

RIDERS ON THE STORM
Dramatic ride of the "Vinica cavalier"

The treasury of the ceramic reliefs excavated at the archeological site of KALE Vinica in the eastern part of Macedonia¹ is considered to be one of the most authentic collections of artistic works dated in the period of Early Christianity. Executed in a shape of terracotta plaques for revetment of the funereal structures within the Late Antique settlement situated near the present-day town of Vinica, the twelve relief slabs decorated with symbolic scenes soaked in eschatological connotation were identified, iconographically deciphered and disclosed, as well as precisely dated by my humble self some twenty years ago². According to my scholarly investigation based on: the iconographic repertoire of the illustrated motifs, the paleographic features of the executed Latin inscriptions, the specific and highly elusive manner of transposition of religious messages into the visual context of the depicted scenes, as well as the fiercely passionate and dramatically intoned stylistic expression, the Vinica terracottas should be, by no means, seen as true representatives of the alternative - Monophysitically oriented artistic approach to the visual exposition of Christian subjects in the age of the Byzantine Emperor Anastasius³. The obvious absence of Christ's image from the iconographic design of the representations, its substitution by symbolically configured biblical references executed in pictures and inscriptions, the lack of saintly halos from the visual definition of the iconographic concept of the repertoire, as well as the close resemblance of our terracottas to the relief depictions in the Monophysite funerary church at Seleucia Pieria near Antioch (end of the 5th century) are also some of the crucial elements that speak in favour of my idea for origination of the Vinica ceramic collection in

¹ Ц. Крстевски - З. Белдедовски, *Рекогносцирање и наоди околу Виница*, Маседониае Acta Archeologica 7-9, Скопје 1987, 155

² Е. Димитрова, *Некои натписи на теракотните икони од Виница*, Современост 5-6, Скопје 1992, 119-127; eadem, *Иконе од теракоте из Винице*, MA Thesis defended at the Department of Art History, Faculty of Philosophy in Belgrade in April 1992, 62-185; eadem, *Керамичките релјефи од Виничкото Кале*, Скопје 1993, 77-176; eadem, *The Terracotta Relief Plaques from Vinica*, Старианар н.с. књ. XLIII-XLIV/1992-1993, Београд 1994, 53-70

³ Е. Димитрова, *Керамичките релјефи од Виничкото Кале*, 207-222; eadem, *Виничките теракоти*, Скопје 2000, 54-56



Fig. 1 Joshua Stopping the Sun over Gibeon

Сл. 1 Исус Навин зауставља сунце изнад Гаваона

Fig. 2 The 65th Old Testament Psalm

Сл. 2 Шездесет пети Псалм

the time of the most generous patron of Monophysitism, the controversial monarch Anastasius (491-518)⁴.

The scene of Joshua Stopping the Sun above Gibeon (Fig. 1), the depiction of the Miracle of the Prophet Elisha, the picture of Tobias' Miraculous Healing, the illustration of the Old Testament Psalms (Fig. 2), the execution of the images of victorious Christian martyrs (Fig. 3), as well as the configuration of associative symbolic vistas are all united by the idea of the mystical dimension of after-life and its significance for the blissful destiny of devoted believers⁵. Due to their visual authenticity, the exciting thematic constellation, as well as the genuine symbolic dimension of their iconographic arrangement, the Vinica relief tiles have been successfully providing governmental funding for continuous excavations of the archeological site during the last two decades. Traditionally kept locked behind the iron gates of the National museum institution, the newly excavated specimens were and still are not accessible for scholarly approach, although some of them were discovered more than ten

years ago. However, with the courtesy of my colleagues from the museum Terracotta in Vinica, I was able to "peep" into the "forbidden world" of mu-

⁴ E. Dimitrova, *The Vinica Mystery. The Ceramic Treasures of a Late Antique Fortress*, Vinica 2012, 255-269

⁵ Е. Димитрова, *Есхатолошките пораки на ранохристијанската уметност во Македонија*, Религиите и религиските аспекти на материјалната и духовната култура на почвата на Република Македонија, кн. 4, Скопје 1996, 154-157; eadem, *Ремек-дела на ранохристијанската уметност во Македонија*, Македонска цивилизација Т. II, Скопје 2012, (у штампи)



Fig. 3 St. Theodore the Dragon-slayer
Сл. 3 Св. Теодор победник над змајем



Fig. 4 Fragment 1 of the newly discovered slab

Сл. 4 Фрагмент бр. 1 новооткривене теракоте

seum depots and to decipher another of the Vinica relief plaques. Its visual design, the specific iconographic features, as well as its precise symbolic significance will be presented briefly on the pages of this paper.

