

PAINTING IN THE CRYPT WITH AN ANCHOR IN NIŠ

The crypt has been accidentally discovered in September 2006 while digging a house foundation in Pantelejska Street (55 Ratka Pavlovića St.) in Jagodin Mala settlement, in the western part of the early Christian city necropolis. Then, a dredging machine took the upper half of the western part, with a part of the vault. In the middle of the southern part of the crypt, on its outer side, a widening was noticed, which was visible from the beginning of the vault (2,30m height, round 35cm width, after cleaning), which was made of broken stone and bricks (4cm thick), connected by lime mortar. The purpose of this wall, which partly leans on the southern wall of the crypt, has not been defined since the cleaning has not been finished. (Fig. 1)

The crypt is oriented E-W, with the entrance in the east. Its quadrangular shape is close to a square (2,25x2,30m) and is vaulted by a half-rounded vault 2,04m height (Fig.2) The lower part of the crypt walls is made of pieces of the broken stone and round pebble, with equally arranged horizontal lines of bricks that were used for leveling the walls. The brick zone is made of sometimes one and sometimes two lines of bricks. Longer and transversal outer walls are not adapted but built into the previously dug hole. The arch of the vault is completely made of radial layers of red bricks of unequal dimensions (39x28x4cm; 29x26x5cm; 27x27x6cm), connected by lime mortar (6cm thick fugue). Half-rounded vault is covered on the top by nicely deposited hydro-static mortar 4-5cm thick. (Fig. 3)

Especially important is the unusual way how the arch of the vault is made, which has not been recorded by now in the early Christian architecture of Naissus. The arch of the vault is not closed in the expected way, but a vault segment bends at the top, exceeding it, so giving the impression of additional, smaller vault. In this way, the vault consisting of three parts is made, with clearer central space that is more convenient for painting.¹ (Fig. 4)

The entrance (62x75cm), at 90cm height from the crypt floor, is formed by three stone blocks processed by rough strokes of chisel, while the threshold

¹ Much later, a vault consisting of three parts will become recognizable characteristic of oriental architecture - Г. Суботић, *Охридска сликарска школа XV века*, Београд, 1980, 53.



Fig. 1 Niš, crypt after it was discovered

Сл. 1 Ниш, изглед гобнице после откривања

is made of two bricks. The entrance is closed by precisely fitted stone block processed by fine strokes of chisel. The floor is of the stamped down earth.² (Fig. 5)

The crypt walls are painted. The first layer of the fresco support is 2-3cm thick, depending on rough spots arisen in the building process and is made of fine grain mortar partly filled with trimmed straw. The painting was done on the second, finely polished layer 1-2mm thick.

Decoration of the crypt is horizontally separated, at the height where the arch of the vault begins, by a wide, red horizontal strip (12cm). (Fig. 6) In that way, respecting the architectonic elements, the walls are separated in two zones.³ A hem on the eastern wall at the threshold level is interrupted by the entrance opening. Under the hem, lower part of the walls, down to the floor, is not painted. Above the hem, leaning on it, symmetrically to the entrance, there

² The crypt was not plundered. A skeleton of, it seems, one deceased, found out in traces, spreads in the east-west (head) direction. He was dressed in golden-woven clothes. Golden threads round 0,5mm thick and 4-5cm long are clearly seen. Besides the skeleton, there was a glass lacrimarium and a square profiled nail (12cm) with a damaged head. As it seems, the wooden coffin with a deceased was directly placed on the floor made of stamped down earth. After the summon, collaborators of the Institute for protection of cultural monuments came to the location: historian of art M.A. M. Rakocija, archeologists T. Čerškov, A. Aleksić. And an architect, D. Palibrk. Subject of this paper is, in accordance with professional obligation, the crypt painting.

³ Horizontal separation of the crypt painted decoration is often found in Sofia necropolis crypts and is not accidental and only decorative. - К. Миятевъ, *Декоративна живопись на софийския некрополъ*, София 1925, 6, 109.

