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**THE CRYPT IN THE SANCTUARY OF THE BASILICA NO 3
AT THE ANCIENT CITY OF ZALDAPA
(PROVINCE OF SCYTHIA)**

Zaldapa is the largest (covering an area of ca 25 ha) fortified Roman-Byzantine city in the countryside of Dobroudja – the Late Roman Province of Scythia (Fig. 1). Around the middle- or second half of 6th century AD, the city got an Episcopal cathedra in the Diocese of the Metropolitan Bishop of Tomis (now *Constanța*, Roumania)¹.

On the site there were conducted archaeological excavations in 1905/6 by the founder of the Bulgarian archaeology Karel Skorpil. In 1913/4 a team of Romanian archaeologists led by G. Mateescu also excavated there. The results were not published, but later they were partially documented by K. Skorpil. In 1949 M. Mirchev excavated a Late Roman Cistern and captation-well in the North-Western foothills of the city. All these results with detailed bibliography were analyzed and published by S. Torbatov along with supplementary data collected recently by him².

Until 2014, only two Early Christian basilicas were known in Zaldapa. The first one is located next to the SW gate and the second one – close to the Northern gate. In 2014, a new basilica – No 3 was located next to the crossroad of two of the main streets of the city (Fig. 2). During the seasons of 2014-2015 it was archaeologically investigated and a lot of new and interesting Early Christian material came to light.

Basilica No 3

The basilica (Fig. 3) has three naves, a semicircular apse, a tripartite narthex and atrium with a total length of 51 m and an width of 21 m. South of the

¹ Г. Атанасов, *Бележки и допълнения към църковната организация в Мизия и Скития през IV–VII в.*, – AMV VIII-1, Сборник в чест на Ал. Минчев. Варна 2008, 299–320; G. Atanasov, *Christianity along the Lower Danube Limes in the Roman Provinces of Dacia Ripensis, Moesia Secunda and Scythia Minor (4th–6th C. AD)*, – In: *The Lower Danube Roman Limes*. Sofia 2012, 327–380.

² С. Торбатов, *Късноантичният град Залдапа*, София 2000.



Fig. 1. Map of the Late Roman Province of Scythia
Сл. 1. Мапа касно римске провинције Скитије

southern aisle there is located a large building, which consists of two large premises with three accesses: one from the West; one from the North (to the church) and another one approach from the East. It could be supposed that this building was the Episcopal Residence.

According to the archaeological surveys and the numismatic data, Zaldapa suffered a large scale destructions during the Gothic and Hunnish invasions at the end of 4th- and in mid- 5th century AD. The life in the city recovered at the end of 5th – first half of 6th century AD. Basilica No 3 was built probably in that period and at a later stage (around the middle of the 6th century AD), the atrium of the church was abandoned and in front of the narthex was built a staircase. Then, the courtyard was covered mostly by large limestone slabs, and to the southern nave the

Episcopal Residence was adjoined.

As in many other towns and fortresses in the area of the Lower Danube, the city of Zaldapa and respectively its Basilica No 3 were destroyed and abandoned at the end 6th – the beginning of the 7th century AD as a consequence of the Avaro-Slavic invasions in Dobroudja³.

The Sanctuary of the basilica

Basilica No 3 in Zaldapa has a large apse, spanning in width the entire central nave. In front of it was built the *presbyterium* – a rectangular space with dimensions: 8.20 by 5.60 m. The *presbyterium* was limited with an chancel screen which of *in situ*, only several limestone blocks of the *stylobate* are partially preserved. The *stylobate* of the chancel screen was set on a fundament (0.65–0.70 m wide and 0.75–0.80 m deep) constructed of stones soldered by earthen fix. The measures of the fundament help to assume that the chancel screen was rather high and heavy.

