elements that have given a distinct and decorative look with decorative elements suitable for the role and function of this church (Picture 11.12).



**Picture 11-12.** Elements architectural

In front of it, at a distance of 25.06 m, there is a stone basin with stone blocks sculpted in two stones, of 4.07m length and 1.20m width, while the raised part is built with smaller stones and mortar, which today is kept at 2.5 m height.

St. George's Cathedral and its yard have served for a period of time as well as a cemetery. In this church were buried bishop Pjeter Severini in 1873 and Gjergj Koleci in 1928. Also from the testimonies of the inhabitants we learn that their ancestors are buried here but because of the continuous damage they do not find their graves today.

To the southwest of the church there is a tomb covered with stone slabs, but it is obvious that it was previously open and with engraved graffiti of 1912. In this grave it is written in the old dialect of gege: *Here await the dead the remains Of Gjush Cinit. He was born 1885. As a dragon, he fought for the Religious Faith and the Freedom of the Homeland, to expel hence the enemies of the centuries. With a gun in his hand he gave his life for him on September 6, 1912. Bishop Gjergj Koleci and his friends testify to bravery and pray for the eternal happiness. Memorandum was placed by his father, Gjin Jaku 1916.*

In the northeast of the cathedral there are some ruins that have served as a cellar and oratory for the bishop of Zadrima, but today it is impossible to determine the function of each due to the heavy vegetation. At the foot of the rocky massif, on the road that descends from the cathedral down to the village, there is a well that has served the bishop for vital needs as it is an area quickly covered by drought.

### **Third Residence of the Headquarter of Bishop of Sapa XIX<sup>th</sup> Century**

A third burial place of the Bishop of Sapa became the Bardhaj neighborhood at the foot of Mount St. Mehilli, when in 1860 the bishop Severini moved his seat there<sup>1</sup>. This residence is located to the north of Saint George's Cathedral and almost at the same height as it divides a torrent valley, but the hilly is now flat, not so rocky and sloping as the Saint George's cathedral.

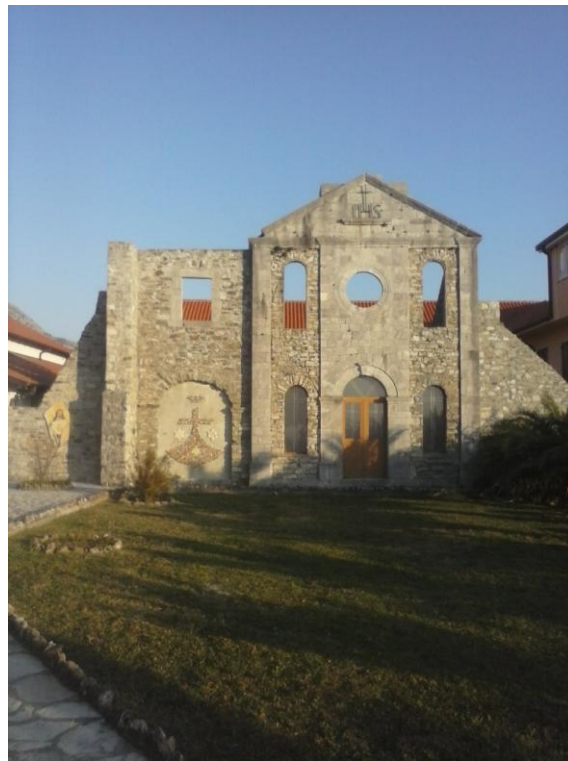
In 1905 this site was burned by a great fire, but the bishop of this diocese who was named that same year, Jak Serregji, rebuilt it and made it even better than before.

This headquarters was a two-story building east-west oriented and with a length of 22.20 m and a width of 17 m, which consisted of 40 rooms. Today, only southwestern edge is preserved with the first two windows of the first floor and the stone floor is preserved. (Picture 13)



**Picture 13.** Photo of the headquarters of Bishop of Sapa, 19th century.

At the southeastern edge is the baptistery of the bishop which is a tall chapel (perhaps two storey) with a width of 6.10 m and a length of 10 m. This was a bit special, where the main bow and 1.20 m wide door, on both sides of the door, has a small window with a width of 0.60 m both on the first floor and on the second floor. Between the two windows of the second floor and perpendicular to the main door had a large round window. Today only the front part is preserved but reconstructed. (Picture 14).



**Picture 14.** The front part of the Chapel of the Bishop of Sapa, 19th century.

In March 2003, here was set the "Order of the Carmelite Sisters" that today have made many constructions but those parts that have still found them undiscovered from the bishop's headquarters have kept them exposed in front of their house.

The center of the diocese of Zadrime is no longer here because it, along with its bishop's headquarters, has moved to Laç de VauDeja and the cathedral of this diocese built in 2005 bears the name of the saint of Albanian origin "Mother Teresa".

Sapa's medieval churches, despite the historical conditions they faced, managed to survive, unlike other dioceses such as Sardinia and Danjas, which were extinguished since the 15th century. They carry out the function for which they were created, kept faith and religion alive to the inhabitants of this province, whose great number of Catholic believers confirm this hypothesis. These churches are also a rich testimony of the material cultural heritage and the national spirituality.

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