

**THE EARLY CHRISTIAN FRAGMENTED WOODEN  
RELIEF FROM THE SITE BARGALA NEAR ŠTIP**

In 2001 within the Episcopal city of Bargala (village Kozjak, region of Štip, R. od Macedonia), in the prefurnium (fig. 1, 1a) of the large Christian bath devastated at the end of the 6th C. several fragments of wooden relief (fig. 2) have been dug up during the controll excavation carried out by the Museum of Štip at 2,50-270 meters in dept.

Their condition is poor since at some point they have been touched by fire and carbonised in a layer of carbonised wood, pieces of carbonised logs, soot, ash and coal. Only a few pieces of a larger relief have been discovered. The largest piece contains an easily recognizable scene, representing the Sacrifice of Abraham (fig. 3, 3a). Dimensions of the this piece are 10,8x11x3 cm., while the framing rib becomes even thinner -1,5 sm. We can only speculate about the purpose and original location of the object. It may be related to an object-like chair or revetment of a cript in the near by Episcopal basilica and Episcopal palace. The framing ribbons above and under the main scene contain an ornament-swastika (preserved up to 11x8x4 cm.). Several small animals, among which the archaeologist that discovered it saw a bull, a lion (10X5X4), and some floral elements have been found dispersed. Some of the fragments contain inscribed letters that were part of a longer inscription. Archaeologist Aleksova Blaga has supposed there was a martirium initially under the altar of the later build over Episcopal basilica. The theme of the sacrifice is adequate for such a place. Also, it can come from an episcopal throne, wooden reliquary or box. We might raise the question how such object ended as a fire material.

Together with the woodcarving, bronze coins of Provus (276-282) have been discovered. We can tentatively propose a date according to the existing recognisable stylistic elements and analogies in the 4th C. A.D.

The first short note on this finding within a report on archaeological findings in the Annual of the Galery and Museum of Štip has wrongly attributed the relief to pagan Roman cult. Until the winter 2005 the relief has been reported as "under conservation" so it was impossible to see it "in life". Today it is finally exhibited in the permanent exhibition of the recently renovated Museum of Štip. The Early Christian wooden Relief from the site Bargala, is the only presenta-



Fig. 1 Bargala, part of the bath where the accidentally preserved wooden relief fragments have been found

Сл. 1 Баргала, део Велике Бање где су пронађени случајно сачувани делови дрвеног рељефа

tion of early Christian Abraham's sacrifice found in the Balkans and the only one depicted in wood from the early Christian world, and can be added to the images of this composition found in the whole Christian world, mostly on the sarcophagi in the Vatican collection of Rome and in Rome's catacombs.

The Sacrifice of Isaac (the "Akedah",) was one of only a few popular biblical images. Its semiotics has been the subject of a lot of discussion and disputes in Jewish and Christian literature. It is an important story, which intersects and links the two religions. It was one of only a few popular biblical images that have been represented in various art works and techniques in synagogues and churches, in chapels and catacombs, as well as on glass, jew-

ellery, amulets, seals, ivory.<sup>1</sup>

"A study of biblical interpretation can shed light on Jewish-Christian relations because both Jews and Christians lived in a biblically oriented culture . . . because, to a certain extent, Jews and Christians shared a common Bible."<sup>2</sup>

The Sacrifice of Isaac in Early Christian Art was a very popular subject, proved by the writings of Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine.<sup>3</sup> Christians, Muslim and Jews regard Abraham as the father of their people and/or the creator of monotheism. The Bible, the Torah and the Genesis all mention Abraham as a prophet.

<sup>1</sup> J. Wilpert, *Das Opfer Abrahams in der altchristliche Kunst*, Romische Quartalschrift, i, 1887, 126-160; A. M. Smith, *The Iconography of the Sacrifice of Isaac in Early Christian Art*, American Journal of Archeology, xxvi, 1922, 159-169; I. Speyart van Woerden, *The Iconography of the Sacrifice of Abraham*, Vigiliae Christianae, xv, 1961, 197-253; and R. Krautheimer, *Lorenzo Ghiberti*, 2nd ed. Princeton, 1982, 38ff.

<sup>2</sup> Edward Kessler, *Jews, Christians and the Sacrifice of Isaac*, Cambridge University Press, 2004, 18-19.