Fragments of the marble chancel screen: pillars, columns, fragmented chancel slabs, etc., were found at various places in- and around the Basilica. Perhaps, some of the chancel screen slabs were made in open-work. Until now,

³ Хр. Димитров, *Аварите и Малка Скития (562–625)*, – ИПр, 8–9, 1992, 105–117; А. Madgearu, *Continuitate și discontinuitate culturală la Dunărea de Jos în secolele VII–VIII*, București 1997, 19.

the only known analogue in Scythia and in Moesia Secunda provinces is the open-work chancel screen of the Episcopal Basilica in Histria (Roumania)⁴.

As the nave and the narthex of the church, the *presbyterium* is covered by bricks. After the dismantling of the partially conserved brick floor into the bema, it was found that in its center there is a North-South oriented rectangular pad with dimensions: 4 by 3.10 m, made of small stones fixed by yellow clay. The test trenches made around of that area (Fig. 4) showed that it covers a construction. After its clearing, it appeared to be a large crypt (Figs. 5–6).

The crypt in the Sanctuary

The crypt (Figs. 5–7; 9–11) of Basilica No 3 at Zaldapa is a large rectangular and vaulted space, orientated North-South, which external dimensions are: 3.80 m length by 2.50 m width and 2.40 m height. The

walls are 0.40–0.47 wide. Up to 1.40 m height, they are built of medium-sized and small stones fixed by light pink mortar mixed with pieces of crushed bricks. The internal dimensions of the crypt are: 2.80 m length, 1.95 m width and 2.04 m height. The vault is made of bricks with size 0.30 x 0.30 x 0, 04 m fixed by red mortar. The height of lunette on the North wall is 0.65 m.

The entrance of the crypt is located on its South wall and a staircase consisting of seven built by stones steps leads to the crypt (Fig. 7). The entrance was found sealed with a massive rectangular stone slab (with dimensions: 0.95 x 1.39 x 0.12 m) as it was left when the church was abandoned. The staircase leading to the crypt entrance has 7 steps and there is a small corridor (0.75 m wide and 1.50 m long).

The interior of the crypt is coated with pale yellow mortar. Into the center of the north lunette there is incised a big cross with elongated lower arm (dimensions 21.6 x 14 cm). A similar in shape smaller cross is incised in the centre of the East wall too (Fig. 8).

The floor of the crypt is covered by bricks with dimensions 30 x 30 x 4 cm (Fig. 7). Under the bricks there is a layer of pink mortar about 8 cm thick, which covered above the natural yellow clay there.



Fig. 2. Topography and layout of Zaldapa – based on K. Škorpil, S. Torbatov and new results after excavation in 2014–2015

Сл. 2. Топографија и план Залдапе – К. Шкорпил, С. Торбатов, засновани на резултатима након ископавања у 2014–2015.г.

⁴ Al. Suceveanu, *La basilique épiscopale*, – Histria, XIII, 2007, 28.

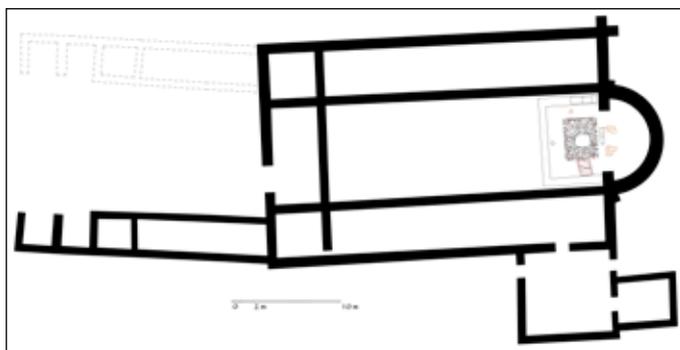


Fig. 3. Basilica No 3 and Crypt in the Sanctuary
Сл. 3. Базилика број 3 и крипта у светилишту



Fig. 4. Sanctuary area and place of the test trench where the Crypt was discovered

Сл. 4. Пргостор светилишта и место испитивања ровова где је крипта откривена

The center of the crypt's vault was damaged by a hole with a diameter of about 1.40 m (Fig. 5–6). This was done later, probably under the place where the *mensa sacra* (the altar table) was located in the *presbyterium*. The space inside the crypt, was found filled with soil and a large number of marble architectural units, obviously of the church furnishing: four column bases; three entirely preserved and several large fragments of Corinthian and Ionic capitals; a post from the chancel screen. Moreover, thirty smaller marble- and limestone fragments of columns other parts of the chancel screen and the *mensa sacra*, as well as from the *ambo* of the basilica.

