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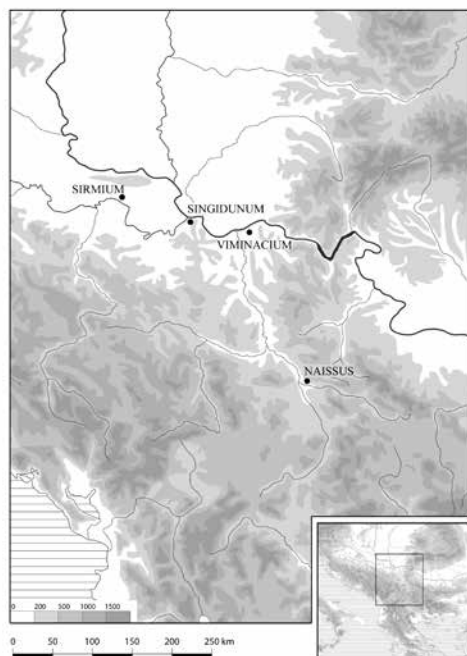
**PALEOCHRISTIAN SEPULCHRAL MONUMENTS
OF VIMINACIUM AS AN INDICATOR OF SOCIAL STATUS
OF BURIED INDIVIDUALS***

In ancient cities in the territory of the Roman province of *Moesia Prima*, we can notice an unequal representation of early Christian monuments during the 4th and 5th century. Poor information provided by historical sources,¹ but also the small amount of material remains, indicate that *Viminacium*, as the capital of the province, had no significant role in the early Christianisation of the Balkan provinces of the Roman Empire (Map. 1). Most of the early Christian findings from *Viminacium* originate from the site of Pećine, where the presence of Christians is documented with sepulchral monuments, memorial buildings that were used not only as tombs, but also for Christian rites, some epigraphic monuments with mainly funerary characteristics and a few graves with Christian memorials or grave goods. Given that these monuments were discussed in the previous works of different authors, I will just briefly recall several significant monuments.²

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¹ In historical sources has not been recorded a single name of martyr from *Viminacium*, while the names of some martyrs from other large centers in north Illyricum are known (*Naissus, Singidunum and Sirmium*), including bishop of *Sirmium* Iraeneus and his deacon Demetrius (there are churches dedicated to him in *Sirmium* and Thessalonica, and also St. Anastasia and St. Synerotes from *Sirmium*; from *Singidunum* deacon Fortunat and Christians Donat, Ermil and Stratonicus. It is assumed that *Naissus* was among the first cities having its martyrs and it is recorded already in the 4th century by Sanctus Victricius, bishop of the city of Rouen in France (*Rotomagensis*), in his writing *De laude sanctorum*, cf. J. Zeiller, *Les origines chrétiennes des les provinces danubiennes de l'Empire romain*, Paris 1918, (reprint Roma 1967), 105-128.

² M. Mirković, *IMS Viminacium et Margum*, vol. II Beograd 1986, 177, no 216, 217, 178, no 219, 179, no 220; M. Korać, Late Roman Tomb with Frescoes from Viminacium, 1991, *Starinar* XLII, 107-122; *Idem.*, *Slikarstvo grobnica u Viminacijumu*, Požarevac, 2000; G. Milošević, *Arhitektura grobnica u rimskim centralnobalkanskim provincijama od IV do VI veka*, unpublished PhD thesis, University of Belgrade, Faculty of Architecture, 2006.



Map 1 The major early Christian cities in the territory of the Roman provinces in today's Serbia in the 4th century.

Карта 1 Већа хришћанска средишта на територији римских провинција на тлу данашње Србије у IV веку

In particular, we will use this opportunity to discuss the painted Christian tomb from the site of Pećine (G.5517).³ The tomb was discovered with several other typologically identical tombs. The difference between this and other tombs of the same type is in the narrative of the decoration.

The central motif on the west side is the Christogram in a wreath composed of painted laurel leaves Christ (figs. 1,1a). The Christogram is a common motif in tomb painting and expresses hope for eternal life through Christ. As a complement to the west side, the east wall is decorated with a presentation of the Garden of Paradise, with peacocks, a fountain in the form of a cantharus and the tree of life (fig. 2). On the north and south lateral sides are hunting scenes within a dark red border (fig. 3). A frieze with a vine is painted above the figural scenes on the front and lateral walls, a motif that symbolises the Garden of Paradise.

