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SOME NOTES ON THE LATE ANTIQUE NECROPOLISES OF PHILIPPOPOLIS, THRACE

With the proclamation of Constantinople on May, 11, 330 AD the lands of the old Roman province of Thrace all of a sudden become part of the hinterland of the new capital of the empire. As a result, all the processes taking place around the new imperial city echoed also in Thrace. Studies reveal that it happened in almost every aspect of the life of the provincials, and among the most important of these were religious matters. Despite the legendary evidence according to which the Christianity penetrated into Thrace as early as 1st c.,¹ it seems that the first well established communities, mainly in the urban centers, date to the late 3rd c. According to epigraphic monuments² and panegyrics these were Asianic Christians³ who were fleeing from the poverty and religious persecutions in their homeland. The epigraphic monuments also reveal that not all of them were poor, but they were attracted by the assured economic prosperity of the Thracian lands, as part of the hinterland of Constantinople. This went along with the imperial policy of encouraging immigration to counter the depopulation of these lands that happened in the middle of 3rd c.⁴ and by the end of the century was not overcome yet. These processes significantly changed the structure of the old provincial society and were reflected in every aspect of provincial life.

¹ They are summarized in I. Topalilov, 'Christianity, Heresies, and paganism in the religious policy of Theodosius I in Thrace', in: Piazza, E. (ed.) *Quis est qui ligno pugnat? Missionaries and Evangelization in Late Antique and Medieval Europe (4th - 13th centuries)*, Verona, 99-100.

² *Inscriptiones Graecae in Bulgaria repertae*, ed. G. Mihailov, III, 1, Serdicae 1961, n°. 1448; V. Beševliev, *Spätgriechisches und spätlateinische Inschriften aus Bulgarien*, Berlin 1964, n°. 220.

³ Pan. Lat. VIII (V) 21, 1: *Itaque sicuti pridem tuo, Diocletiane Auguste, iussu deserta Thraciae translatis incolis Asia complevit.*

⁴ See for instance the evidence of Dexippus that more than 100 000 citizens were captured in Philippopolis - Dexipp. fr. 20; see also Amm. Marc. XXXI, 5, 15; Zosimus I, 23; Iord. Get. XVIII, 101-103. Even if the number is exaggerated it shows that a huge amount of citizens suffered.

the lack of the historical narratives is compensated by the results of the archaeological excavations. The process followed more or less that seen in Constantinople, but with some local specifics. The provincial capital of Thrace, Philippopolis provides good example of these changes. Thus, the first attested signs of religious change known up to now seem to have happened *extra muros*. And while the temple of Apollo still existed and the city was known as the 'city of Apollo' in the 4th c. according to an Early Christian *Passio*,⁷ some changes occurred just beyond the curtain walls.

While the newly constructed Christian buildings such as basilica, *martyria* etc. are silent witnesses of the changes which the society underwent, the burials and necropolises could reveal an almost live picture of these processes. It is my belief that the study of the necropolises dated to that time may reveal not only the main tendency of Christianization of society within the civic community in Philippopolis, but specifics of transformations in burial customs and ancient beliefs about the afterlife, the role of the dead in the life of living, etc. This is why in the present paper I will deal with the necropolises of Philippopolis dated to 4th century, when dramatic changes in all aspects of life occurred with the penetration of Christianity.

The necropolises are among the least studied components of the Late Antique Philippopolis. And this is not surprising, considering the lack of extensive excavations, with one exception,⁸ and thus of extensive publications; the bulk of burials discussed were studied only by rescue excavations. The burials themselves, with a few exceptions, are also unremarkable and belong to the tile graves, mostly single-burials.