Actually, in the crypt in Zaldapa there were found three carpal bones of a human hand, which may have been of the originally deposited there corpse. Most probably, before the filling of the crypt the ex-

posed there relics of one or more unknown for us Christian Saint[s] were taken away.

In the same manner for instance, the Christians from Durostorum had carried the relics of St. Dazius and those of St. St. Maximus, Dadas and Quintilianus from their home city to Constantinople⁵.

This situation allows us to propose a hypothesis according to which the Christian believers have deliberately filled the space of the crypt with soil

⁵ Г. Атанасов, *Християнският Дуросторум – Дръстър. Доростолската епархия през късната античност и средновековието (IV–XIV в.)*, *История, археология, култура, изкуство*, Варна – Велико Търново 2007, 22–27, 49–54, 68–72; G. Atanasov, Z. Dimitrov, *About the dating and history of the urn-sarcophagus with the relics of St. Dassius from Dorostol (+ 20 November 303 AD)*, *Pontica*, XLVII, 2014, 97–110.

and marble pieces in order to avoid its possible later desecration. Thus, they would have made it a some sort of sanctuary for the sacred furniture, mainly of the altar space. This had to be done between the destruction of the church in the early 7th century AD and the final abandonment of the city a few years after.

According to the data of the excavation, the crypt was built at the same time as was the church: namely at the end of the 5th- or at the beginning of 6th century AD.



Fig. 5. The crypt – view from N

Сл. 5. Крипта, поглед са севера

Parallels of the crypt in the Sanctuary of Basilica No 3

According to the plan and size the crypt on Zaldapa is similar to dozens of Late Roman (Early Byzantine) vaulted tombs (greatly distributed in the 4th–5th centuries AD), which are known from the cemeteries of cities on the Lower Danube provinces: in Scythia (Tomis, Aksiopolis, Kalatis)⁶, in Moesia Secunda (Durostorum, Marcianopolis)⁷; and beyond on the Balkans: in Thessaloniki, Naisus, Serdica, Philippopolis, Sandanski, Viminiacium, Diocletianopolis, etc.⁸

The use of this type of architecture for forming crypts, however, is rare.

There is no exact analogue to the crypt in Basilica No. 3 in Zaldapa as an architectural type, method of construction, orientation, placement of the entrance and staircase among the known monuments of this kind from 4th–6th centuries AD.

In province of Scythia

Tomis

As a closest analogue to it, the crypt of the Church at „Karl Marx“ street in *Constanța* – the provincial capital Tomis, must be mentioned⁹. It has the

⁶ V. Lungu. *Creștianismul in Scythia-Minor*, Constanța 2000, 35–49.

⁷ Р. Иванов, Г. Атанасов, П. Донеvски, *История на Силистра, I: Античния Дуросторум*, Силистра – София 2006, 248–255, 380–382; С. Chera Marginianu, *Un monument de epoca romana descoperit pe raze comunei Ostrov*. – *Pontica*, XI, 1978, 137–141; G. Atanasov, *Late Antique Tomb in Durostorum – Silistra and its Master*, *Pontica*, 40, 2007, 447–468; A. Mincev, *Marcianopolis Christiana*, In: *Das Christentum in Bulgarien und auf der übrigen Balkanhalbinsel in der Spätantike und im frühen Mittelalter* (Hrsg. V. Gjuzelev, R. Pillinger) (= *Miscellanea Bulgarica*, 5), Wien, 1987, 297–306.