<sup>3</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Son of God and the Holy Spirit*, (Patrologiae Graecae (PG) 46.573): "I have seen many times the likeness of this suffering in painting and not without tears have I come upon this sight, when art clearly led the story before the sight." Augustine, *Reply to Faustus the Manichaean* 22.73. "The deed is so famous that it recurs to the mind of itself without any study or reflection, and is in fact repeated by so many tongues, and portrayed in so many places, that no-one can pretend to shut his eyes or his ears from it."

Jensen suggests that, „homilies and liturgies were the most important sources from which early Christian imagery derives meaning for its audience.”<sup>4</sup> The use of the Isaac-Christ typology in the liturgy is also reflected in the practice of including readings from Genesis 22 in the Easter vigil service.

Kessler and Bregman argue that visualisation of the theme shall receive much more attention than the interpretation of the textual sources. “An understanding of artistic interpretation has generally begun with the word but should begin with the image. The image clarifies the word and not necessarily the other way around.”<sup>5</sup>

Kessler suggests it is also true for the Christian and Jewish studies of the artistic portrayal of the *Akedah*. He suggests the first stage should be to examine the image on its own; the second is with reference to the biblical story; the third is with reference to the literary context.

“Scholars now accept that in ancient times the artist played a significant role in portraying the biblical story. The Targum Pseudo - Jonathan mentions that figurative art in synagogues was approved as long as it was used not for idolatrous purposes but only for decoration. ..Like the rabbis, the church fathers were concerned about the idolatrous nature of art in places of worship, but they were not as hostile to art as was originally assumed. For example, Tertullian like Rabban Gamaliel II states that figurative representation was not forbidden because it was not idolatrous.”<sup>6</sup>

After St. Paul’s letter to the Hebrews, 11:17, The Sacrifice of Isaac in literature was sometimes interpreted as a metaphor of prefiguration of the mys-



Fig. 1a The very place of the Bath where the fragments were found today

Сл. 1а Бања где су пронађени фрагменти, данас



Fig. 2 The wooden relief fragments on display in the Museum of Štip, Macedonia

Сл. 2. Фрагменти дрвеног рељефа изложени у Музеју у Штипу

<sup>4</sup> Robin Jensen, *The Offering of Isaac in Jewish and Christian Tradition, Biblical Interpretation* (1994), 85-110, 106.

<sup>5</sup> Edward Kessler, A Response to Marc Bregman, *Journal of Textual Reasoning*, <http://jtr.lib.virginia.edu/volume-2-number-1/response-to-marc-bregman/>

<sup>6</sup> *Idem*.



Fig. 3 The fragment with the scene of Abraham's sacrifice (Akedah)

Сл. 3 Фрагмент са представом Акеде - Аврамове жртве

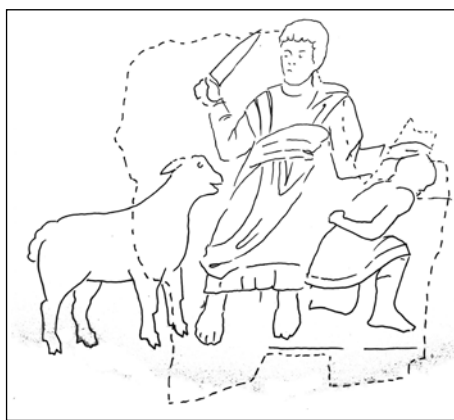


Fig. 3a Reconstruction of the missing parts of the Abraham's sacrifice

Сл. 3а Реконструктивни цртеж делова који недостају представе Аврамове жртве

teries instituted by the era of Christ and the Church<sup>7</sup>. Isaac was related to Christ and associated to the Road to Calvary because of the pre-sacrificial preparations in which Isaac carried the wood of his own immolation on his back (Christian reading of Genesis 22). This sacrifice is seen as prototype of Christ sacrifice on the Cross already around year 200 by Melito, bishop of Sardis.<sup>8</sup> Jewish tradition identified Mount Moriah with the Temple Mount. An anonymous pilgrim from the 6th century known as the Piacenza Pilgrim described Golgotha in the following way: „You can see the place where [Jesus] was crucified, and on the actual rock there is a bloodstain. Beside this is the altar of Abraham, which is where he intended to offer Isaac, and where Melchizedek offered sacrifice.“<sup>9</sup>

Western Hellenistic, Asiatic-Hellenistic or Jewish iconographical type of the scene of Akedah In time the iconography of the *Sacrifice* of Isaac differed, as it happens with most of the themes. Generally there were motifs specifically associated with two basic types, Latin or Hellenistic (sometimes named Greek, that is Byzantine) iconographic types. The typology concerning this scene suggested by Alison Moore Smith in the early thirties of the 20<sup>th</sup> C. seems to be still in use.<sup>10</sup> She describes the scene of Akedah filled with the Hellenistic tradition of simplicity and lack of realism. In the Hellenistic iconographical type