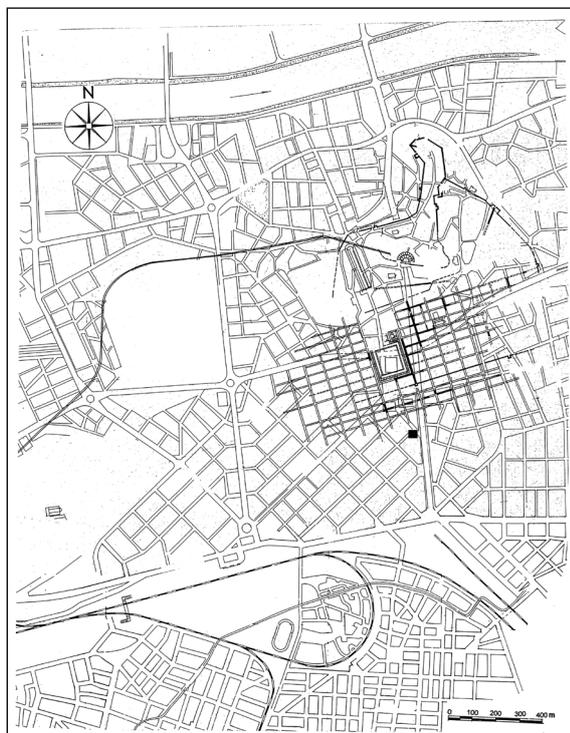


Fig. 2 The location of the Tetrarchy tomb

Сл. 2 Локација Тетрархијских гробница

⁷ It is the *Passio* of St. Theodota – see some comments on it in Н. Шаранков, *За датата и мястото на мъченичеството на св. Теодота от „града на Филип“*, *Bulgaria Mediaevalis* 6, 2016, 17-26; И. Топалилов, *Бележка върху Житието на св. Теодота*, в: *Tempus fugit. Юбилеен сборник в чест на 70-годишнината на проф. д-р Стоян Витлянов*, (И. Йорданов, К. Константинов, Т. Тодоров ред.), Шумен, 2017, 45-50.

⁸ See the site studied by M. Bospachieva within the Eastern necropolis – M. Bospachieva, *The Eastern necropolis of Philippopolis in the light of the latest archaeological excavations*, *Thracia* 12. In honorem Christo M. Danov (Z. Gocheva ed.), 1998, 147-157.

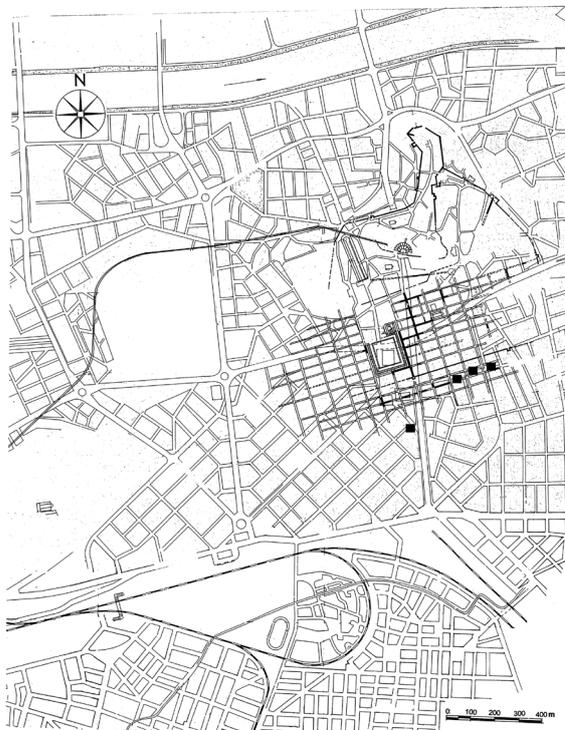


Fig. 3 The location of the earliest Christians burials within the southern *pomerium* of the city

Сл. 3 Хришћанско сахрањивање унутар јужног померијума града

The plunder of Philippopolis by the Goths in 251 AD and massive Gothic invasions of the Balkans in the two succeeding decades led to unprecedented demographic collapse which affected the territory of the southern, western and northern necropolises, which was considerably reduced,⁹ while according to L. Botoucharova the Eastern necropolis ceased to exist.¹⁰ Burials now were located near the main roads leading to the city as well as the curtain walls (fig. 1). The best preserved example is provided by the southern necropolis.