⁸ Д. Овчаров, *Архитектура и декорация на старохристиянските гробници в нашите земи*, *Археология* 4, 1977, 20–30.

⁹ V. Lungu. *Creștianismul...*, 69–70, fig. 8; I. Achim, *Les fosses d'autel en Scy-*



Fig. 6. The crypt with staircase and entrance – view from S

Сл. 6. Крипта са степеништем и улазом, поглед са југа



Fig. 7. a) The entrance and the staircase of the crypt – view from inside; b) The floor of the crypt

Сл. 7. а) улаз и степениште крипте, поглед изнутра; б) под крипте

same rectangular space (but with smaller size) with stone-built walls, brick vault and plastered with white mortar walls on which there are incised crosses. Unlike Zaldapa, this crypt in *Constanța* is oriented West-East; the entrance is from the West and there

is a niche in the middle of any of the three walls. The large size of the crypt in Zaldapa allow us to assume that there was laid a whole body of martyr, while on that of „Karl Marx“ street in *Constanța* this is debatable.

In *Constanța* / Tomis, in the major urban basilicas are found three more crypts with large sizes like the crypt in Zaldapa, and they are quite sufficient to accept whole body of one and even a few martyrs¹⁰.

Tropaeum Traiani

Crypts with large sizes are researched and in *Tropaeum Traiani*, which is located approximately 40 km north of Zaldapa. One of the crypts is in the apse of the Basilica A and constitutes a rectangular room with dimensions 2,70 x 2,30 x 2,50 m. The approach was from the West as the approach to the Basilica, but it was built as a wooden staircase¹¹. The crypts under the altars in the basilicas C and D are smaller and probably were not suitable to accept whole body of a martyr. The first one (C) has square vestibule around 0.90 x 0,90 m and an

the Mineure. Esse d'analyse. – *Ephemeris Dacoromania*, XII. 2004, 278–280, fig. 4; Irina Achim, *Early Roman and Late Roman child graves in Dobrudja (Romania). Preliminary considerations*, In: *Homines, funera, astra: proceedings of the International Symposium on Funerary Anthropology: 5-8 June 2011 (=BAR International Series 2410) 2012*, 183–195.

¹⁰ See: P. Cobb, *The architectural Setting of the Liturgy*. London, 1978, 476.

¹¹ I. Barnea, *Christian Art in Romania. I*. Bucarest, 1979, 163–167, fig. 55, 56; I. Barnea, *Le cripte delle basiliche paleocristiane della Scizia Minore.* – *RESEE*, 3, 1981, 496, fig. 7; V. Lungu, *Creștinismul...*, 72–73, fig. 15; I. Achim. *Op. cit.*, p. 278, fig. 7.

