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SAINT NICETAS OF REMESIANA – UNITOR OF EUROPE

Abstract: The paper focuses on the Early Christian basilicas in Gela and Remesiana, which are connected with the life of Saint Niketas of Remesiana. The study aims to tell stories, to look for reliably adapted „pillars“ for today and to show a new view to the old monuments. Among the diverse material traces of the archaeological and historical heritage of early Christianity, the study has selected, separated by three centuries, unifying iconic figures from the history of early Christianity and places related to their pan-European civilizational mission. It is no coincidence that Saint Nicetas of Remesiana is one of the symbols of United Europe, leaving through the ecclesiastical-archaeological conservations the romantic memory of the Biblia Bessica, his ideas and the hymn Te Deum he wrote will contribute to mutual knowledge, friendship and peace.

Keywords: Early Christianity, Basilicas, Cultural unity, Peace

There are many significant archaeological traces of early Christianity on the Balkans, and a large number of them are basilicas. Originating as a gathering place for all the baptized, taking the form of the civic basilica, these large-scale buildings were mainly located outside the ancient cities and corresponded in size to a „congregational church“ that could accommodate all, participate and be able to move inside during liturgies. Many of these basilicas have reached us in ruins, some of them are barely visible or are even completely under the ground. But even the invisible early christian legacy exerts its influence on the modern inhabitants of these lands, even if they are not fully aware of it. Many of these basilicas have reached us not only with their foundations, but also with rich mosaic decoration, which „speaks“ to the people of today with symbolites, from which the complex images are woven - symbols that tell about what was important for the former inhabitants of the ancient cities - salvation and eternal life, especially needed in the troubled times in which they lived.

Apostle Paul set foot on European soil in 50-60 AD precisely in the metropolitan multi-ethnic and multi-confessional city of Philippi near today's Kavala. With a radical new manifesto for equality, love and understanding, significantly relevant in today's challenge for women's rights, the Apostle Paul



Fig. 1.
Basilica
„Saint Sofia”,
foundations
from the 4th
century, main
structure
from the 6th
century.

Сл. 1.
Базилика
„Света
Софија“,
темељи из IV
века, главна
грађевина из
VI века.

incorporated (baptized) the first European, namely a woman - Saint Lydia near Philippi. Arriving to Europe from Asia Minor, Apostle Paul had behind him a complex biography, but also a significant transformation. In a significant period of his life, he was Saul, a highly educated Pharisee, a Roman citizen by inheritance and a participant in the persecution of Christians in Judea. Sent by high priests to Damascus, he received a vision and enlightenment on the way. Struck by the challenge of spiritual unification in the educated and refined environment of the elite establishment in the peculiar „common market“ of the imperial age of the reign of Emperor Nero, the pharisee Paul became the Apostle Paul and preached equality, democracy and love. The missionary passed remarkably via the Balkans to the European borders of the Roman Empire, where he left his immortal universal messages in the Acts of the Holy Apostles in the New Testament. He preached in the cultural world of the time the avant-garde idea that spiritual salvation and love between people are for everyone, regardless of their origin, ethnicity and social status. Whether he was beheaded by the then totalitarian system or he hid in Spain, the Apostle Paul is a pioneer-international ambassador for European spiritual unity and this is the connotation of the project, ambitious to implement a broad public education for adults while symbolically updating the „steps of the Apostle“ in the Balkan part of the Via Egnatia.

Three hundred years after Apostle Paul, born around 272 as a „Native Balkan“ near Naisus (contemporary Nis, Serbia), Emperor Constantine the Great (306 - 337) decreed Christianity as the state religion in the Roman Empire, thus legitimizing the ideas of spiritual salvation and peace. Near his birthplace in Mediana, mosaics and marble fragments recall for the past greatness. The memory of his claiming „Serdica is my Rome“ is alive in today’s Sofia not only at the exceptionally well-preserved basilica „Saint Sofia“ (Fig. 1) and at the tombs under and near its foundations, at the Mausoleum of Lozenets district