The archaeological record reveals that burials dated to the second half of 3rd century are located within the heart of the older necropolis and near the roads heading to Philippopolis.¹¹ The necropolises moved to the curtain walls. A painted tomb dated to the time of Tetrarchs,¹² located some 180 m to the south of the southern curtain wall of the city is a good marker for the northern limit of the southern necropolis (fig. 2). Beyond it was the *pomerium* of Philippopolis, outlined by the tomb and curtain walls and located between them.

⁹ See И. Топалилов, *Раннохристиянският Филипопол* (in Print).

¹⁰ Л. Ботушарова, *Данни за топографията на Филипопол през римската епоха според гробните находки*, Известия на Археологическия Институт, 25, 1962, 192, обр. 1.

¹¹ In this case we are dealing with the burials discovered at N. Buxton Str – see for them Д. Цончев, *Трако-римски некропол в югоизточния край на Филипопол*, Годишник на Народния Археологически музей- гр. Пловдив, 4, 1960, 138, 144, tombs №№ 1,3.

¹² See the tomb, ritual and burial goods in Н. Маврадинов, *Гробница от IV в. сл. Хр. В Пловдив*, Годишник на Пловдивската Народна библиотека в Пловдив, 1926, 21-50.; for the paintings and their dating and interpretation – see Д. Овчаров, *Архитектура и декорация на старохристиянските гробници в нашите земи*, Археология, 1977, 4, 23 сл.; V. Popova-Moroz, *Christian and Pagan art of 4th century in Bulgaria*, Das Christentum in Bulgarien und auf der übrigen Balkanhalbinsel in der spätantike und im frühen mittelalter (V. Gjuzelev und R. Pillinger hrsg.), *Miscellanea Bulgarica*, 5, Wien, 267-268; *Corpus der spätantiken und frühchristlichen Wandmalereien Bulgariens* (R. Pillinger, V. Popova, B. Zimmermann Red.), Wien, 1999, 42-46.

The case appears to be similar with the Western necropolis, which by the middle of 3rd century reached as far as Dzendem tepe.¹³

The prosperity of the city was ensured in the time of Diocletian by promoting Philippopolis to the rank of provincial capital of Thrace. This prosperity can be detected not only in the restoration of its urban appearance, but also within the necropolises. We can hardly be surprised by their land expansion. For example, the biggest of them – the southern – gained its expansion southward with a new area with tumuli in which coins of Constantine I providing a *terminus post quem* were discovered. In one of them a tomb with a burial following pagan customs was uncovered. In the same area an *ustrinum* was also uncovered.¹⁴ Similar burials have been attested within the Western necropolis,¹⁵ but similar finds should be expected probably in the Northern, too.

In addition to these pagan burials, some of them probably of nobles from Philippopolis and Thrace, other burials were also discovered which may be interpreted as Christian. Thus, in the course of archeological excavation of sites near Captain Raicho Street, as well as at Sheinovo Street,¹⁶ the modern hotel Trimontium¹⁷ etc. there were discovered burials in tile graves in the form of a pitched tent with east-west orientation (fig. 3). In some of them a Charon obol was found – a coin either of Constantine I or of Constantius II.¹⁸ A masonry tomb was also uncovered which may be attributed to the Christian burials.¹⁹ These burials and especially those of Sheinovo Street are located in immediate proximity to the southern curtain wall.

The Charon obols discovered in these burials give a definite *terminus post quem* of the burials and date them to the time of Constantine I and after,²⁰ probably before the time of Valens. At present, these are the earliest certainly identified Christian burials attested within the necropolises of Philippopolis.

As one would note, these burials were located within the *pomerium* of the city, in this case the southern one. Their presence would reveal that a certain desacralization of the place occurred at that time. It should be noted that according to the archaeological excavations both poor and middle class Christian burials were taking place there.

Without question, the extension of burials into the *pomerium* of the city should not be regarded as an isolated act. Quite on the contrary – it seems to be a

¹³ See Ботушарова, *Данни за топографията на Филипопол през римската епоха според гробните находки*, 192, обр. 1.