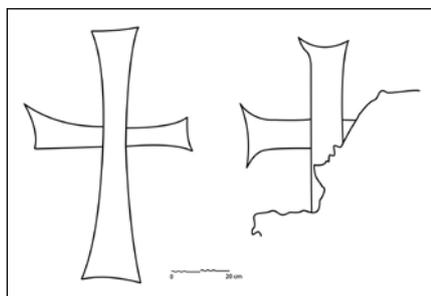


Fig. 8. The incised crosses on the walls

Сл. 8. урезани крстови на зидовима

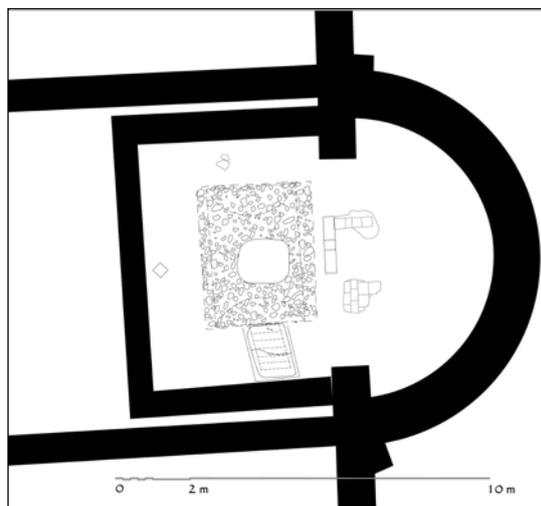


Fig. 9. The crypt – layout

Сл. 9. Крипта, распоред

actual crypt on the East, with dimensions 1.35 x 30 meters, and the second one (D) is a simple rectangular constructed pit with dimensions 1 x 1,20 x 1,93 m.¹² We show these crypts as a comparison, because they are the only known not only in Scythia province, but with one exception even in the Balkans. Similarly to the crypt on Zaldapa they have an entrance from the South, and stairs with respectively 3 and 8 steps but these are the only similarities.

Halmyris

Among the large Crypts in the province of Scythia occupies a special place the one in the Basilica at Halmyris¹³. Like the one in Zaldapa it is a crypt with one room and vaulted roof with dimensions 2,00 x 1,80 m x 1,88 m. It is oriented West-East. The entrance, as in the large Crypts of the Tropaeum Traiani and Tomis is from the West, and is reached through 8 steps with 2.15 m long corridor. Near the Northern and Southern walls are built two benches on which are found entirely preserved skeletons of two martyrs. Most likely these are the relics of St. Epictetus and St. Astion, who according to their vita – shone at the beginning of the 4th century AD in Halmyris¹⁴. Therefore, the name of Astion is inscribed with red ochre and it is readable on the Eastern Lunette of the crypt. It's almost impossible that crypt to was thy primary martyrium of the executed in Halmyris two martyrs, because the Basilica, under which is the crypt of St. Epictetus and St. Astion is in populated urban territory.

¹² I. Barnea, *Christian Art in Romania*, p. 167; I. Barnea, *Monuments paléochrétiens de la Roumanie*. Cité del Vaticano 1977, p. 163, fig. 55; V. Lungu, *Creștianismul...*, 73, fig. 17; I. Achim, *Les fosses d'autel en Scythie Mineure...*, 278, fig. 9–11.

¹³ M. Zachariade, O. Bounegru, *Despre inceputurile creștinismului la Dunărea de Jos: Martiriumul de la Halmyris*. – In: *Izvoarele creștinismului românesc*, Costanța 2003, 117–126.

¹⁴ *Acta Sanctorum, Iulii, T. II*. 1867, 538–551 (=BHL, col. 2568); H. Delehaye, *Les martyrs Epicrète et Astion*. – *Buletin de la section historique de l'academie Roumaine*, XIV, 1923, 1–5; E. Popescu, *Martirii și sfintii in Dobrogea*. – *Studii teologice*, XLI, 1989, 46–53.

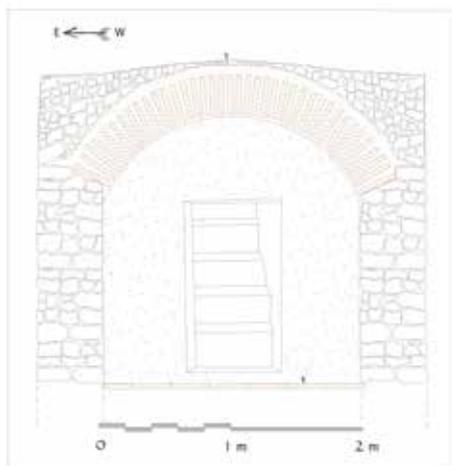


Fig. 10. The crypt –EW cross section
Сл. 10. Крипта, пресек исток-запад

Therefore, it is known that Roman law prohibits lying dead in the bounds of the city and this rule at least until the beginning of 5th century AD is strictly adhered to. All citizens, including criminals, respectively Christians have a right to a grave in urban cemeteries and that they are registered martirium over primary graves of the martyrs of 3rd–4th century AD¹⁵. Probably, the crypt in Halmyris was erected along with the basilica (after second half of 4th- or rather in 5th century AD) and after then was the two skeletons moved and secondary buried in the martirium.