- Sofia (Fig. 2,3) and the place of the Serdica Council with the Decree of peace and tolerance since 311. Another „Native Balkan“ - a missionary of spiritual unification - Saint Nicetas of Remesiana (335 - 414), who served and preached as a bishop in the area of the modern cities of Nis and Pirot in contemporary Serbia, continues the work of the Apostle Paul for inclusion and unification again through journeys along the Via Egnatia and also on the Via Militaris/Via Diagonalis. At the diocesan rift between Rome and Constantinople by the end of the fourth century AD, the social environment and the target groups approached in the pilgrimages of Saint Nicetas of Remesiana (contemporary Bela Palanka, Serbia) were different. His spiritual doctrine was already a state ideology standing with institutional support in the trails of the missionary. Unlike his predecessor, the Apostle Paul, who had an audience of educated and refined opponents, Saint Nicetas traveled to baptize and enlighten the uneducated human sacrificers from the Rhodope mountains - the Bessi, part of the Thracians, who were considered „wild beasts“. In an effort to soften the mutual estrangement of the two parts of Imperial Christendom, Saint Nicetas of Remesiana most likely passed quickly by the mosaics of the Great Basilica in the refined Philippopolis and plunged directly into the wild forests of the Rhodopes, where he learned the Thracian language of the Bessi and, according to traditional Balkan legends, translated the Bible for them in Latin or Greek script - *Biblia Bessica*.¹ The attachment of the demons to the complex and secret teachings of Orphism with the ideas of rebirth and resurrection for a new life, the mysterious manifestations, proved to be fertile ground for the permanent spread of Christianity in the entire Rhodope region. It's highly likely he preached at the settlements in the mountain from the preserved foundations of the Episcopal Basilica Besica - Gela (Fig. 4) as far as the basilicas in fortress of Perperikon.

About the mission of the Remesian enlightener in the Rhodopes his companion St. Paulinus of Nola raved in his verses:

Nam simul terris animisque duri et sua Bessi nive duriores nunc oves facti
duce te gregantur pacis in aulam.

„The demons, if the earth and their souls are hard, if they themselves are harder than the snow there, have now become, by your guidance, meek sheep that gather in the fold of peace.“²

It is no coincidence that Saint Nicetas of Remesiana is one of the symbols of United Europe, leaving through the ecclesiastical-archaeological conservations the romantic memory of the *Biblia Bessica*, his ideas and the hymn *Te Deum* he wrote³ - the interlude of the Eurovision Song Contest. Preaching in the Episcopal Basilica - Basilica Besica in Gela and the numerous small churches in the area built by him, documented in archaeological surveys

¹ http://karavaltchev.blogspot.com/2013/12/blog-post_20.html: В. Каравълчев, *Св. Никита Ремесиански и христијанизацијата на бесите*, Христијанство и култура, 7 (84), 2013.

² Wikipedia: https://bg.wikipedia.org/wiki/Никита_Ремесиански; ЛИБИ, том 1, Софија, 1958, стр. 258.; Migne PL 61, 487; Catholic Encyclopedia: <https://www.newadvent.org/cathen/11052a.htm>.

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nicetas_of_Remesiana: J. Łupiński, *Nicetas of Remesiana and his time*, *Studia Teologiczne*, Białystok Drohiczyn Łomża, 2015;33(1), 337-56.



Fig. 2.
Mausoleum
complex in
the Lozenets
district, Sofia,
4th century.

Сл. 2.
Маузолејски
комплекс у на-
сељу Лозенец,
Софији, IV век.

and tours and reflected in the spectacular new exhibition in the museum at the Old Grade School in Shiroka Laka, Saint Nicetas of Remesiana left a material mark, in addition to the spiritual one, of his ideas, sermons and compositions. He is respected as a saint and his feast is celebrated on June 22.

As already said, the basilicas on the Balkans are numerous. We will focus on the one in Gela, as it is related to the legendary story of the relationship of Saint Nicetas of Remesiana with the ancient population of the mountain - the Bessians and the Biblia Bessica, written especially for them. The early Byzantine basilica in the village of Gela translated from the beginning of the fifth to the end of the sixth century. That temple seems to be the largest and most richly decorated in the Middle Rhodopes from that time.

The mentioned basilica is located at high 1480 m above sea level in the village of Gela in the Rhodope Mountains at a place named "The Monastery". It is about 100 m from the currently functioning church of „Saint Trinity“. In the time of the construction of the contemporary church during the beginning of the twentieth century, some remains of another big old church were found. Foundations of houses and a necropolis have been revealed close to it, down the slope. There are some written sources about finds in 1897 of a grave of a senior cleric, probably a bishop, with a skeleton, buried in a sitting position with a cross and a scepter with decorations of snakes, a second grave and some parts of the foundations of a large stately and richly decorated building. The finds from the graves were kept as private properties and disappeared during the WW II. The remains of a bigger church – the basilica were seen for a long time upper of that place and it's stones were used as building materials for the new church and for houses in the village. Stone slabs and parts of columns with Christian signs are in the collection of the District Historical Museum – Smolyan, but they don't have an inscription with the name of the place. The local legends tell that the name of the monastery complex was „Saint Trinity“ or “Saints Constantine and Helena” and mention the existence of three early Christian churches in it with

Fig. 3.
Mausoleum
complex in
the Lozenets
district, Sofia,
4th century, the
sarcophagy.