<sup>7</sup> *By faith Abraham, when he was tried, offered up Isaac; and he that had received the promises offered up his only begotten son, of who it was said, that in Isaac shall thy seed be called; accounting that god was able to raise him up, even from the dead; from whence also he received him in a figure.* Hebrews 11:17

<sup>8</sup> Jeffrey Spier with contributions by Jensen et al., (Jensen, *Early Christian Images and Exegesis*), exhibition catalogue, *Picturing the Bible: The Earliest Christian Art*, Yale University Press, 2007, 65-85,

<sup>9</sup> C. Milani, *Itinerarium Antonini Placentini. Un viaggio in Terra Santa dal 560-570 d.C. (A journey to the Holy Land from 560 to 570 AD)*, Milan, 1977, 238.

<sup>10</sup> A. M. Smith, *The Iconography of the Sacrifice of Isaac in Early Christian Art*, *American Journal of Archeology*, xxvi, 1922, 159-169.

Abraham wears either tunic and pallium or exomis. Usually he is bearded. Holding the knife in his right hand, with his left he often grasps the head of Isaac who kneels on the ground or stands beside the lighted box - shaped altar with hands shackled as Christ's were in the apocryphal version of the Crucifixion. Frequently the Hand of God is introduced, in which case Abraham turns his head towards Him and the ram is almost invariably present. In the



Fig. 3b Upper view of the fragment

Сл. 3b Фрагмент са Акедом, поглед одозго

Asiatic-Hellenistic Type Abraham always wears long draperies. He grasps the knife with his right hand and turns his face towards the Hand of God emerging from above which is an omnipresent detail. Sometimes his left hand rests upon Isaac's head. The presence or absence of ram and tree are not significant variations as in the Hellenistic type. The detail which differentiates the Asiatic-Hellenistic from the western Hellenistic representations is that Isaac is always on the altar instead of standing or kneeling on the ground; the representation that follows the literary source usually found in Eastern iconography, the *posait eum* (Isaac) in altare of Gen. XXII.<sup>11</sup>

In the case of Bargala, the altar if it existed is missing, but it is visible Isaac is seated and it is rather less probable his head was put on an altar. It is much more probable according to the possible length of his arm, Abraham holds Isaac's hair (fig. 3 b).

Sources for the images

It has been assumed that Judaism influenced Christian interpretation but little attention has been given to the question of the influence of Christianity upon Judaism. Kessler provides an insight into the point of mutual influences and intersection of this two-way encounter and argues that neither Jewish nor Christian interpretations can be understood properly without reference to the other. "Jews and Christians share not only common biblical texts, but also common exegetical tradition".<sup>12</sup> Isaac Kalimi in his review of Kessler book<sup>13</sup> disputes Kessler starting point that "Jews and Christians share a sacred text: they are bound together by the Bible." He inquires if they also share a common exegetical tradition that is the Old Testament. Kalimi thinks the very common texts of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament generally are not used as a starting point for better mutual understanding and acceptance of each other; on the contrary, they deepened the dispute, animosity, and conflict between the sister religions over thousands of years.

<sup>11</sup> Smith, *The Iconography of the Sacrifice of Isaac in Early Christian Art*, 161, 163.

<sup>12</sup> Kessler, *Christians and the Sacrifice of Isaac*, 184.

<sup>13</sup> Published by RBL in 2005 by the Society of Biblical Literature. See <http://www.bookreviews.org/subscribe.asp>.



Fig. 4 Catacomb of Priscilla, Rome (late 3rd C.) with Isaac carrying the wood.

Сл. 4. Катакомба Присциле, Рим, касни 3 век, са Исаком који носи дрвеће



Fig. 5 Catacomb of Peter and Marcellinus, Rome (4th C.)

Сл. 5. Катакомба Петра и Марцелинуса, Рим, 4. век

#### *Works of art depicting the Sacrifice of Isaac*

In early Christian art, artistic interpretations of the Sacrifice of Isaac illustrate deliverance (sometimes referring to the Eucharist). Images are found in funereal art because the story was understood in relation to death and resurrection.