Beroe / Piatra Frecatei

Similar in plan, dimensions and structure to the crypt in Halmyris and most of the crypts in Tropaeum Traiani and Tomis is the crypt in Beroe/ Piatra Frecatei – also an Episcopal Centre in Scythia after the middle of 6th century AD¹⁶. It was found under the apse of the Basilica in the town's necropolis. It is oriented West-East. The entrance, which is on the West side is reached by a corridor and 8 steps. Unlike the Halmyris that was probably primary martirium within the necropolis, above which at the end of the 4th century AD was erected a small church graveyard.

Niculitel

At first glance similar is the story of the famous martirium near Niculitel into the necropolis of other Episcopal Center in Scythia – Noviodunum¹⁷. Under the apse of the Basilica's is investigated a crypt with square dimensions: 3.50 x 3, 50 x 2, 30 m, with a canopy-like (baldachin / ciborium) dome and a small entrance from the West. Thanks to the inscription on the Eastern wall is

¹⁵ A. Grabar, *Martyrium. Recherches sur le cult de reliques et de l'art chrétien antique et Moyen âge. I*, Paris 1946, 48; H. Delehay, *Les origines du culte des martyres. Bruxelles*, 1933, 47–48. For practice christians and martyrs from 3rd and early 4th centuries AD to bury in pagan necropolis see: R. Krautheimer, *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture (History of Art)*, New Haven 1981, 33–37.

¹⁶ V. Bauman, *Sângele martirilor*, București 2005, 53–55; V. Bauman, *Mărturii ale persecuțiilor religioase din zona Dunării de Jos în primele secole ale erei creștine*, In: *Izvoarele creștianismului românesc*, Costanța 2003, 101–102.

¹⁷ V. Bauman, *Nouveaux témoignages chrétiens sur la limes nord-schtique: la basilique à martyrium de bas époque romaine découvertes à Niculițel (jud. Tulcea)*, Dacia, 16, 1972, 189–202; V. Bauman, *A propos des premières basiliques paléochrétiennes découvertes à la l'embouchure du Danub*, In: *Acta Congressus Internationalis XIV Archaeologiae Christianae*, Roma 2006, 827–831, Taf. 32; V. Bauman. *Sângele martirilor...*, 83–132.

Fig. 11. The
crypt – NS cross
section

Сл. 11. Крипта,
пресек север-
југ



clear that it is a martyrium of the martyrs of Noviodunum – Attalos, Kamasis, Zotikus and Phillipos, who are registered in the Syrian Church calendar and in the Martiriologium of Jerome.

The crypt at Niculitel is most likely a primary martyrium from the end of 4th century at the necropolis of Noviodunum, above which in 5th–6th century AD was built and expanded the great Basilica of the necropolis.

Other crypts, but with a small size for placement of pieces of relics are known under the apses of most of the excavated churches from 5th–6th century AD in Scythia province: Histria, Capidava, the smaller churches at Tropaeum Traiani¹⁸ and the church in fortress St. Cyril (near Golech village – 40 km south of Durostorum)¹⁹.

In Moesia Secunda province

In distinction from Scythia, in Moesia Secunda, from the territory of which they are explored dozens of basilicas from the 5th–6th century AD, there are not known not only large Crypts for placing the bodies of martyrs, but also in generally are not known crypts. That also concerns to the episcopal centers and episcopal basilicas in Marcianopolis, Odessos, Novae, Durostorum, Nicopolis ad Istrum, Abritus and the large churches in Khan Krum (Shumen region), Misionis (at Targoviste), Iatrus, etc. Most likely the reliquaries with relics in these temples were embedded in the altar-tables. The only exception is the church graveyard basilica in Novae, but there the case is different²⁰.

Since our attention is on the large Crypts that can take on the entire bodies of martyrs it should be noted that these are rare even in the Balkans, where there are such remarkable Episcopal centers with large basilicas as Serdica, Philippopolis, Augusta Trayana, Deultum, Naisus, Sirmium, Singidunum, etc.