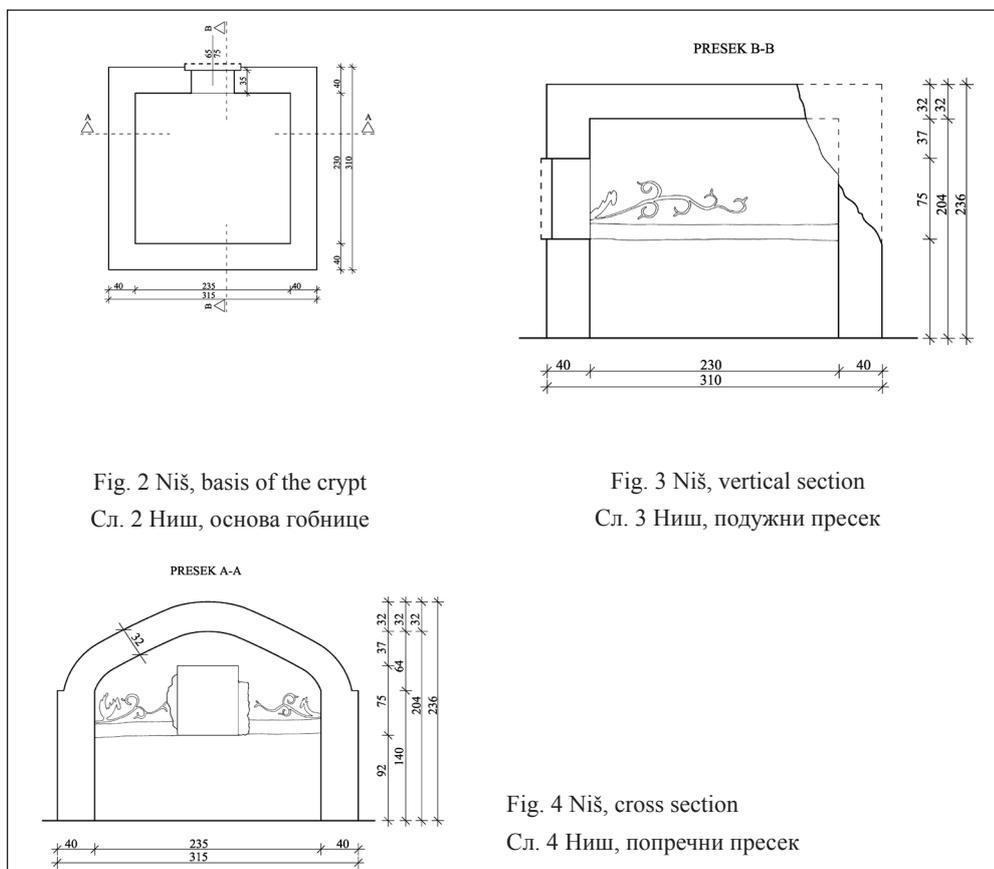


Fig. 2 Niš, basis of the crypt
Сл. 2 Ниш, основа гобнице

Fig. 3 Niš, vertical section
Сл. 3 Ниш, подужни пресек

Fig. 4 Niš, cross section
Сл. 4 Ниш, попречни пресек

is an ocher vine in a shape of a curved branch with bended endings. On that branch, in the corners of the eastern wall, there are birds. Vine, as a symbol of life and eternity, is painted without leaves here. Thus, it is not possible to define the vine source. On the eastern wall, it spreads towards the entrance, while on the northern and southern wall, it is placed in their eastern halves. (Fig. 7) On the western wall, above the imitation of parapet plates, an anchor was painted, within a medallion, surrounded by flowers. On the vault, there is Constantine's monogram in a medallion, surrounded by a wreath within a ring.

On the vault, there is circle medallion (105cm radius) consisting of two concentric circles made of black lines (1cm thick). Inside the ring (25cm wide), there is a laurel wreath tied by a ribbon. Inside the medallion (60cm radius) there is Christ's monogram. (Fig. 8)

Constantine's monogram in clypeus,⁴ perfectly precise, is painted on a blue background⁵ by ocher yellow, with apocalyptic letters α and ω in the same

⁴ Represents monogram of the Jesus Christ's name and is called Constantine's monogram because Constantine had placed it on labarum – Л. Мирковић, *Православна литургија* I, Београд 1982, 172.

⁵ Blue color symbolizes purity, peace and piety – J. Kuper, *Ilustrovana enciklope-*



Fig. 6 Niš, south-eastern part of the crypt
Сл. 6 Ниш, југоисточни део гробнице



Fig. 5 Niš, the entrance opening
Сл. 5 Ниш, улазни отвор

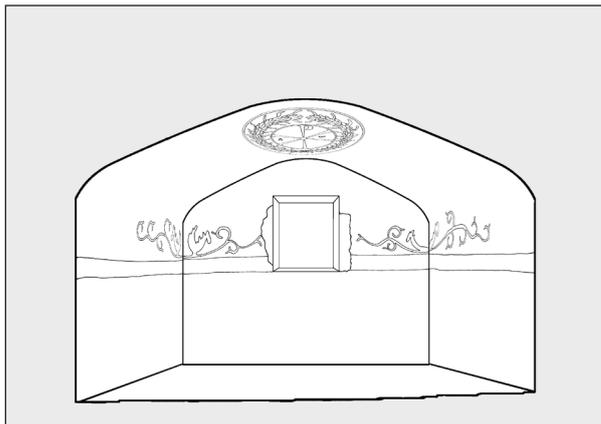


Fig. 7 Niš, eastern part of the crypt,
drawing

Сл. 7 Ниш, Источна половина
гробнице, цртеж

color, on the left and right side of the monogram center. In the middle, where hastas of the letters cross, the center is emphasized by a smaller circle,⁶ from where hastas, geometrically correct, spread in a triangle form, towards the rim of the ring. (Fig. 9)

dija tradicionalnih simbola, Belgrade 1986, see: Color. The background is blue like the sky behind the crosses and monograms in Galla Placidia Mausoleum, San Giovanni in Ponte or San't Apollinare in Classe. Blue clypeus is a symbol of the cosmic sphere. Harizmon with the same meaning in blue clypeus is on the vault of the archbishop's chapel in Ravenna and it influenced a series of motives of the same meaning - F.W. Deichmann, *Ravenna. Hauptstadt des spätantiken Abendlandes I-IV*, Wiesbaden 1958-76, 204-5; W. Oakeshott, *Mozaici Rima*, Belgrade 1977, 188, 198.

⁶ A circle, as a cross, symbolizes heavenly empire and the God - J. Chevalier, A. Gheerbrant, *Rječnik simbola*, Zagreb 1983; В. Лилчић, *Македонскиот камен за боговите, христијане и за живот по живот II*, Скопје 2002, 636, 1086. About this in: M. Rakocija, *About the parapet plate in Niš, origin and technology of early Byzantine partitions*, Niš and Byzantine IV, Niš 2006, 95-111