¹⁴ Д. Цончев, *Трако-римски некропол в югоизточния край на Филипопол*, 133-136.

¹⁵ See for instance Б. Дякович, *Находки из некропола на античния Пловдив*, *Известия на Българския Археологически Институт*, I, 1, 1922, 48.

¹⁶ Observation of the author on the site.

¹⁷ See Л. Ботушарова, *Нови данни за Филипопол през римската епоха*, *Годишник на музеите в Пловдивски окръг II*, 1956, 130.

¹⁸ See L. Botoucharova, E. Kesjakova, *Sur la topographie de la ville de Philippopolis dans la provincial Thracia*, *Pulpudeva*, 3, 1980, 142.

¹⁹ The tomb was published in Е. Кесякова, *Късноантична стопанска сграда във Филипопол*, *Известия на музеите от Южна България*, 1, 1975, 99.

²⁰ Л. Ботушарова, В. Танкова, *Материали за археологическата карта на Пловдив*, *Известия на музеите в Южна България*, 8, 1982, 57.

that Constantinople where beyond the 'Constantinian wall', just off the curtain wall, Christian and barbarian burials are attested, archaeologically dated to that time.²²

If the date proposed for the burials at the southern *pomerium* is correct, it would be the earliest example known so far of Christian burials made within the *pomerium* not only in Philippopolis, but also in Thrace.

The question about the burials within the *pomerium* is also – who were the Christians there?

It may be suggested that the arrival of immigrants, Christians, not all of whom were poor as we can attest from the preserved funeral stelae²³ and masonry tombs discovered seems to have put some pressure on the existing classical system of patronage in the city. The newcomers were not able to assimilate into the existing city – a model which guaranteed the emperor a certain *quietissimus populus* and *innocens ordo*.²⁴ Therefore, they existed alongside the traditional community and were treated as 'outsiders', obviously not privileged and did not possess those rights which were guaranteed to the ordinary citizens of Philippopolis. It seems that their treatment as such was reflected not only in the city of living, but also in the city of dead, as the area of the necropolises was divided in various plots according to the tradition and wealth of their owners, viz. the citizens of Philippopolis.

There were therefore two possible areas for burial available to them – on the outer periphery of the existing necropolises, where the older Christian burials were carried out, away from the city and its authorities to whom the Christian mourning gatherings around the grave would be suspicious, and the area of the desacralized *pomerium*. The archaeological excavations reveal that both areas were used that time. As the number of these immigrants was not small, it is very plausible to suggest that the burials in the *pomerium* were made by those immigrants – the Christians originating from the Asianic provinces, who were 'outsiders' for the local community and therefore not able to use the privileges and rights of local citizens (*clientes*). It is, however, also possible that some of the burials contain the remains of those native *clientes* who were Christianized, and as a result were not allowed or able to be buried within the graveyard plot of their *patronus*.

The performance of Christian burials within the *pomerium* showed to the local civic community that another group of people had appeared in the city. Despite the fact that the local Christian community was not yet economically influential in the life of the provincial capital, by this act it demonstrated its negligent disregard of the long-term pagan traditions, which would have happened only due the imperial support they had received; as mentioned above, burials within the *pomerium* took also place in Constantinople at that time.

²² See for this C. Mango, *Le Développement urbain de Constantinople (IVe-VIIe siècles)*, (Paris 2004), 47-48.

²³ See for example those published in V. Beševliev, *Spätgriechisches und spätlateinische Inschriften aus Bulgarien*, under nos. 207, 208, 210.

²⁴ See for this P. Brown, *Power and persuasion in Late antiquity, Towards a Christian Empire*, University of Wisconsin System, 1992.

It is worth noting that in the second half of 4th c. some pagan burials were also discovered within the eastern *pomerium* of the city which may indicate the decline of these pagan traditions among the native population too.

At the same time that Christian burials entered the *pomerium*, pagan burials were not only practiced within the existed necropolises, but some of them even expanded; the group of tumuli within the limit of the southern necropolis mentioned above is a good example of this.