¹⁸ I. Achim. *Les fosses d'autel en Scythie Mineure...*, 278, fig. 8.

¹⁹ G. Atanasov, *De nouveau sur la localisation de la forteresse Bas byzantine St. Cyril en Scythia Mineure*, In: Prinos lui Petre Diaconu la 80 de ani, Brăila 2004; G. Atanasov, *Martyrium et confesio contenant des reliques dans le castel basbyzantin près du village de Golech, région de Silistra (communication préliminaire)*, In: AMV IV, p. 221–228; Г. Атанасов, *Християнският Дуросторум – Дръстър...*, 107–109.

²⁰ G. Atanasov, *À propos de martyrium de St. Loupus de Novae (Svichtov)*, In: MOESICA ET CHRISTIANA. Studies en honor of prof. Alexandar Barnea on his 70-th anniversary, București 2015, 397–401.

Conclusions

According J.-P. Sodini's typology of the Early Christian Crypts – by the place of the entrance and the stairway, the crypt in Zaldapa is in group 4. In this group there are only four crypts mentioned: in Thessaloniki (Saint-Demetrios church) and in the basilica at the Island of Thasos; in Histria and basilica D in Tropaeum Traiani²¹. We can add to that group and the crypt in basilica C in Tropaeum Traiani, on which recently drew attention I. Ahim in her classification on the crypts in Scythia²². However, it should be noted that these crypts are of smaller sizes and have different layout and orientation.

There is no exact analogue to the crypt in Zaldapa. In fact, there are similarities only with few other crypts located under the floors of major basilicas in the nearby towns in Scythia and first of all in the Provincial capital – Tomis and also in other big city – Tropaeum Traiani. It must be mentioned that there is no other province on the Balkans beside Scythia, where there are registered so many crypts with large sizes, which enable them to be used for depositing inside the entire corpses of martyrs²³. For instance, there is no similar practice in Moesia Secunda. A possible explanation of that phenomenon is that in Scythia there are known the names of no less than 147 martyrs, and only 118 of them are in Tomis. In Moesia Secunda there have been found only 19 crypts (the main group is in the city of Durostorum on the border with Scythia Province from where 12 martyrs are known²⁴).

The large size of the crypt in Zaldapa is heading towards the conclusion that there was buried one or more (?) martyr[s]. Such is the case with most of the other large crypts in Scythia.

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КРПИПТА У АПСИДИ БАЗИЛИКЕ БРОЈ 3 У АНТИЧКОЈ ЗАЛДАПИ
(ПРОВИНЦИЈА СКИТИЈА)

У античкој Залдапи познате су само две ранохришћанске базилике које покривају 25 хектара. Залдапа је утврђени касноантички (потом и византијски) град недалеко од Добруђе у провинцији Скитија. Нова базилика – број 3, пронађена током лета 2014., пронађена је недалеко од раскршћа две главне улице града. У олтару базилике је пронађена велика крипта. Према подацима са археолошких ископавања, крипта је изграђена у V веку или почетком VI века н.е.

²¹ J.-P. Sodini, *Les cryptes d'autel paléochrétiennes: essai de classification*, In: *Tra-veau et mémoires du centre de recherches et civilisation de Byzance*, 8. Mélanges P. Lemerle, Paris 1981, 453–457.

²² I. Achim, *Les fosses d'autel en Scythie Mineure...*, 278, fig. 8.

²³ Г. Атанасов, *345 раннохришћански светци-мъченици от българските земи (I–IV в.)*, София 2011, 32–55.

²⁴ H. Delehay, *Saints de Thrace et de Mésie*, *Analectica Bolondianala*, Bruxelles 1912, p. 265–268; E. Popescu, *Martirii și sfintii in Dobrogea*, *Studii teologice*, XLI, 1989, 46–53; Г. Атанасов, *345 раннохришћански светци-мъченици...*, 32–45.