Fig. 8 Niš, Constantine's monogram at the crypt vault

Сл. 8 Ниш, Константинов монограм на своду гробнице

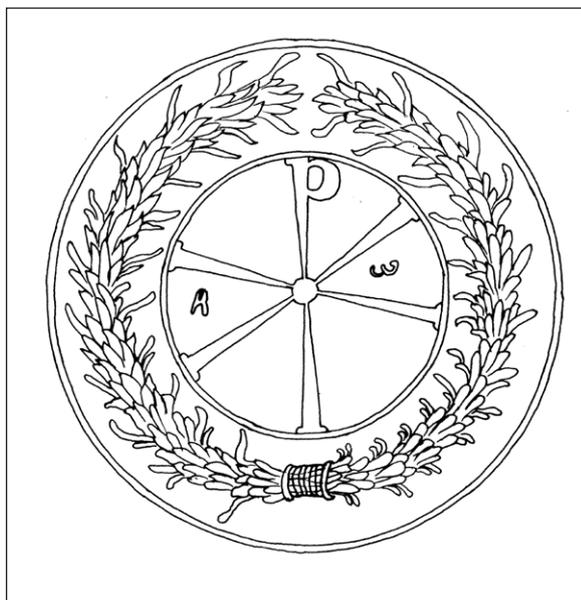


Fig. 9 Niš, Constantine's monogram, drawing

Сл. 9 Ниш, Константинов монограм, цртеж

Such Christ's monogram is surrounded by the palm branches wreath in a ring, as a symbol of triumph and victory over death of the chosen ones, who are rewarded by "a wreath of glory".⁷ It is a reminder of the Christ's martyr death which should be an ideal for every Christian. The wreath consists of the pleated branches, separated above, and at the bottom they are firmly tied by a light brown ribbon with white accents, and it resembles a lot monograms in the nearby crypt with figural representations.⁸ The wreath is made of leaves of dark and light blue, to light green, with white accents. Leaves are painted by wide strokes of the brush (2cm) by one move, so that brush hairs left relief mark. He uses a technique typical for monumental wall painting, which is to be observed from the distance. The inner part of the ring is separated by the wreath in two zones. The zone next to the monogram is covered by white, and zone at the outer side of the wreath is ochre. Corona triumphalis of the laurel the artist painted expressionistically, offering general impression of the real, dense pleated wreath, which is specially stressed by realistically painted ribbon by which the branches are tied, so that it reflects Hellenic spirit.⁹ (Fig. 10)

⁷ F. Cumont, *Recherches sur le symbolisme funéraire des romains*, Paris 1966, 483; About the wreath problem in Christian art, which origin should be traced in Hellenic and not in Roman victor's wreath, see Ј. Мирковић, *Мозаици баптистерија православних*, - *S. Giovanni in Fonte in Ravenna*, in: Иконографске студије, Нови Сад, 1974, 75-82.

⁸ М. Ракоција, *Манастири и цркве града Ниша*, Ниш 1998, 49-52, сл. 26.27.

⁹ The origin of such Hellenistic designed wreaths, thinks Mijatev, should not be traced in Roman tombstones, but in the east, where it came from to the southern Italy and the Balkans: К. Миятев, *op. cit.*, 24/25.



Fig. 10 Niš, Constantine's monogram
Сл. 10 Ниш, Константинов монограм



Fig. 11 Chersonesus, Constantine's monogram
Сл. 11 Херсонес, Константинов монограм

In the context of the crypt painted decoration, the Christ's monogram type of Constantine's monogram in clypeus,¹⁰ symbolizes Christ and victory over death – resurrection, salvation and the eternal life. This type of the Christ's monogram in a wreath we can find on many monuments in the period from IV to VI century,¹¹ beginning with the nearby crypt with figural representations in Niš¹² and the crypt in Pecs (Hungary),¹³ then in crypts no. 46 and 38 in Thessaloniki,¹⁴ on the eastern wall of the crypt no. 4 in Sofia necropolis,¹⁵ up to the south-west Crimea coast, in the crypt of early Christian necropolis of the city of Chersonesus, nearby Sevastopol, where, also at the crypt vault, the Christ's monogram in clypeus was found, which design is closest to the Constantine's monogram in Niš. This crypt is dated as of late IV or the first half of V century.¹⁶ (Fig. 10 and 11)

Often, the wreath is flanked at the bottom by two pigeons (birds), such as one placed on the Pasiat's sarcophagus (Laterano museum, Vatican, IV

¹⁰ About origin, kind and development of imagines clipeatae see: I.M. Đorđević, *Imagines clipeatae dans la peinture monumentale serbe du XIII^e siècle*, Collection of fine arts 16, Novi Sad, 1980, 13-23.

¹¹ Due to this reason, it is located at the vault of the archbishop's chapel in Ravenna – Л. Мирковић, *Мозаици архиепископске капеле у Равени*, in: Иконографске студије, Нови Сад 1974, 99, Fig. 31.

¹² Л. Мирковић, *Православна литургија* I, 55-56, Fig. 2, 6

¹³ J. Zeiller, *Les origines chrétiennes dans les provinces danubiennes de l'Empire romain*, Paris 1918,=(г.р. Žak Zeler, *Почетци хришћанства на Балкану*, translated by К. Никчевић, Подгорица 2005), 194/5.

¹⁴ Ε. Μαρκε, Η νεκροπολι της Θεσσαλονικης στους υστερορωμαϊκους και παλαιохριστιανικους ηρονους, ΑΘΗΝΑ 2006, Πιν. 23α

¹⁵ К. Миятевь, *op. cit.*, 24, сл.9.

¹⁶ E. Turovskiy, *A newly-found early Christian vault of the Chersonesus necropolis next to the quarantine bay*, International Conference Varna 2003, Varna 2006, 287/8, fig. 6.



Fig. 12 Niš, western wall, view

Сл. 12 Ниш, западни зид, изглед

century)¹⁷ and then in the crypts no. 38, 57, 53 from the end of IV century in Thessaloniki.¹⁸ Depiction of pigeons in tomb architecture often occurs. They symbolize souls of the deceased who reached Paradise.

Also in Niš, we find two pigeons (birds), not next to the Constantine's monogram but next to the entrance opening. Above the hem in the corners of the eastern wall, on the bended vine, the preserved contours of the faded colored layer irresistibly remind of the birds silhouette. It is not unusual that birds surround the entrance opening. So, the birds flank two crypts entrances of Sofia necropolis,¹⁹ and in Chersonesus.²⁰ Their presence at this spot is not accidental and they are symbol of a saved soul of a person buried here, which found peace in heaven.²¹ This symbolism is match to the western wall symbolism, where an anchor with hastas is painted, revealing that soul of the deceased had found peace in Christ, which is sure sign of salvation that leads to Paradise. (Fig. 12)

Lower zones of longer walls are not painted, so that, thanking to the red hem and vine, above was pointed a motive on the western – front wall.

Out of the whole western wall that used to be completely painted, a lower half is preserved. Its sides are bordered by red hem. The preserved lower

¹⁷ Е. Димитрова, *Најстарите христијански симболи*, Скопје 1995, 29, 127.