The earliest catacomb frescoes that illustrate the theme of deliverance, dated in the 3rd C, come from the Callixtus catacomb in Rome. Abraham and the child Isaac are offering thanks for their deliverance. In the foreground, to their right stands the ram. Late 3<sup>rd</sup> C. fresco located in the Catacomb of Priscilla, Rome (fig. 4) shows the boy Isaac carrying wood and Abraham pointing to the fire on an altar or perhaps to a tree. Abraham is looking up to the heavens. Two other 4<sup>th</sup> C. frescoes have very similar images. In the Catacomb of Peter and Marcellinus (fig. 5) Abraham holds a knife in his raised right hand and at his feet is the child Isaac - naked, kneeling and bound for the sacrifice. The ram is far aside

of the altar.

Cubiculum C in the Via Latina (late 4th C.) represents the same iconography: the altar has wood burning upon it; to the left is the ram, Abraham has a sword in his hand, looking at something, while Isaac is kneeling with his hands behind his back. Below is a representation of a servant with a donkey. Stemberger thinks their iconography is under Jewish influence and that is a proof for the peaceful coexistence of Jews and Christians.

Outside Rome there is a 4th C. painting from Egypt, Karge, chapel Myra. Comparison with the Sacrifice on Golgotha is found in the liturgical texts. The ram is significant in

artistic interpretation because of its allusion to deliverance. Typology is rarely found in artistic interpretation during this period, and when it is found it is associated with liturgy, not literature, states Kessler.<sup>14</sup> He thinks these examples of catacomb art emphasise the aspect of deliverance, which either parallels, or perhaps even precedes, the early Christian prayer for the dead, which contained a cycle of deliverance. This prayer and its reference to the Sacrifice of Isaac came into use by the 4th century A.D. So artistic interpretation paralleled the liturgical development.<sup>15</sup>

The text that is referred to when illustrating this composition is Genesis 22:10-13:

*“And Abraham stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son. And the angel of the Lord called unto him and said, Abraham, Abraham, and he said, Here am I. And he said, Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou anything unto*

*him; for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou has not withheld thy son, thine only son from me. And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked and beheld behind him a ram caught in a thicket by his horns; and Abraham went and took the ram and offered him up for a burnt offering instead of his son .”*

The reading of Genesis 22, like the Jewish liturgical calendar, was an important element of the lectionary cycle and was mentioned by a pilgrim during her visit to Jerusalem in the late fourth century AD. The Easter cycle was the major feature of the liturgical year and Genesis 22 was commonly read on the Thursday before Easter. When the priest extends his hands over the host he prays: “*Supra quae propitio ac sereno vultu respicere digneris et accepta habere, sicuti accepta.*”



Fig. 6a detail with the Akedah, sarcophagus of Junius Bassus

Сл. 6а Детаљ рељефа са Акедом, Саркофаг Јунија Баса

<sup>14</sup> Kessler, A Response to Marc Bregman, *Journal of Textual Reasoning volume II*, no. 1, 2003, p. 4.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.



Fig. 7 fragment of sarcophagus Vatican inv. no 31470

Сл. 7. фрагмент Ватиканског саркофага са инв. бр. 31470



Fig. 8 Istanbul, relief found at Fatih, as stray find during the reconstruction of Tophane Medrese in 1926

Сл. 8 Истамбул, рељеф пронађен код фетије, као случајни налаз приликом реконструкције Тофани Медресе 1926. године

Images of the Sacrifice of Isaac are frequent in early Christian sarcophagi, and the Mas d'Aire Sarcophagus (3<sup>rd</sup> C.) seems to be the earliest. It shows the child Isaac, bound and kneeling. Abraham grasps his hair from behind and raises the knife to strike. Abraham's eyes are not on Isaac but the ram, which is standing at his side (almost nuzzling him). The ram appears eager to be sacrificed.

The early Christian art rarely shows typology in the details. For example, the sarcophagi examples do not portray the ram caught by its horns or caught in a bush, suggesting that ram was not of christological importance to the artists. Nor do they show Isaac carrying wood as a model of Christ carrying the cross.

Many of the sarcophagi show post-biblical interpretation which can not be found in contemporary Christian literature. This may also indicate that artistic interpretations contain traditions, that are otherwise lost.<sup>16</sup>

#### *Bargala's relief iconography and typology*

God commands: "[t]ake your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah" (Gen. 22:2)

The iconographic simplicity recalls early Christian use of narrative style and the iconographic simplicity represented in sarcophagi and catacombs, so that the viewer immediately gets a visual interpretation of the story.