All the tombs in *Viminacium* were used for multiple burials, a fact that is also true of this Christian tomb. The bones had been dislocated and fragmented by plunderers, but anthropological analysis has determined that four people were buried in the tomb. A coin of Constantine the Great, struck in 307, was found in the grave. Based on the findings and

stylistic elements of the paintings, the researchers dated tomb to the first half of the 4th century.⁴

Unlike this tomb, most of the other early Christian tombs in *Viminacium* are built of secondary used material with a cover of bricks, which often include a Christogram consisting of overlapped Greek letters *X* and *P*. In this context, we can distinguish several tombstones, epigraphic monuments with motives of a Christogram or with text displaying early Christian characters.⁵ It should be borne in mind that in the earlier period of Christianity when followers of the

³ The tomb is reconstructed and therefore not in its original location. Presented frescoes are replicas of the original ones kept at the National Museum in Požarevac cf. M. Korać, Late Roman Tomb with Frescoes from Viminacium, 1991, *Starinar* XLII, 107-122; *Idem.*, *Slikarstvo grobnica u Viminacijumu*, Požarevac, 2000.

⁴ *Idem.*, *Slikarstvo grobnica*, 72.

⁵ M. Mirković, *IMS Viminacium et Margum*, vol. II Beograd 1986, 177, no 216, 217, 178, no 219, 179, no 220.

Fig. 1 Viminacium. G/5517 site Pećine. Western side of the tomb. Christogram with apocalyptic letters A (alpha) and Ω (omega). (Photo by M. Korać).

Сл. 1 Виминацијум. Г/5517 лок. Пећине. Западни зид гробнице. Христограм са апокалиптичним словима А (алфа) и Ω (омега). (Фото М. Кораћ).



Fig. 1a Viminacium. G/5517 site Pećine. The angle of the western and the southern wall of the tomb. (Photo by M. Korać).

Сл. 1а Виминацијум. Г/5517 лок. Пећине. Угао западног и јужног зида гробнице. (Фото М. Кораћ).



new religion were still persecuted, we somewhat rarely encounter their official religious assignment. Consequently, epigraphic monuments with direct religious declarations are very rare, as these sparse finds from *Viminacium* confirm.

We should assume that, besides the graves with apparent Christian characteristics, there were also unidentified Christian graves whose above ground signs have disappeared or those which, due to the poor socio-economic status of the decedent, did not have grave signs made of a more permanent material on which the religious affiliation was declared.

* * *

Based on the current level of investigation of ancient *Viminacium*, we can conclude that data regarding the first Christians is not complete. All present knowledge of early Christianity in *Viminacium*, based mainly on archaeological excavations that mostly covered the southern and eastern necropolis while re-



Fig. 2 Viminacium. G/5517 site Pećine. Eastern side of the tomb. Representation of the Garden of Paradise. (Photo by M. Korać).

Сл. 2 Виминацијум. Г/5517лок. Пећине. Источни зид гробнице. Представа рајског врта. (Фото М. Кораћ).

searching the military camp and civilian settlement, is still in its infancy. We should say that, at this moment, we do not have evidence for the existence of early Christian churches, which undoubtedly must have existed in the city, given its status of the Episcopal seat. Also, we do not have at our disposal any data about the existence of graveyard churches, despite the fact that a large Late Roman necropolis where Christians had also been buried has been discovered. We have, so far, only data about memorial structures which, along with their basic function as tombs, were also used for performing Christian rituals associated with the decedent.

Small in number, the Viminacium Christians did not have their own separate necropolis. They buried their dead within pagan Late Roman necropolises, in already established rows. It is obvious that there was no ban on Christians being buried among pagans, and this was no exception. There is no doubt that there was no strict control of regulations imposed regarding the interment of Christians in the Danubian provinces of the Empire during the 4th century. A similar situation was also encountered at another large necropolis in the territory of the Upper Moesia province (later *Dacia Mediterranea*), at Jagodin Mala in Niš (*Naissus*).⁶

If we try, based on the registered monuments, to determine the social status of the first Christians in *Viminacium*, it can be seen that there are only two economically differentiated layers. One layer consisted of wealthy and influential citizens, while the second group belonged to those Christians who came from the poor strata of society. The first layer of wealthy Christians built luxury buildings for family funerals or the burials of a small Christian community. Some of them were solid burial structures painted using the

fresco technique, to which were attached typical Christian symbols, clearly confirming that they were Christian tombs. From the above examples we can see that the Christogram is the most common symbol found in *Viminacium*. At the same time, the poorer Christians buried their dead in ordinary earthen graves or in graves whose coffins were constructed from secondary used material.

Gravestones with memorials written in Greek and Latin are mainly made from brick or fragments of tegulae and, on rare occasions, slabs of limestone or marble. The poverty in this stratum of society is evident when we look at their

⁶ Most recent investigation results published: G. Jeremić, The late antique necropolis in Jagodin Mala, Niš (Naissus), Serbia – eight years of research, *Strategie e Programmazione della Conservazione e Trasmissibilità del Patrimonio Culturale*, Roma 2013, 272-281.



Fig. 3 Viminacium. G/5517 site Pećine. Hunting scenes on the northern and southern lateral sides of the tomb. (Photo by M. Korać).