¹⁸ Е. Маркџ, *op. cit.*, 165, Σχ. 111; Σχ. 134; 183, Σχ. 140.

¹⁹ Сцуптс no. 1, 9 - К. Миятевџ, *op.cit.*, 12, Fig.5; 91, Fig.34.

²⁰ Е. Turovskiy, *op.cit.*, fig. 5

²¹ About symbolism of pigeons - see Е. Димитрова, *op. cit.*, 126-131, with literature

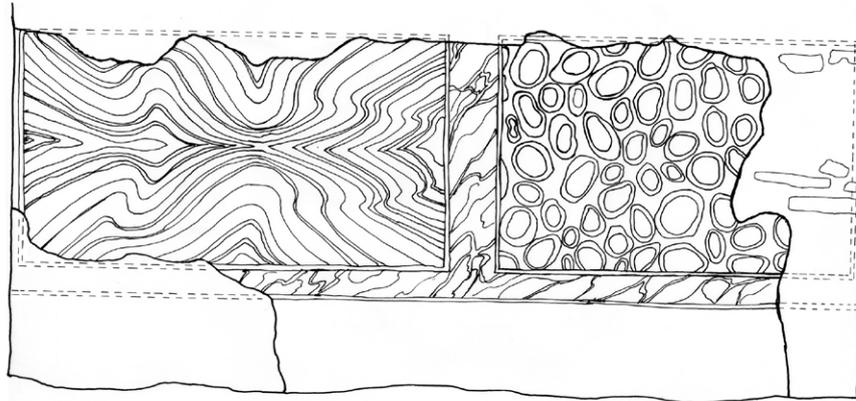


Fig. 13 Niš, lower half of the western wall, drawing

Сл. 13 Ниш, доња половина западног зида, цртеж



Fig. 14 Niš, southern surface, western wall

Сл. 14 Ниш, јужна плоха, западни зид



Fig. 15 Niš, northern surface, western wall

Сл. 15 Ниш, северна плоха, западни зид

half is separated in two rectangular (painted) surfaces framed by a dark blue line (southern 113x61cm; northern 95x61cm). The surfaces are separated by a ribbon (13cm wide) with, on a white background, painted slanting, pleated, winding, blue lines, without any order, so that it reminds of a marble column structure. Such ribbon, only narrower (7cm), spreads along the lower edge of the surfaces, around 25cm above the floor level. (Fig. 13)

In this way, marble structure was created, recuperated by playful, wavy, blue lines, giving the impression that surfaces have been placed into a marble frame. No doubt that the wider ribbon that separates the surfaces represents an ancient memory of a column or pilaster which separates the parapet plates.

The southern surface consists of white-blue background with light blue wavy lines that spread radially from the middle towards the sides. It reminds of a parapet (board) imitation with marble incrustations (imitates marble plating) or water waves. (Fig. 14)



Fig. 16 Niš, lower half of the western wall

Сл. 16 Ниш, доња половина западног зида

The northern surface is filled by dark-yellow oval forms, approximately of the same size, placed in a light-ocher background of the same shape. Space among them is filled by crimson color, so that a net form is created, which resembles egg-like honeycombs, but also a wall made of round pebble stone. All this - with full force of decorative architectural style in painting. (Fig. 15)

This way of fresco decoration, which imitates luxurious materials, such as marble plating, which used to cover the lowest zones of the houses and temples walls, originates from antique Greece times and represents special group of the early Christian crypts. This kind of decoration, to mention some similar to one in Niš, can be found in one of the oldest crypts lowest zones (no. 7) of the Sofia necropolis, dated as of the second half of IV or beginning of V century,²² then in Beška,²³ Brestovik, Solin,²⁴ in basilica Five Martyrs in Kapljuč, Pecs (Sopianae),²⁵ Thessaloniki,²⁶ has not been surely clarified yet. (Fig. 16)

²² К. Миятевь, *op. cit.*, 67, обр. 20.

²³ Ђ.М. Zisi, *Antika, umetnost na tlu Jugoslavije*, Beograd-Zagreb-Mostar 1982, 147, sl.107

²⁴ Л. Мирковић, *Старохришћанска гробница у Нишу*, Старинар V-VI (1954-1955), Београд 1956, 68.

²⁵ J. Zeiller, *op. cit.*, 194; Л. Мирковић, *Старохришћанска гробница у Нишу*, 68; F. Fülep, *Grad Pečuj u rimsko doba*, Budapest 1975, 26-27;

²⁶ Crypt no. 99, 94, and a crypt without numeration Fig. 133-134 all dated according to comparison with other crypts, into the second quarter of IV century - Е. Маркџ, *op.cit.*, 176/177, Fig. 130, 132.134



Fig. 17 Brest near Beska, IV century

Сл. 17 Брест код Беске, IV век

Rostovcev concludes that there is no difference between the painted decoration in a crypt and equally painted decoration in the contemporary houses.²⁷ For him, this way of painting of the lowest zones in crypts, is a simple imitation of marble plating, with its only purpose to decorate this space. Srđan Đurić also agrees with him, seeing the imitation of incrustation as purely decorative detail in painting of the early Christian crypts.²⁸ For our colleague Marki, again, in the latest study of the Thessaloniki necropolis, a decoration consisting of irregular circles is common imitation of red marble plates.²⁹ Julia Valeva thinks that painted architectonic motives in crypts “do not follow the architectonic logics, but are for purely decorative purpose”, imitating the marble plating, but she also comments that “at the same time, they represent Christian eschatology”,³⁰ in this way coming closer to Mijatev’s way of thinking. Slightly different opinion has Krstju Mijatev who approaches this problem analytically carefully, pointing to the present details on a painted decoration, such as a network consisting of irregular circles,³¹ which can be found in the Niš crypt. His point of view is that the crypts decoration has more symbolical than decorative character. Horizontal separation of decorations shows that in the upper zones, heavenly Paradise is presented, while in the lower zones, separated by hem that separates this world from the “other one”, the earthly residence of the deceased³² is painted. Due to this reason, thinks Mijatev, the lower half is not interpreted as a room so that, often, it is not decorated.³³ Exact example, like this one, we find in the Niš crypt,

²⁷ N. Rostovcev, *Ancient Decorative Painting*, Journal of Hellenic Studies XXXIX (1919), 163.