<sup>16</sup> For example, in a Luc-de-Bearn sixth-century sarcophagus, a man and woman are watching the sacrifice (Sarah?). The appearance of Sarah at the sacrifice is mentioned in the poems of St Ephrem of Syria and other Syriac writings but rarely in the Greek or Latin fathers. See Kessler, *A Response to Marc Bregman*, 3.



Abraham has frontal position, wears tunica and palium, with the right hand uprised but closer to the near-by lamb, holding a knife, bare footed and his left hand (the part from the elbow downwards missing) probably holds Isaac's hair. The knife in his right hand is stopped by God? We cannot see this since only the upper part of the tree on his right is visible. The shoes removed may link this scene to Moses at the burning bush (Ex. 3.5). The artist has clearly indicated that when Abraham and Isaac reached the sacred spot they have removed their shoes out of respect for the sanctity of the site. It is also the case at some mosaics of synagogues of the 5<sup>th</sup> C. in Israel. His hair is combed backwards, he probably wears a beard. Isaac wears short tunica, his head missing. He is seated on a stone with his back turned on his father. So we do not know if he was represented as child or young man, but his figure is smaller than the one of his father. This is the moment before the deliverance when the ram is brought to be sacrificed instead of Isaac. The male figures are represented a bit schematised, with the cloths divided in many folds.

The ram is the most skilfully drawn and realistically represented figure. The face of Abraham, his hair style resembles the features of the stucco saints from the Baptistery of the Orthodox in Ravenna, 5<sup>th</sup> C.<sup>17</sup> The only sarcophagus with frontal position of Abraham is the 3<sup>rd</sup> C. Junius Basus sarcophagus from Rome (fig. 6). The possible position of Isaac in Bargala's relief is like the one represented here (fig. 6a). There might have been an altar in the Bargala relief too (missing).

The Christian author Tertullian considered the pallium an appropriate garment both for Christians, and for educated people, in contrast to the toga, since it was associated with philosophers. Expressing decorum and piety, the pallium often appears in portraits for funerary, commemorative, and honorary monuments. By the 4<sup>th</sup> century, the toga had been more or less replaced by the pallium, a garment embodying social unity.<sup>18</sup>

Early Christian wooden reliefs dated in the 4<sup>th</sup> C. are very rare to find. I can name only the wooden doors from St. Ambrogio, Milan and from St. Sabina, Rome<sup>19</sup>, figures from Egypt (Louvre) - wooden doors, and relief with besieged city from Egypt (Berlin Museum) dated in the 5<sup>th</sup> C.<sup>20</sup>

The Mas d'Aire Sarcophagus from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century is the earliest one containing Abraham's sacrifice. It shows the child Isaac, bound and kneeling. Abraham grasps his hair from behind and raises the knife to strike; his eyes are not on Isaac but the ram, which is standing at his side, eager to be sacrificed.

A Vatican sarcophagus with inventory no. 31470 (fig. 7) is a very fragmented relief that shows also similarities with the Bargala's Akedah relief iconography.

<sup>17</sup> Fridrih Gerke, *Kasna Antika i rano hrišćanstvo*, Novi Sad 1973, photo 10-11.

<sup>18</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:Cynwolfe/clothing\\_of\\_the\\_Roman\\_Empire#cite\\_notes-30,31,32](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:Cynwolfe/clothing_of_the_Roman_Empire#cite_notes-30,31,32)

<sup>19</sup> Javier Barral I Altet, *The Early Middle Ages*, Tashen, Köln, 1997, 56.

<sup>20</sup> *Byzantium 330-1453*, ed. By Robin Cormack and Maria Vassilaki, Royal Academy of Arts, London 2008, fig. 7, 57;



Fig. 9 San Vitale, Ravenna, completed 546-548, mosaic lunette with scenes of Abraham's life.

Сл. 9 Св. Витале, Равена, завршен 546-548, мозаична лунета са сценама из живота Аврама



Fig. 9a San Vitale, Ravenna, Abel and Melchizedek making their sacrifices and sharing a church altar with bread and wine, panel opposite the lunette with the mosaics from Abraham's life

Сл. 9а Св. Витале, Равена, Авел и Мелхиседек приносе жртву од хлеба и вина на црквеном олтару, панел са супротне стране од мозаика са сценама из живота Аврама



Fig. 10 bargala, two pieces from the frieze with a lion and another animal (head missing, fur like the one of a ram but the animal is larger in size-bull?), divided by large swastikas made of three lines.