During the archeological excavations of the Vinica Kale undertaken in the course of the last decade, eight different fragments were found altogether from the relief plaque in question. One of them is larger and reveals the right portion of the discovered tile, as well as the inscription encircling the preserved iconographic depiction (Fig. 4); another is rather smaller and contains letters of the inscribed text applied in the lower right angle of the plaque (Fig. 5). One fragment displays portions of the inscribed text and some elements of the iconographic motive executed in the upper left part of the terracotta (Fig. 6); another reveals elements of the figural execution with anthropomorphic features and two heavily damaged letters of the inscription executed in the upper edge of the relief (Fig. 7). On the fifth fragment one can see the opening and the closing letters of the inscription, as well as the upper portion of the represented figure (Fig. 8); on the sixth fragment parts of the inscribed words executed in the upper right angle of the terracotta are clearly visible and a great portion of the devastated iconographic depiction (Fig. 9). The last two fragments are heavily and irreparably damaged, preserved as small pieces broken off from the lower section of the relief. Considering the highly noticeable distinctions in the colour of these terracotta pieces resulting from the different temperature to which they were ex-



Fig. 5 Fragment 2 of the newly discovered slab
Сл. 5 Фрагмент бр. 2 новооткривене теракоте



Fig. 6 Fragment 3 of the newly discovered slab
Сл. 6 Фрагмент бр. 3 новооткривене теракоте

posed as portions of the once existent plaques during their manufacturing, as well as the technical quality of their production, one can assume that they belong to four different slabs. This is, by no means, a confirmation that this motive was worked out in multiple replicas and thus, by its dimensions, visual design and fabrication manner belongs to the Vinica terracotta slabs repertoire mentioned in the opening passage of this article.

According to the discovered fragments and their junction into a unique composition, the ceramic plaque in question should have a rectangular format with supposed dimensions: 31 x 27 x 4 cm, displaying a visual presentation of a cavalier in motion (Fig. 10). The rider is depicted as a male figure, dressed in a tunic that reaches down to his knees. Due to the damage caused to his image, only the right half of the represented face is visible, where one can recognize the mild oval of the chin, the round convexity of the eye, the accentuated modelling of the lips, as well as the curly hair, the locks of which vividly frame the round shape of the head. With his left hand, the

figure holds the harness of the horse he rides, while his right hand is lifted and shown with an open palm and triumphant swing. The cavalier is represented in a riding position, while the kinetic moment of the scene is displayed through the unfurled cloak, visible under the lifted arm of the depicted figure. The horse, out of which the front part is visible, is represented with sturdy anatomical features, a luxurious mane and its front legs stretching as an effective manner of displaying the pace of an energetic gallop. Sideways of the rider, there are two heavenly components: in the right part of the scene the round shape of a characteristic phase of a new moon is depicted, while as its counterpart – a burning sun in its full glow glances in the opposite part of the sky⁶.

The visual concept of the representation is concise and well balanced in terms of the spatial arrangement of its iconographic components. The central position of the plaque is occupied by the dynamic duo of the rider and his horse

⁶ E. Dimitrova, *The Vinica Mystery. The Ceramic Treasures of a Late Antique Fortress*, 179-187



Fig. 7 Fragment 4 of the newly discovered slab

Сл. 7 Фрагмент бр. 4 новооткривене теракоте



Fig. 8 Fragment 5 of the newly discovered slab

Сл. 8 Фрагмент бр. 5 новооткривене теракоте

as bearers of the thematic context of the scene. The only elements that accompany the temperamental “couple” are the depictions of the glowing sun and the half moon, distributed symmetrically in relation to the horseman’s position, as well as to the overall spatial design of the figural composition. Although no intact plaque is discovered so far and the excavated fragments are not sufficient for a precise reconstruction of the entire scene, I undoubtedly and strongly believe that these were the structural elements of the composition, elaborated as a firm skeleton of a visually unpretentious, yet aesthetically expressive iconographic design. The figural scene described above is framed by an inscription executed on the edges of the tile, which could not have been put in the designated space, thus the last part of it had to be placed within the frames of the composition, next to the depiction of the burning sun. This is, by all means, due to the lack of cautiously planned distribution of the inscription within the designed space, which has been observed in some other specimens of the Vinica relief collection, as well⁷.