²⁸ S. Đurić, *Kasnoantičke i ranohrišćanske zidane grobnice u Iliriku (III-IV)*, Belgrade 1985, 244, doctoral dissertation in writing.

²⁹ E. МАРКН, *op. cit*, 179.

³⁰ J. Valeva, *Sur certaines particularités des hypogées paléochrétiens des terres thraces et leurs analogues en Asie Mineur*, *Anatolica VII* (1979-80), 123

³¹ К. Миятевъ, *op. cit*, 64, 65

³² К. Миятевъ, *op. cit*, 109.

³³ К. Миятевъ, *op. cit*, 111.

Fig. 18 Stobi
Сл. 18 Стоби



which lower part of the lateral sides and the eastern wall under the hem, is not decorated. This is, relying on Mijatev's conclusions, with intention to show difference between earthly and beauty "of not of this world", symbolically presented on the upper surfaces of the crypt. Only the western wall is painted under the hem, at the height of the "earthly residence", by a clearly recognizable painted architectonic motive, which was made of solid material in houses and temples, in which way the atmosphere of the "earthly residence" is made stronger and more convincing. Also, Mijatev supported his assertion by decoration of the Sofia crypt no. 7, with net made of irregular circles, like in Niš, which imitation of incrustation really depicts a detail of the earthly life.³⁴

Motive of incrustation is found in a certain number of the early Christian crypts which, as such, need to be classified. There is no doubt that painted architecture originates from parapet plates which covered walls of the palaces and temples. Another issue is what was painted on them and what its meaning in the crypt was. If we rely on Mijatev's caution and analytically approach the paintings on surfaces in the Niš crypt, we come to a conclusion that besides painting of the contemporary recognizable architectonic detail – marble plating, the earthly residence is once again stressed by a symbolical meaning of its decoration. Wavy and stone painted decoration is more than ordinary texture, and as if it has an intention to, once again, stress and depict the earthly essence – water and earth.

At this stadium of the early Christian crypts painting, considering decorations of the lowest zone of the recently discovered Niš crypt, it seems that all researchers are equally right. We tried to add to Mijatov's recommendation about the necessity of solving symbolism of paintings on parapet plates. Being aware of the early Christians' tendency to symbolism, it is not likely, especially in a crypt, that a contemporary painted architectonic detail is only a decoration, mere ideas-lacking decorating of a temporary residence of a deceased.

³⁴ *Истм*, 110-111, обр. 20. This also counts for crypts no. 8 and 9, but we selected no. 7 because of the great similarity with the one in Niš.



Fig. 19 Thessaloniki, crypt no. 78

Сл. 19 Солун, гроб бр. 78

In Niš, decoration of the southern surface can be most easily connected with imitation of the marble plating, with a reservation that justfully arranged wavy lines concentrated towards the center can, besides ornamental, also hide symbolical meaning. Identical motive of incrustation and equal arrangement of the surfaces were discovered in the crypt no. 78 in Thessaloniki³⁵ and an older structure under the Episcopal basilica in Stobi.³⁶

Network consisting of colored irregular circles, which decorates the northern surface, is recognized by Mijatov as an interesting one, with symbolism that just has to be solved.³⁷ Analogy with decoration of the Niš surface can be established with the crypt no. 7 in Sofia, then, with a crypt in Brestovik³⁸ and in Thessaloniki no. 99, 78³⁹. In these crypts, unlike the one in Niš, a rough line forms reduced oval forms, giving an impression of the scattered round pebbles. And again, the painted decoration on the northern surface is most similar to the one in the older structure under the Episcopal basilica in Stobi. There, as in Niš, correctly drawn egg-like forms, shaped by precise brush strokes, framed by bright red color, form the network structure. (Fig. 17 and 18).

There are many examples of crypts that belong to the type with imitation of incrustation in lower zones, we stated only the surrounding ones: in Stobi, Serdica and Thessaloniki, as well as in the crypt with an anchor, where the parapet surfaces are framed by marble structure frames. Let us distinguish those where the arrangement of surfaces is identical to the Niš one. If in the

³⁵ E. Маркџ, *op. cit.*, Пт. 65

³⁶ J. Wiseman and Đ. Mano-Zissi, *op. cit.*, 142-143, fig.29.

³⁷ К. Миятевь, *op.cit.*, 65

³⁸ М.М. Vasić, *Rimska grobnica u selu Brestoviku*, Starinar n.s. I, sv.2, Belgrade 1906, 128-140.

³⁹ E. Маркџ, *op.cit.*, Пт. 21, 65

Fig. 20 Niš, western wall

Сл. 20 Ниш,
западни зид

older structure under the Episcopal basilica in Stobi an additional parapet plate had not been placed, the arrangement would have been equal to one in Niš.⁴⁰ Completely identical arrangement of equally decorated surfaces was discovered in Thessaloniki in the crypt no. 78, preserved at the height of parapet, also dated as of the second quarter of IV century.⁴¹ It should be mentioned that painting skill in these crypts is on much lower level than skill of the Niš artist. (Fig. 19 and 20)

The recognized imitation of incrustation in geographically distant places, as well as in structures that serve different purposes, unifies the iconography of this period and offers a recognizable model that has been used all over the Balkans.

Finally, the conclusion of Rostovcev, Đurić, Marki and Valeva about purely decorative character of incrustation imitations, as well as the opinion of Mijatev regarding their symbolical presentation of the earthly life, seem to be equal.