Сл. 3
Маузолејски
комплекс у на-
сељу Лозенец,
Софији, IV
век, саркофази.



baptisteries. ⁴ The archaeological site was declared in the List of the monuments of culture with national importance from the Region of Smolyan with the name "Ruins of late Roman and early Byzantine settlement with basilica – Gela" in 1955 and it is protected by the Government of the Republic of Bulgaria. Highly likely this was really a see of a bishop and the finds during the years support that. The dedication and the name of the bigger church - the basilica, remains still unknown, but we call it symbolically Episcopal Basilica Bessica - Gela.

The local population homage from old times the whole location as a sacred place and kept the name "The Monastery", but there were no regular archaeological investigations for a very long time. The first regular archaeological investigations of the site were carried out in the period 1967-1971 by a team from the National Archaeological Institute with a Museum - Bulgarian Academy of Sciences - Sofia and the District Historical Museum - Smolyan under the scientific supervision of Prof. Margarita Vaklinova. ⁵ During the excavations was discovered an early byzantine three-aisle basilica with a transverse and annexes. A new archaeological investigations was made in 2010, followed by conservation in 2011-2012, made possible by a project, supported by a grant from Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway through the EEA Financial Mechanism, with beneficent Development of the Industrial, Cultural and National Heritage Foundation (DICNHF), the village of Gela with partners - National Archaeological Institute with a museum – Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Institute of Thracology - Bulgarian Academy of Sciences - Sofia and the District Historical Museum – Smolyan under the scientific supervision of Prof. Margarita Vaklinova. ⁶ Prof. Vaklinova is no longer with us, so I dedicate today's study to her memory.

⁴ Н. Гигов, *Гела*, София, 1988, 46-53.

⁵ М. Ваклинова, *Култовият център при Гела*, *Rhodorica*, 1-2, 2002, 159-179.

⁶ Project "Investigation, conservation and popularization of the Thracian fortress of



Fig. 4. Episcopal Basilica Besica, Gela, forth century, look towards the abse.

Сл. 4.
Епископска базилика Бесика, Гела, IV век, поглед ка апсиди.

The main building measures 30 x 14,80 m, with annexes both north and south of it. It consist of a narthex, a naos with of three long aisles and one transverse aisle. It has an apse with a deambulatorium, a portico and two annexes. (Fig. 4)

The narthex covers the west sector of the church. Through gateways with stairs downwards and closed with wooden doors, it communicates with the central aisle and the isolated northern aisle. The latter served to keep the church plate necessary for the service, the holy oil, wax, wine and wheat. It leads also to the northern annexes. A funerary chapel was constructed in the southern sector of the narthex. It contains a burial chamber made of stones and bricks and covered with stone slabs. The dimensions are 1.80 x 0.82 m and the depth is 1 m. The chamber held a skeleton with a golden coin in the mouth as a Charon's obol – a coin of the Byzantine Emperor Justin I (518-527), which shows the use of the pagan tradition in a Christian funeral. Presumably, the buried man has been once an especially honored high-rank ecclesiastic bishop and libations and pilgrimage were performed on his tomb – as important as the person from the grave with the scepter.

The naos is the central space of the basilica. It's the space in which the believers gather in attending the service – the liturgy. It has measures 17,15 x 14,80 m and is divided in three long aisles and a transverse aisle before the altar, with entrances leading to the annexes north and south. A getaway closed by a wooden door and two steps down the narthex led to the naos. The northern aisle was isolated from the central part, closed by a wall. A gate in the narthex leads to it along stairs cut in the rock. The transverse aisle communicates with the rooms north and south of it.

To the East the church terminates in a wide space enclosed with a trap-ezoidal wall and illuminated by many windows. It contains a semi-circular apse. They are divided by a round passage-way – deambulatorium, used in time of the service with a liturgical function. The fore-altar space is shaped in front of the apse, in the transverse aisle.

Fig. 5. Early Christian Basilica – Remesiana, Bela Palanka, Serbia, fourth century.

Сл. 5. Ранохришћанска базилика, Ремезијана, Бела Паланка, Србија, IV век.