Сл. 10 Баргала, два дела фриза са лавом и још једном животињом (недостаје глава, крзно је као код овна али је већа животиња у питању), издвојене помоћу мотива свастике састављене од тројне ленте

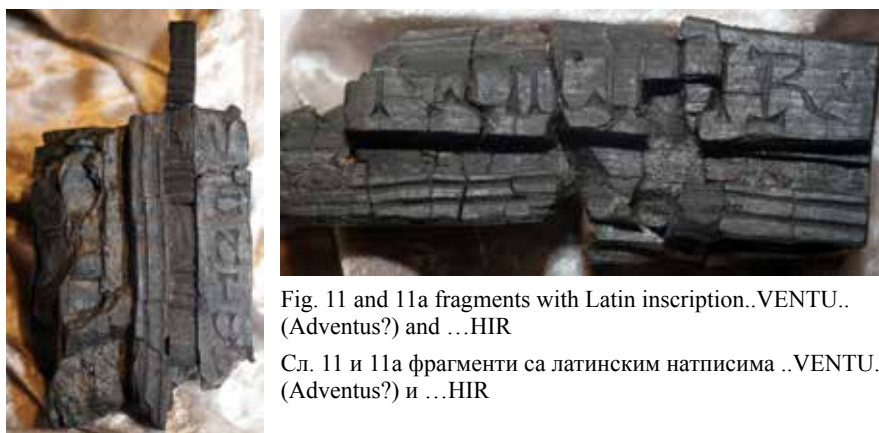


Fig. 11 and 11a fragments with Latin inscription..VENTU..  
(Adventus?) and ...HIR

Сл. 11 и 11а фрагменти са латинским натписима ..VENTU..  
(Adventus?) и ...HIR

Analogue images of Abraham's sacrifice on Early Christian reliefs & sarcophaguses come from: Istanbul, relief found at Fatih (fig. 8), as stray find during the reconstruction of Tophane Medresi in 1926<sup>21</sup> (hair style and cloths' stylization resembles Bargala's relief), fragment of sarcophagus from St. Maria dell Anima, Rome (Isaac's position resembles Bargala's relief), Sarcophagi from St. Ambrogio, Milan, sarcophagus no. 184, Museo Laterano, Rome, Sarcophagus of Junius Bass (Isaac position may resemble the one from Bargala). At the sarcophagus of Marcus Claudianus (330-335), Vatican Museum, inv. no 31489, the position of Abraham hand and head is neither westerner nor easterner, does not touch his head, and several more from the Vatican collection.<sup>22</sup>

Genesis XXII was among the lessons of the Old Testament read during the Eastern Vigil, attested in the 4th C. already in Jerusalem, Milan and Gaul.

According to Speyart van Woerden that section of the present Canon of the Mass in which sacrifices to Avel, Abraham and Melchisedek are mentioned is part of the primitive Canon that came into use in the 4th C.<sup>23</sup>

Some early Christian mosaics reflect a different typological reading of the story of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac.

At St. Vitale, Ravenna, the Sacrifice of Isaac is associated with the offerings of Abel and Melchizedek (9a) represented on the opposite side, and is linked to the liturgy of the Eucharist. The cycle of images from the Abraham (fig. 9) narratives move from Sarah overhearing the three visitors give Abraham the promise (Gen. 17-18) on the left side of the lunette to the sacrifice of Isaac on the right. God's hand stays Abraham's sword with the ram waiting at the side (Gen. 22). Isaac is kneeling on the altar and Abraham's sword is raised but the hand of God prevents the sacrifice. At Abraham's feet is the ram looking at him.

<sup>21</sup> Nezhir Firatli, *La sculpture byzantine figurée au musée archéologique d'Istanbul*, 1990, 305.

<sup>22</sup> [http://www.rome101.com/Topics/Christian/Magician/pages/Vat31470\\_0609\\_0805WS.htm](http://www.rome101.com/Topics/Christian/Magician/pages/Vat31470_0609_0805WS.htm)

<sup>23</sup> Isabel Speyart Van Woerden, *Vigiliae Christianae* Vol. 15, no. 4 (Dec., 1961), 214-255, 220.



Fig. 12 Zodiac Wheel Mosaic in the great synagogue of Tzippori, 5th C. (the mosaic floor is divided into seven parts, one of which shows the Akedah)

Сл. 12 Мозаик са зодијачким точком, велика синагога у Тципори (Сипорис), 5 век (мозаик је подељен на седам сегмената, у једном од ових је приказана Акедат)

These mosaics show the existing original church altar where the Eucharist was celebrated and the Akedah was mentioned during the offertory prayers, associated with epiclesis (a petition for the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the bread and wine).