Walls of the Niš representative crypts were also covered by genuine marble plating, such as the nearby one with two domes, but the walls were not painted. Niš baptisterium and churches were decorated by marble plating. In the basilica with martyrium, besides genuine marble plating, fragments of the wall painting were also discovered, which demonstrates that lower zones were decorated by incrustation.⁴² Until the end of the Byzantine Empire,⁴³ as

⁴⁰ On the older layer (frescos I) there are panels imitating marble incrustation, separated by Ionic pilasters. When defining purpose of this room, the considered symbolism of decoration may be useful - J. Wiseman and Dj. Mano-Zissi, *Excavations at Stobi*, 1973-1974, *Journal of Field Archaeology*, Vol. 1, 1-2 (1974), 142-143, fig.29. I express my thankfulness to Ph.D. Carolyn Snively for given photographs.

⁴¹ Е. Маркџ, *op. cit*, 177, Пт. 65

⁴² Дј. Мано Зиси, *Дневник са археолошких радова на базилици у Јагодин Мали*, Документација Народног музеја Београд, 15. Јун 1953.

⁴³ S. Curcic, *Gracanica, King Milutin's Church and Its Place in Late Byzantine Ar-*



Fig. 21 Niš, painting fragments
Сл. 21 Ниш, фрагменти живописа



Fig. 22 Niš, fragment with painted anchor
Сл. 22 Ниш, фрагменат са насликаним
сидром



Fig. 23 Niš, fragment with painted herbal decoration
Сл. 23 Ниш, фрагменат са насликаном биљном
декорацијом

well as nowadays, the lowest zones in churches are decorated in the same way, reduced and formulated in accordance with time and technical capacities. The crypt painting, doubtlessly, cannot be observed as an independent one. It is conditioned and directly related to decorating sacral and non-sacral structures.

Several fragments of the fresco decoration on the upper half of the western wall were discovered: (Fig. 21)

On the sound blue background, surrounded by half rounded yellow ribbon (4cm wide), lower part of an anchor of the same color was painted. On the outer side of the yellow circle, green color can be seen in a form of a saber-shaped leaf on white background. Fresco-mortar is joined with the bigger piece of round pebble (16x25cm).

A smaller fragment with crossed yellow ribbons like hastas, formulated like the anchor that they belonged to. (Fig.22)

With yellow arched line, there is green, branchy vegetation, on white background.

On white background, saber-shaped leaves of green color (22x13cm). (Fig. 23)

A red fruit (flower?) with green leaves next to the hem. (12x12cm)

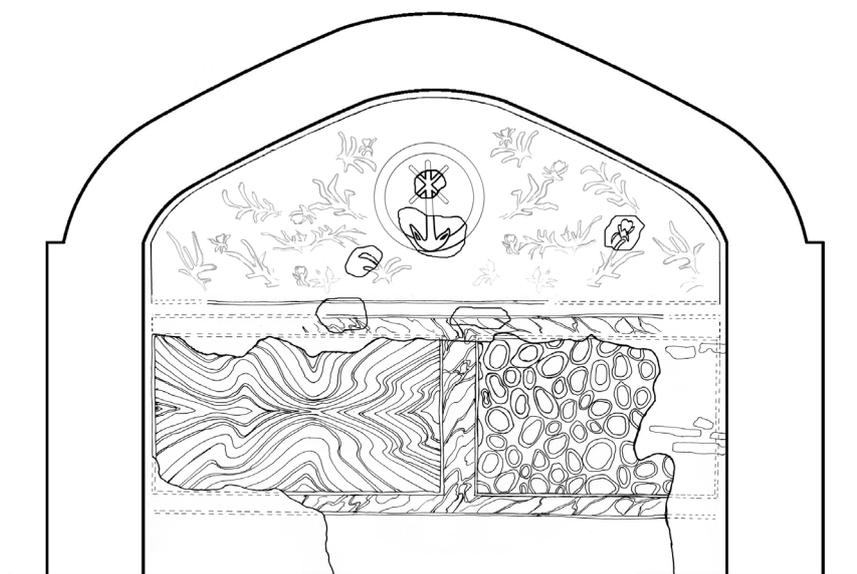


Fig. 24 Niš, western wall, drawing

Сл. 24 Ниш, западни зид, цртеж

Due to certain difficulties with documenting the painting, appearance of the western wall upper zone must remain within the framework of an attempted reconstruction and supposed contents. However, analysis and photographing of the collected painting fragments on the very structure at the moment when it was discovered, offer enough number of elements for realistic reconstruction of the western wall upper zone, in which way the fresco decoration of the crypt could be fully perceived. This crypt occupies an important position in history of early Christian art.

According to the described painting fragments, it can be surely stated that the upper zone consisted of freely arranged vegetation with flowers and leaves which as horror vacui surrounded the ocher medallion with the anchor, located in the middle of the arched segment of the western wall. Inside the medallion, on a blue background, the ocher-yellow anchor is painted, with crossed hastas of the letter "X" near the top of the vertical anchor leg, in this way forming the Christ's monogram. (Fig.24)

The medallion with an anchor is placed in the area of Paradise, represented by beautiful vegetation. In painting of the Balkans crypts, also in Naissus, flowers are mostly used as a motive. Most often, those are flowering fields of Paradise, which is also the basic topic in majority of crypts. Here, the discovered fragments reveal that on white background, green saber shaped vegetation was painted as well as formulated flower petals that surround the medallion with anchor, from which lower part of the anchor remained, with a segment of

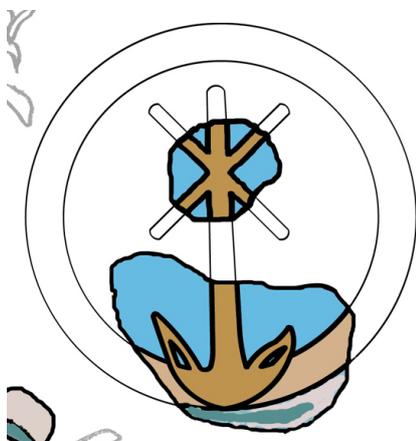


Fig. 25 Niš, reconstruction of the anchor
Сл. 25 Ниш, реконструкција сидра



Fig. 26 Varna, anchor in the crypt in Akčilar,
drawing

Сл. 26 Варна, сидро из гробнице у
Акчилару, цртеж

the medallion arch and place where hastas cross in the upper part. Such decoration was characterized by Rostovcev as “flower style”, the origin of which is in the east, in the oriental art.⁴⁴