Outbuildings were found outside the south-east corner and to the south-west to the porch, connected by a portico pavement. The North-east corner passes to a room, attached to the North wall. A portico was constructed in front of the southern facade, with entrances to the interior and to a room at the Southeastern corner, which was probably used as a baptistery. Presumably wooden pillars supported the portico. Processed stone blocks carefully shaped the entrance leading to the interior. A spacious yard developed to the South with some service rooms. The annexes to the north probably also served for liturgical purposes.

The church walls were built of stone and bricks, The floors were paved with tiles round in shape 0,60 m in diameter, rectangular and square ones. The roof was supported by a wooden construction and tiled. The church was brightly illuminated through glazed windows. The interior was decorated with architectural details made of local stone.⁷

During the excavations 1967-1971 on the intermediate terrace between the two church buildings were discovered the walls of a large, richly decorated representative building - probably an episcopal residence directly connected to the basilica.

In the course of the excavations, ceramic fragments of vessels from the fifth-sixth century were found; wholes and parts of bricks and tiles; fragments of window glass, parts of glass cups and lamps; iron nails of different sizes; parts of fasteners - hinges, rings, latches, reamers, clamps, etc.; one copper female ring with unspecified dating; Turkish copper coin from the nineteenth century. Based on the conducted archaeological research, we would claim that the early byzantine basilica in the village of Gela functioned from the beginning of the fifth to the end of the sixth century, when it was burned during one of the Slavic and Avar invasions. After that, it was not restored in the same place.

⁷ Project "Investigation, conservation and popularization of the Thracian fortress of Gradishte and Early Byzantine Basilica, Gela, Western Rhodopes, Bulgaria", Grant agreement N BG0050-GAE-00112-E-V1-EEA-FM.



Fig. 6. The main square of Bela Palanka, ancient Remesiana, the marble monument from 202 AD., dedicated to the Roman emperor Septimius Severus and his son Caracalla, images of Saint Nicetas of Remesiana and Septimius Severus.

Сл. 6. Главни трг Бела Паланка, стара Ремезијана, мермерни споменик из 202. године, посвећен римском цару Септимију Северу и његовом сину Каракали, са приказима Светог Никите Ремезијанског и Септимија Севера.

Let's return to the place from which Saint Nicetas of Remesiana travelled the Rhodopes. This is the town of Bela Palanka in present-day Serbia, originally known as Remesiana, which was visited by emperors, kings and travel writers. The ancient town Remesiana was founded in the slopes of Suva planina mountain at the crossing of Koritnitza river with Nishava river, on the important ancient roads.

Much of the ancient Remesiana lies under the contemporary town of Bela Palanka. The urban settlement on the territory of today's municipality continues to exist for 2300 years, which makes Bela Palanka one of the oldest settlements in Serbia. Looking back at the history of the city, located along the main Roman military road Via Militaris, we find a huge cultural and historical heritage dating back to the time of Remesiana. This is an invitation for archaeologists, scientists and organized groups of tourists to visit and experience the spirituality of these traces of Christianity in this area.

The first excavation started in Bela Palanka in 1957 mostly as sondages. Finds were result of the contemporary building activities in the town since then. Remesiana was declared an Archaeological site of great importance in 1987 and it is protected by the Republic of Serbia.

In the very center of today's city, an archaeological site can be visited. There are remains of a basilica from the Roman-Byzantine period, which was rebuilt and adopted to new needs of later epochs. Its foundations and apse are located under a modern building. It seems to be a single aisle building with not so big dimensions. (Fig. 5) On the town square of Bela Palanka there is a marble monument from 202 AD., At dedicated to the Roman emperor Septimius Severus and his son Caracalla, who passed through Remesiana on their way back to Rome from the Orient.⁸ Near it are placed images of Septimius Severus and St. Nicetas of Remesiana, to remind the modern tourist of this ancient history. (Fig. 6)

⁸ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Remesiana>; Н. Ракоција, *Прилог истраживан у*

The biggest early Christian basilica from the fourth –sixth century AD was found in 2012 near Bela Palanka at Kladenciste archaeological area during the construction works of Highway E75. Unfortunately it was covered in 2012 with sand and lies under the highway. It was the largest one, found in Serbia⁹ and for sure is connected with the activities of Saint Nicetas of Remesiana.