Kessler quotes the following 4th century prayer which explicitly links the biblical figures in the mosaic during the liturgy of the Eucharist: „Be pleased to look upon these offerings with a gracious and favorable countenance, accept them even as you were pleased to accept the offerings of your just servant Abel, the sacrifice of Abraham, our patriarch and that of Melchizedek, your high priest - a holy sacrifice, a spotless victim.”<sup>24</sup>

#### *Other fragments of the wooden relief from Bargala*

There are several more fragments apart from the one discussed above, two pieces from the frieze with a lion and another animal (head missing, fur like the one of a ram but the animal is larger in size), divided by large swastikas made of three lines (fig. 10).

Other small fragments that do not belong to the frieze are one with a lamb, grapes and vine leaves, and a table or chair leg?

There are two fragments with Latin inscription ..VENTU..(Adventus?) and ...HIR (fig. 11, 11a). The first fragmented inscription is read vertically, from the top downwards.

On the fragment under the lion there might be an inscription inscribed or a decoration where the omega letter looks like lozenges, several omegas and one L can be noticed. This paleography requires further research. Latin inscriptions are very rare during the Early Christian period in Macedonia, they may be found on the impost capital with cock from the Rotunda church at Konjuh, Kratovo (there are some similarities of the letters in the capital's inscription over the abacus), and again on several reliefs of Archangel Michael from Vinica.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Edward Kessler, *Jews, Christians and Muslims*, SCM Press, 2013, 140.

<sup>25</sup> Snežana Filipova, *Primeri na ranovizantiski plastika i kapiteli od Makedonija so aplicirani natpisi/ ili bukvi, Systasis 6-7*, 2008.



Fig. 13 and 13a  
Gerasa synagogue,  
Jordan, 5th C. up to  
530, mosaic

Сл. 13 и 13а  
Мозаик синагоге у  
Гераси, Јордан, 5  
век,-све до 530 г



The fragment with the Akedah is slightly rounded as is another part with inscription. Conservators shall try to reconnect some of the damaged parts and divide wrongly connected ones.

*The meaning of the animals from the frieze*

One of the possible interpretations that come to my mind is they are zodiac signs or animals entering the boat of Noah? This theme is frequent in the mosaics of the synagogues in the 4 -6<sup>th</sup> C.



Fig. 14 Synagogue in Beth Alpha, 6<sup>th</sup> C. mosaic

Сл. 14 Мозаик синагоге у Бет Алфи, 6 век



Fig. 15 The synagogue in Dura Europos, Syria (244)

Сл. 15 Синагога у Дура Еуропосу (244)

Analogue frieze with such animals (a lion and a bull running) is represented on the mosaic floor from Gerasa, 5<sup>th</sup> C. There are other fragments preserved that show another lamb, a grape, a small bird, and a piece that looks like a small leg of a chair. There is no photo in the photo library of the Museum (at least that is what I have been informed by the photographer of the museum) to indicate what was the position of this fragments altogether when they have been discovered.

#### *Akedah in Jewish art*

Many scholars, agree with Goode-nough, considering the archeological findings of Dura-Europos that Jews who built the Synagogue, in art style and content followed not fundamentally „Jewish,“ but rather Hellenistic influences. Herbert Kessler and others argue that the Dura Synagogue paintings (fig. 15) were part of Jewish propaganda program, set up against

Christians, to compete for Gentile converts. The art emerged during a time of „intense debate“ between Jews and Christians and that „throughout the empire and frequently in public, Jews found themselves defending their own Scriptures and history under challenge from Christians.”

Seaver concludes the fourth century was the age of the great conflict between the church and the synagogue, and the period of the gradual breakdown of the bureaucracy of the Roman government. This was adjoined with the ever-growing influence of the ecclesiastical authority on the central government which is visible in the Roman legislation of the century which dealt with the actual rights and privileges of the Jewish community.<sup>26</sup> Was that the reason to destroy the relief belonging to a Jewish community in some times of conflict between the Christians and the Jews? Or it somehow accidentally ended in the flames of a fire that caught part of the Large bath? Apart from the Akedah represented in the synagogue in Dura Europos, I will note here only a few examples of Jewish art of the 4-6<sup>th</sup> centuries A.D. depicting Zodiac and/or Akedah:

Zodiac Wheel Mosaic in the great synagogue of Tzipori (fig. 12), 5th C. (the mosaic floor is divided into seven parts, one of which shows the Akedah, Gerasa synagogue (fig. 13, 13a), Jordan, 5th C.- 530, mosaic, Beth Alpha (fig. 14), 6th C. mosaic, northern panel of the nave, the synagogue in Dura Europos (244), wall paintings (fig. 15).