Representation of the arch is not often a motive, or explorers were not lucky enough to find it in the known crypts. An anchor of the similar shape, only without hastas, is pictured on a drawing on a crypt wall in Akčilar near Varna (Bulgaria), as a symbol of a human soul salvation.⁴⁵ An anchor is also painted in the middle of the cross in a crypt in Filipi.⁴⁶ In Filipi, symbolism of anchor is more than clear – the believer’s soul has anchored, consolidated in Christ (cross). Crossed hastas on the Niš anchor had the same meaning. Together with destroyed decoration of the upper part of the western wall in Niš contain the same idea which reveals that a soul of a deceased has anchored in the Paradise garden and found peace in Christ. The western wall corresponds to decoration on the eastern wall, where journey of a deceased’s soul (bird) begins, on its way to salvation and Paradise. (Fig. 25 and 26)

And really, above the horizontal hem, heavenly kingdom is depicted by painting the anchor in Paradise garden on the western, and birds on the eastern wall, together with the Christ’s monogram on the vault, as recognizable symbol of Christian faith and sacred sign of salvation in Christ. Under the hem, the “earthly residence” is not decorated, only the western wall is, in a way that it

⁴⁴ M. Rostovtsev, *La peinture decorative antique en Russie meridionale*, Sain-Petersbourg 1914, 20-22 et: J. Valeva, *Sur certaines particularités des hypogées paléochrétiens des terres thraces et leurs analogues en Asie Mineur*, *Anatolica VII* (1979-80), 122

⁴⁵ Д. Овчаров, *Архитектура и декорација на старохристијанските гробници в нашите земји*, *Археологија* 4, (Софија 1977), 23, обр. 3

⁴⁶ Σ. Πελλικανίδης, *Μελέτες παλαιοχριστιανικές και βιζαντινές αρχαιολογίας*, *Τεσσαλονικη* 1977, 370/372

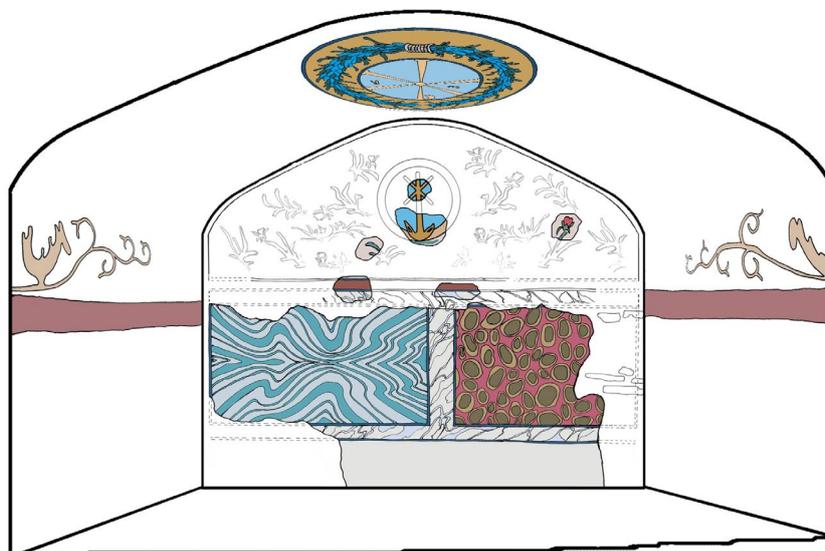


Fig. 27 Niš, reconstruction of painting in the crypt, drawing
Сл. 27 Ниш, реконструкција сликарства у гробници, цртеж

reminds of a detail of everyday life. This also confirms that the painted “constructive” elements were used by the Christians to express the idea of the holy hierarchy.⁴⁷ However, those paintings are symbols that should be interpreted carefully, especially when trying to reconstruct something that has been irretrievably lost. (Fig. 27)

Painting of the crypts came from good theology knowledge, from a skillful craftsman’s hand, who left us stylistically and artistically perfect work of art. He uses reverberant colors, which freshness offers an impression of a just finished work. The paint brush stroke is wide and free where playful leaves and branches should be painted, while he is mathematically precise, surely by help of a pair of compasses, when drawing circles. Movements are tidy and meticulous when he paints the Christ’s monogram and anchor, or when he ties a bow round the laurel branches. In this way, by painting procedure, he accomplishes that painting truly reflects the desired atmosphere.⁴⁸ Painting of the new discovered crypt in the city necropolis of Naissus is a result of already formed and widely accepted tradition of Christian art in this ancient and respectable bastion of Christianity.

It is difficult to say something more about the artist’s origin. However, it is not exaggerated to conclude that this is the work of an educated artist who could acquire his knowledge either somewhere else or in some Niš workshop, where fresco technique was widely accepted. This is work of an experienced routine artist to whom codes of monumental painting were not unknown.

⁴⁷ J. Valeva, *op. cit.* 123

⁴⁸ This crypt and the crypt with frescos were not painted by the same painter. Due to the style, they are different both artistically and chronologically.

Hellenic designed wreath with religious details (ribbon), fear from an empty space and reverberated colors point to influence of the East, which is new in viewing stylistic characteristics of the early Christian painting in Naissus. Stylistic eclecticism of the Niš crypts painting should be the subject of a separate study.⁴⁹ This painting should be dated in the period between Hellenic verism and full Christian symbolism visible in ornamental stylistic of late V and VI century. Therefore, one can understand big similarity of the Constantine's monogram in klypeus with the monogram in Chersonesus, far in the east, which dating also corresponds to date of painting of the Niš crypt, end of IV, mid V century latest.

Painting of the crypts, parallel to ecclesiastical painting, developed in accordance with its purpose. Bordering and separation of walls by horizontal hem with painted incrustations in the lower zone and hrizmon at the top of the vault, this crypt looks like a smaller, one-nave church. It is not difficult to conclude that the artist, for his prototype, had painting in some church in contemporary Niš.