There are also rich finds from the ancient cemeteries of Remesiana, which show clear the spreading of the new religion in the area and it's coexistence together with the pagan tradition. That is supported by the research of the Belgrade University and the exhibition at the Narodni museum - Beograd "(Un) shared memories: Pagan and Christian burials of Remesiana". That is quite similar to the finds from Gela in the Rhodopes - Christian funerals of important persons and more than 20 pagan burials of Thracians.¹⁰

Conclusions: These two seemingly distant archaeological monuments in Gela and Remesiana can be linked to each other as part of an European Cultural Routh and could tell a lot to the modern man along the new transborder cultural corridors on the trails of the ancient Via Militaris, which will become a road and a corridor of peace. This way the sacred places and the life of the saints can be a good example for educating the people of all ages.

Such new European Cultural Routes connecting the archaeological parks from the era of Early Christianity and sustainable routes for cultural tourism with an emphasis on popular-accessible public education of adults on the material, confessional and civilizational traces of early Christianity in the Balkans as a common history, a common need of the general public knowledge and common motivation for mutual trust between the Balkan peoples will contribute to mutual knowledge, friendship and peace. The possibilities for conducting cultural tourism with an emphasis on popular-accessible public education of adults on the material, confessional and civilizational traces of early Christianity in the Balkans as a common history, a common need for broad public knowledge and a common motivation for mutual trust between the Balkan peoples in sustainable routes of cultural tourism, will provide new opportunities for getting known the early Christian connections and mutual influences on the Balkans. It is no coincidence that Saint Nicetas of Remesiana is one of the symbols of United Europe, leaving through the ecclesiastical-archaeological conservations the romantic memory of the Biblia Bessica, his ideas and the hymn Te Deum he wrote will contribute to mutual knowledge, friendship and peace.

Public knowledge about archaeological sites connected with historic memories of St. Nicetas of Remesiana is an example and motivation for today's European Cultural Routes. As municipal and regional projects in Orthodox Balkan countries usually aim at strictly planned tourist developments by encouraging local investments over short time spans, there is a need for larger public education of Balkan societies based on positive historical knowledge about revived archaeological remains from the epoch of Early Christian centers

Ремесијане и редлог утречениа простора утвченеа у Белог паланци, Ниш и Византија, XIV, 137-154.

⁹ <https://www.panacomp.net/remesiana-site/>

¹⁰ Н. Гигов, *Гела*, Софија, 1988, 46-53.

in today's Serbia, Bulgaria, the Republic of North Macedonia & Greece. The scientific texts about archaeological finds regarding Early Christian centers on the Balkans from the time of Apostle Paul and Saint Lydia until Saint Nicetas of Remesiana need a specially adopted narrative, a new story to be told for larger groups of modern Balkan nations, mainly with the aim of reviving Early Christianity's ideas for spiritual and cultural unity and issues regarding peace.

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СВЕТИ НИКЕТА РЕМЕЗИЈАНСКИ – УЈЕДИНИТЕЉ ЕВРОПЕ

Научни рад Ралице Базайтове истражује дубок историјски и духовни утицај Светог Никите Ремезијанског, представљајући га као темељну личност европског јединства кроз призму ранохришћанске археологије. Студија се фокусира на базилике у Гели у Бугарској и Ремезијани у данашњој Србији, представљајући их не само као рушевине, већ као важне стубове заједничког цивилизацијског идентитета. Испитујући материјалне трагове раног хришћанства, ауторка настоји да исприча причу о културној интеграцији која одјекује и у данашњим изазовима мира и међусобног разумевања.

Археолошки докази који потврђују ову мисију највидљивији су у Епископској базилици у Гели, смештеној у срцу Родопа. Ово налазиште представља материјални доказ проповеди и организационог рада Светог Никите. Паралелно са налазима у Гели, град Бела Паланка у Србији, некадашња Ремезијана истраживања су открила више базилика. Ова два удаљена археолошка локалитета повезује личност Светог Никете, што указује на постојање духовног коридора који је различите етничке групе повезивао под заједничком вером.

У закључку, ауторка предлаже стварање нових **Европских културних рута** које би повезале ове ранохришћанске центре широм Балкана. Обнављањем историјског сећања на Светог Никиту Ремезијанског и његову мисију мира, савремене балканске нације могу пронаћи заједничку основу и међусобно поверење. Студија наглашава да научни наратив археологије мора бити прилагођен и представљен широј јавности на приступачан начин како би се подстакло осећање заједничке историје. На крају, Свети Никита остаје снажан симбол уједињене Европе, чије наслеђе пријатељства и културне синтезе представља безвременски пример за савремено друштво. Његов живот и дело показују да чак и у немирним временима духовно спасење и културно јединство могу превазићи границе, претварајући древне путеве у савремене коридоре мира и међусобног поштовања.