Сл.3 Виминацијум. Г/5517 лок. Пећине. Сцене лова на северној и јужној страни гробнице. (Фото М. Кораћ).

graves and inscriptions, which are mostly carved by ignorant stone masons or people who are not professionally engaged in this trade, perhaps someone in their immediate environment. The funerary texts were written in crooked lines, with unevenly sized letters. From this we can conclude that the poor stratum of early Christians were educated, but not wealthy enough to pay for high-quality craftsmen. In contrast, members of the first group were a small number of wealthy citizens or, more likely, dignitaries who had risen in the new Christian hierarchy.

Based on current knowledge regarding the beginnings of Christianisation in *Viminacium*, only a small number of middle-class citizens accepted the new religion that was coming from the east. The logical question is: why, among the middle class, were there no prominent Christians? A partial answer to this question is provided by preserved material remains. Namely, the rich of the urban population remained supporters of the official Roman religion or solar cults. Most of the late antique religious cults that came from the east, among them Christianity, did not find a spiritual path to the higher classes of armies and citizens. There were probably many reasons for this, with one being the possibility that this richer section of Roman citizens was not inclined to the new religious learning in which equality in poverty was preached.

We could also think about the negative impact of heretical views. It is a fact that the initial period of development of the Christian church was in conflict with various heresies that appeared with greater or lesser intensity and encompassed almost the entire then Christian world. The first heresy that created a huge rift in the church during the 4th century was the teachings of the Alexandrian presbyter Arius. In the period after the Council of Nicea 325, many important events related to the Arian teachings took place precisely in the area of the Illyrian prefecture.⁷ Among the supporters of Arius in the Danube region were the bishops Ursacius of *Singidunum*, Valens of *Mursa*, Germinius of *Sirmium* and Palladius

⁷ About Arian teaching and his supporters in the Danube region see: O. Ilić, *Ranohrišćanski pokretni nalazi na području dijeceze Dakije od IV do poč. VII veka*, unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Belgrade, Faculty of Philosophy, 2005, 36-48, with the cited literature.

of *Ratiaria*. Arius' teachings, thanks to the bishops of *Singidunum*, *Sirmium* and *Ratiaria*, outlived him, who died in 336, contributing to the fact that the Illyrian prefecture became an Arian stronghold for the next few decades. Owing to this situation, in *Viminacium*, the official Roman religion and solar monotheism long dominated Christian teaching within the larger part of the urban population, particularly the higher social strata.

It could be concluded, based on the limited data provided by the material remains, but also by the written sources, that *Viminacium* did not play an important role in the early Christianisation, despite being the capital of the province. In contrast to *Viminacium*, written sources record considerably more data about Christianisation during the same period in some other Roman provincial cities in the territory of the Central Balkans, such as *Sirmium*, *Singidunum* and *Naissus* (Map. 1). However, it should be taken into account that our information regarding early Christianity in *Viminacium* is based primarily on investigations encompassing the southern and eastern necropolis. It could be expected that the area of the military camp and the civil settlement that has yet to be archaeologically investigated will bring to light, in the course of future archaeological investigations, new evidence about the sacred architecture of early Christian *Viminacium*.

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ПАЛЕОХРИШЋАНСКИ СЕПУЛКРАЛНИ СПОМЕНИЦИ ВИМИНАЦИЈУМА
КАО ЈЕДАН ОД ПОКАЗАТЕЉА СОЦИЈАЛНОГ СТАТУСА САХРАЊЕНИХ

Питање ране христијанизације Виминацијума, главног града провинције *Moesia Superior* односно *Moesia Prima*, још увек представља тему која није довољно обрађена међу истраживачима који су протеклих деценија вршили ископавања на овом локалитету. Присуство хришћана у Виминацијуму током IV и у првим деценијама V века документовано је поред писаних извора и материјалним остацима. Већина ранохришћанских налаза из Виминацијума потиче са локалитета Пећине, где је присуство хришћана током IV и раног V века потврђено поуздано одређеним ранохришћанским споменицима који се односе на меморијалне грађевине, затим малобројне гробове са хришћанским обележјима и епиграфске споменике.

Ако бисмо на основу регистрованих споменика добијених досадашњим археолошким истраживањима, покушали да одредимо социјални статус првих хришћана, античког Виминацијума, можемо запазити да постоје само два економски диференцирана слоја. Један слој који су чинили малобројни имућнији грађани, највероватније великодостојници који су се уздигли у новој хришћанској хијерархији, док су другој групи припадали верници који потичу из сиромашних слојева друштва.

Треба имати у виду да подаци о раном хришћанству у Виминацијуму нису комплетни, будући да су досадашња сазнања заснована на археолошким ископавањима којима су углавном биле обухваћена јужне и источне некрополе града. Истаживања војног логора и цивилног насеља тек су у зачетку и ту свакако треба очекивати нова сазнања која ће потврдити или можда изменити досадашњу слику о ранохришћанском Виминацијуму.