Both in a crypt and in a church, baptistery, chapel, at that time and nowadays, symbolism of the vault is the same – the Heavenly sphere, heavenly kingdom. Decoration of other walls is added to the vault symbolism. If we rely on the secondary iconography and neglect recognizable details of the visible world, then we can view decoration of the crypt as an announcement of times that are coming, when by literal interpretation of the Biblical text,⁵⁰ four areas of the Universe will be presented and Christian Universe⁵¹ will be conjured up. However, this attempt of solving hidden symbolism of the painted details only confirms clearly readable message about a journey of a soul on its way to Paradise, eternal blissfulness, and heavenly kingdom.⁵²

⁴⁹ Influence of Rome and Italy on painting in the crypt with figural representations is recognized – В. Ђурић, *Византијске фреске у Југославији*, Београд 1974, 5,6. This is understandable because the Mediterranean Dacia was under jurisdiction of Rome, while known Niš bishops and priests were of Latin origin - М. Ракоција, *Нова сазнања о ранохришћанској прошлости Ниша*, Ниш и Византија VI, Ниш 2008, 45-57. For the first time recognized oriental influence, enables more complete overview of early Christian painting in Niš, which is not subject of this paper.

⁵⁰ Н. Радошевић, *Антички научници у византијском и српском средњовековном природословљу*, in: Трећа југословенска конференција византолога, Београд-Крушевац 2002, 92.

⁵¹ *The first zone* represents the Christ's monogram on the vault – Heavenly kingdom. *The second zone* is Paradise, represented by flowering garden. *The third zone* i.e. Earth, is conjured up by stone decoration of the northern surface. Water, *the fourth zone* of the Universe, is wavy painted on decorated southern surface. - Г. Цветковић Томашевић, *Хераклеја III - Мозајк на подот во нартексот на Големата базилика*, Битола 1967, 58,59. About this: В. Моле, *Минијатуре једног српског рукописа из године 1649*, са Шестодневом бугарског егзарха Јоана и Топографијом Козме Индикоплова, Споменик СКА, XLIV, 1922, 54, 62-64; Р. Грујић, *Космолошки проблеми по нашим старим рукописима*, Годишњак скопског филозофског факултета I, 1930, 183/9.

⁵² Technical documentation is work of students of the Faculty of Architecture Jelena Rakocija and Marko Dimanić, for which I kindly thank them.

Миша Ракоција

СЛИКАРСТВО ГРОБНИЦЕ СА СИДРОМ У НИШУ

Гробница је случајно откривена 2006. године у улици Панталејска (Ратка Павловића) бр. 55 у насељу Јагодин Мала, у западном делу ранохришћанске градске некрополе. Њена основе је блиска квадрату и засведена полуобличастим сводом. Лук свода се у темену извија у сегмент лука који га надвисује, чиме је централни простор добио на прегледности.

Сликана декорација гробнице подељена је по хоризонтални црвеном траком. Испод бордуре, доња половина зидова није осликана. Изнад бордуре развија се лоза окер-жуте боје, на којој, у угловима источног зида стоје птице. На западном зиду, изнад имитације парапетних плоча, је било насликано сидро у медаљону окружено цветовима. На своду је кружни медаљон (105см) са Константиновим монограмом у *clupeus*-у који окружује прстен испуњен лаворовим венцем. Лаворов *corona triumphalis* уметник је нацртао експресионистички нудећи општи утисак стварног тако да одише хеленистичким духом.

Константинов монограма у венцу затичемо на многобројним споменицима у временском раздобљу од IV до VI века. Најближи му је онај из Херсонеса датована у касни IV или прву половину V века.

На западном зиду плохе раздваја декорисана трака, нудећи утисак мермерног рама. Јужну плоху чине светло плаве таласасте линије. Северну плоху тамножуте јајолике форме, која сличи зиду од камена облутка.

Овакав начин фреско декорације, који имитира раскошне материјале, представљају посебну групу ранохришћанских гробница. Овај вид декорације још увек није са сигурношћу разјашњен. Ростовцев, С. Ђурић, Е. Марки, донекле и Ј. Валева, сматрају да је то чисто декоративан детаљ, док је К. Мијатев опрезнији. Покушај аналитичког сагледања сликаног препознатљивог архитектонског детаља - мермерне оплоте, довело нас је до тога да је „земаљско пребивалиште“, и тиме, још једном наглашено. Оваква, таласаста и камена сликана декорација, више је од обичне текстуре, и као да има намеру да ослика суштину овоземаљског – воду и земљу.

На основу уломака живописа реконструисали смо садржај горње зоне западног зида. Слободно распоређено растиње (рај) окружује медаљон са сидром. Унутар медаљона је на плавој позадини насликано окер-жуто сидро са укрштеним хастама слова „X“, формирајући на тај начин христов монограм.

Представа сидра није чест мотив. Сидро сличног облика, само без хасти, представљено је у цртежу на зиду гробнице у Акчилару код Варне (Бугарска) и у средини крста из гробнице у Филипима. Садрже исту идеју која открива да се душа преминулог укотвила у рајском врту и нашла мир у Христу. Западни зид коренсподира са декорацијом на источном зиду одакле почиње пут душе покојника (птице) ка спасењу и рају.

И стварно, изнад хоризонталне бордуре дочарано је оноземаљско царство небеско сликањем сидра у рајском врту на западном и птица на источном зиду, заједно са христовим монограмом на своду, као препознатљиви знаци спасења у Христу. Испод бордуре „земаљско пребивалиште“ није украшено, већ само западни зид и то тако да подсећа на овоземаљски детаљ из свакодневног живота. Јасно је читљива порука о путу душе ка рају, вечном блаженству и царству небеском.

Ликовна анализа указала је на утицај орјента чиме је, поред знаног утицаја запада, указано на нову димензију ранохришћанског сликарства нишких гробница. Ово сликарство треба сместити у раздобље између хеленистичког веризма и нешто касније орнаменталне стилизације, у крај IV најдаље до средине V века.