It seems that in the third quarter of 4th century the Christians continued to bury within the *pomerium*. At that time, however, Christian burials entered within the traditional necropolises. Archaeological excavations reveal the existence of tile graves, but also masonry ones of undoubtedly wealthy Christians scattered among the pagan ones (fig. 4). The latter still followed the basic characteristics of the pagan tombs imitating the dwelling and having basic grave goods that could be used also in Christian rituals. In fact, some of the tombs imitate Roman sarcophagi. Unlike the older burials, however, the decrease of the use of Charon obol is clearly observable as well as the appearance of wall-paintings with a clear Christian meaning.

It is certain that at that time at latest appeared the so-called 'pillow' at the western end of the tombs, where the heads of the deceased were put so as to enable the dead to face Christ at his second coming. This is done in various ways, but mostly by raising the bottom bricks or marble plates as is the case in this instance.²⁵

Another feature of typical Christian graves was the rich painting that covered the walls of the tombs. The intention here is not to deal with this, as it has already been covered in the existing literature,²⁶ but I would like to point just the main themes that appeared such as images of birds and garlands,²⁷ but also vines, pigeons and vases.²⁸ It is undisputed that these images symbolize the Christian Eden, but they also represent the main wall decoration that embellished the Christian tombs in Philippopolis until the time of Theodosius I.

As mentioned above, discontinuity may be observed in major Christian burials in the use of a coin for the Charon's fee which, however, incidentally was used in 5th century too,²⁹ as well as grave goods. It is true that such objects are to be found in some burials which contained mainly glass balsamaria and 'dishes',³⁰ whose deposition in the graves has its explanation in the Christian context.³¹

²⁵ Д. Цончев, *Новооткрити старини из Пловдивско*, Известия на Археологическия институт, 15, 1946, 214.

²⁶ See *Corpus der spätantiken und frühchristlichen Wandmalereien Bulgariens* (R. Pillinger, V. Popova, B. Zimmermann Red.), Wien 1999, 46-48.

²⁷ See Цончев, *Трако-римски некропол в югоизточния край на Филипопол*, 138-143, figs. 32-33; 35, 37.

²⁸ Цончев, *Новооткрити старини из Пловдивско*, 215-216.

²⁹ M. Vospatchieva, *The Eastern necropolis of Philippopolis in the light of the latest archaeological excavations*, 152.

³⁰ Цончев *Трако-римски некропол в югоизточния края на Филипопол*, 143.

³¹ See for example N. Poulou-Papadimitriou, E. Tzavella, J. Ott, Rome, *Burial practices in Byzantine Greece: archaeological evidence and methodological problems for its in-*

When studying the masonry tombs, what makes an impression is their deliberate use for individual funerals, if we keep in mind their dimensions. Thus, the width of the tombs usually reaches up to 1. 10 m and makes the tombs almost impossible to be used intentionally as family tombs. Despite this, however, some secondary funerals have taken place in them later. The lack of any antechamber or special entrance in the so-far-attested tombs from that time led to the destruction of the interior when a secondary funeral was made. Thus, in one of the tombs discovered within the southern necropolis, when the cover slabs were removed so that a secondary funeral would be made, the wall painting was partly destroyed and never repaired.³²

It was probably at that time and due to the spread of the practice of secondary burials in one-place graves that we see the attested practice of Christian funeral stelae where it is enjoined that only one funeral should be made in such tombs. Of special interest are the stelae of Narcissus and Heliodorus, son of Julianus. Thus, the former insists that he will 'rest in peace in a tomb for one person',³³ while the latter made a tomb for himself and no one else was to be buried in it.³⁴

In the examples with secondary funerals known from archaeological records it is usually a question of a husband and wife,³⁵ i. e. singular secondary funerals, while in other cases more burials are attested. In this respect it is of interest how the bones from the earlier funeral were treated.

At present, two practices are known in this respect: gathering of the earlier bones in the eastern side of the tomb,³⁶ or the use of the earlier tradition of placing the new body near by the old one.³⁷ It is possible in the latter case that the secondary funerals took place soon after the original one.