Some of the possible functions of the relief if belonging to a Jewish community:

chair/throne or the one for circumcision, casket of religious context

If part of the Christian community - casket (of a reliquary) that will explain the inscriptions.

Still, we must add the possibility there are several pieces of a furniture brought together to make fire or accidentally consumed by fire that has taken place in some room above the yard (where they have been found in).

Снежана Филипова  
РАНОХРИШЋАНСКИ ФРАГМЕНТИ ДРВЕНОГ РЕЉЕФА  
ИЗ БАРГАЛЕ КОД ШТИПА

Године 2001. у префурнијуму Велике Вање Епископског центра Баргале код Штипа, Р. Македонија, уништене крајем 6 века, пронађено је неколико фрагмената дрвеног рељефа у току контролних истраживања овог дела локалитета на дубини од 2,5-2,7м). То су усвари делови веће целине који нису изгорели приликом намерног потпаљивања или случајног пожара. Највећи фрагмент је следећих димензија:

<sup>26</sup> James Everett Seaver, *Persecution of the Jews in the Roman Empire (300-438)*, University of Kansas Press 1952, 5. “The Theodosian Code, a compilation of the mid-fifth century, does not contain all the legislation previously passed, but it probably contains all that was ever enforced or not withdrawn before 438. The Theodosian Code gives accurate dates and place locations from which laws and rescripts were promulgated; from these it is possible to reconstruct the progressive decline in privileges and security suffered by the Jews in the Roman Empire from 321 to 438.”

10,8x11x3cm, a на њему је аутор овог текста препознао сцену Аврамове жртве. Археолог Белдедовски који је вршио истраживања је погрешно помислио да се ради о паганском римском божанству, а приликом моје посете 2002. и 2003. године локалитету и Музеја у Штипу, на моје инсистирању да се ради о овој сцени, у следећем извештају је истраживач дозволио ову могућност, не наводећи да је то моје читање.

Фриз рељефа садржи у односу на људске фигуре крупне животиње уметнуте у свастику састављену од три ленте, само је лав препознатљив (10x5x4cm.). Глава друге животиње недостаје, могуће да се ради о бику. Ове две животиње, као и тема Зодијак, или Нојева барка (и животиње које се искрцавају) су честе на мозаицима синагога 5 века н.е. Део фрагмента има делимично сачуване натписе од којих се разазнају "adventus" који иде по вертикали и реч од које се разазнаје "...hig". Испод лава на фрагменту фриза је урезани плитки напис или декорација? Разазнаје се слово омега изрезане као ромб, и слово "Л" после коа следи опет омега.

Сцена Аврамове жртве у првим вековима првог миленијума наше ере најчешће припада хеленистичком или јеврејском иконографском типу. Аврам из Баргале је окренут фронтално, са мало дужим ножем у руци, а Исак приказан као дете или младић који седи окренут леђима свом оцу. Обојица су боси показујући поштовање као и Мојсије. Најближи нашем решењу је рељеф из Истамбула из области Фетије, пронађен приликом ископавања Torhane Medresi 1926. године. Недостају глава Исака и део руке Аврама, положај фигура има доста заједничког са онима на саркофагу Јулија Баса из Ватикана. Фризура и нос Аврама наликује свецима из баптистерија православних у Равени, изведених у штуку. Одећа је шематизована, Аврам носи тунику и палијум. Ован или овца са десне стране Аврама има сачуван део главе и део тела који се спаја са вратом.

Могуће датирање рељефа је крај 4 века, а контекст, ако је припадао Јеврејској заједници, којој су тада и законима Императора Теодисија драстично смањена права, је сто за ритуално обрезивање или ковчежић религиозног контекста. Ако је целина припадала хришћанској заједници, могуће је да се ради о део реликвијару.

Можда су делови целине случајно изгорели приликом каснијег пожара тада напуштеног града, и да нису намерно потпаљени. Намерно потпаљивање се може повезати са реперкусијама према Јеврејима. Како је видљиво захваљујући резултатима археолошких ископавања, Баргала је била богата епископски град, са развијеним занатима (текстилни, винарски, керамички), црквени објекти су украшавани богатом пластиком, делом импорт из Проконезиса, а Јевреји су често насељавали економски јака насеља. У Стобију је већ констатована синагога па није немогуће да их је и овде постојала.