Finally, one should note a change that occurs in the middle of 4th century Christian funerals, linked with the position of the hands of the deceased. Initially, it seems that the Christians followed the earlier, pagan practice and the hands were laid alongside the corpse, but in the middle/third quarter of 4th century it is possible to observe one or both hands placed over the pelvis, or crossed over the breast.³⁸

terpretation, in: M. Salamon, M. Woloszyn, A. Musin, P. Špehar eds.), Kraków – Leipzig – Rzeszów – Warszawa, 2012, 380 ff.

³² See the grave published in Цончев, *Трако-римски некропол в југоисточниот крај на Филипопол*, 143.

³³ Beševliev. *Spätgriechisches und spätlateinische Inschriften aus Bulgarien*, 208.

³⁴ Beševliev. *Spätgriechisches und spätlateinische Inschriften aus Bulgarien*, 209.

³⁵ See the funeral described in Цончев, *Трако-римски некропол в југоисточниот крај на Филипопол*, 143.

³⁶ See the description in Цончев, *Новооткрити старини из Пловдивско*, 215-216.

³⁷ See the tomb, published in Цончев, *Новооткрити старини из Пловдивско*, 214; see also the grave published in В. Танкова, *Спасителни разкопки в југоисточниот некропол на Филипопол*, В: Археологически открития и разкопки през 1982, Смолян, 1983 г. 79-80.

³⁸ See Цончев, *Трако-римски некропол в југоисточниот крај на Филипопол*, 143; Танкова, *Спасителни разкопки в југоисточниот некропол на Филипопол*, 1984, 79-80.

When studying the necropolises of Philippopolis in the 4th century and especially before the time of Theodosius I it should be emphasized that the majority of burials belong to the pagan tradition. They were made by both inhumation and cremation, in tombs of different sizes and character, mostly masonry, under tumulus or not. They contained specific grave goods and the coin for paying Charon's fee of which the latest issue was of Constantius II. Quite often more than one coin is placed.³⁹

The lavishly decorated Christian tombs with poor burials around them, mostly made under tiles in the form of a pitched tent, are a good indicator not only of the spread of Christianity among the community in the city, but also among its notables, probably reflected on the system of patronage, too.

The present paper deals with the Christianization of the society in the province capital Philippopolis till the time of Theodosius I based on the study of its necropolises. A detailed study not only reveals the emerge of Christian burials as early as the time of Constantine I, but it makes possible to study the social status of the buried Christians – initially 'outsiders' for the civic community of Philippopolis – poor and not so poor. It also reveals that in the time of Constantine I - Constantius II they are mostly found in the southern *pomerium* of the city which is the earliest known example in Thrace. Since the middle of 4th century, the Christian burials with specific rituals are to be found within the necropolises themselves which clearly indicate the Christianization of part of the local society. Among the new Christians one would find poor, but also very wealthy men.

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НЕКЕ НАПОМЕНЕ ИЗ КАСНОАНТИЧКЕ НЕКРОПОЛЕ ФИЛИПОПОЛИСА,
ТРАКИЈА

Овај рад се бави християнизацијом друштва у главном граду покрајине Филиппополиу до времена Теодосија I на основу проучавања његових некропола. Детаљна студија не открива само појаву хришћанских гробница још у време Константина I, већ омогућава проучавање социјалног статуса покопаних хришћана - у почетку «аутсајдера» за грађанску заједницу Филипафолиса, били сиромашни или мање сиромашни. Такође открива да се из времена Константина I и Константије I I, смештени углавном у јужном делу града који су најранији познати пример у Тракији. Од средине IV века хришћански покопи са специфичним ритуалима налазе се унутар самих некропола што јасно указују на хришћанизацију дела локалног друштва. Међу новим хришћанима могу се препознати сиромашни, али и врло богати мушкарци.

³⁹ See for example Б. Дякович, *Могилни находки при Пловдив*, Годишник на Пловдивската Народна библиотека и музеј в Пловдив, 1930, 203.