In regard to the textual elements of the composition in question, similarly to the other examples of the Vinica repertoire, around the frame that separates the iconographic representation from the edges of the plaque, a Latin text



Fig. 9 Fragment 6 of the newly discovered slab

Сл. 9 Фрагмент бр. 6 новооткривене теракоте

⁷ еадем, *Керамичките рељефи од Виничкото Кале*, 152



Fig. 10 God Incarnated

Сл. 10 Овоплощени
Спасителъ

is inscribed encircling the depicted horseman. Portions of it are preserved on the upper margin of the tile, where one can read the entire word; the right margin still displays the damaged letters of its continuation, while the other two margins have “kept” only few characters of the executed inscription. According to its visible parts as components of its reconstruction, this text reads:

*EMANUEL (QUOD EST INTERPRETATUM)
NOBISCUM DEUS SALVU(M ME FAC ET SALVUS ER)O HR(ISTO)F(ORO).*

It reproduces the second part of the twenty third verse of the First chapter of the Gospel according to Matthew, referring to the realization of the prophetic announcements of Christ's incarnation⁹. The inscribed text continues with the second part of the fourteenth verse of the Seventeenth chapter of the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah, which is formulated as a prayer of the believers to God for His salvational intervention¹⁰. According to the data from the older versions of the Roman breviary from the 15th century, the mentioned passage used to be a part of the commemorative services dedicated to the celebrated martyrs, among whom, the names of Saint Christopher, Saint Georges and Saint Theodore were frequently quoted. It was a solemn performance comprised by the festal rites of certain nocturnal services of the Roman Church, such is *In vesperis commemoratio sequentis*¹¹. This is why the name of the first mentioned martyr, written in ablative case, is added at the end of the inscribed sotherio-

⁸ eadem, *The Vinica Mystery. The Ceramic Treasuries of a Late Antique Fortress*, 180-181

⁹ Secundum Mateum (1, 23) in: *Biblia Sacra Iuxta Vulgatam Versionem*, Stuttgart 1969, 1528

¹⁰ Hieremias Propheta (17, 14) in: *Biblia Sacra Iuxta Vulgatam Versionem*, 1190

¹¹ In Vesperis in: *Breviarum Romanum* (ed. J. Fabri et J. Petro), Taurini 1474, 312

logical text executed on the slab. Therefore, contrary to the peculiar and loosely argued identification of this motive with the military character of some Apocalyptic verses¹², the iconographic context of its execution, as well as the inscribed text clearly point to the inventive design of a genuine representation of the salvational incarnation of Christ as the solemnly announced and victorious Saviour of mankind¹³.

The representation of the horseman, chosen as the most appropriate visual manifestation of the inscribed verses executed on the Vinica relief, belongs to the characteristic depictions used for explication of the religious ideas funded upon Biblical references in the symbolic artistic creation of the Early Christian epoch. Taken over from the older symbolic systems related to the religious teachings from pre-Christian times, the representation of the horseman appeared in the artistic production dated in the first centuries of the new era as a visual sublimation of the ancient, pagan and new, Christian connotations, uniting the triumphal aspects of this motive in its iconographic configuration. Namely, in pagan times, the depiction of a rider was considered a symbolic picture of the victorious leader, the courageous representative, as well as the ringleader of the triumphant forces who, with his sonorous battle-cry, conveyed the triumphant glory to all of his followers¹⁴. In that sense, the representation of a horseman depicted in the artistic monuments dated in the pre-Christian era was considered a symbolic picture of the victorious fame, out of time, out of space and eternal, given by the gods, won by the celebrated heroes and donated to the chosen favorites of the deities.

In the Christian artistic creativity from the early age, the representation of a cavalier was commonly depicted as a typical solar symbol, which, on the ground of the absorbed pre-Christian triumphant connotation, became a bearer of the positive, as well as victorious energies of the light, the sun, the divine illumination, the resurrection and the rebirth¹⁵. Due to the positive and productive kinetic charge, as well as the divine dimension, the representation of a horseman was associated with the fertile energy of the heavenly bodies; therefore it was put in a symbolic configuration with the sun and the moon as a sacral mediator between the static horizontal of the earthly lines and the dynamic vertical of the heavenly heights. The kinetic structure of the representation, manifested in the locomotion of its iconographic concept in which the dynamism of the depicted animal and the triumphant energy of its rider are united into a unique picture of solemn mobility, became the main feature of this motif symbolically linked with the eternal source of positive change and its divine manifestations. On the account of that, the representation of the cavalier in the Early Christian era was commonly associated with the process of the ritual passage from the Earth towards the Heaven, in other words, from the earthly life to the divine dimension of Paradise.

¹² K. Balabanov, *Icone dalla Macedonia* (catalogue), Cita dell Vaticano 1986, 17

¹³ E. Dimitrova, *The Vinica Mystery. The Ceramic Treasures of a Late Antique Fortress*, 180-182

¹⁴ J. Hall, *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art*, London 1974, 73

¹⁵ L. Twining, *Symbols of the Christian Faith*, Grand Rapids 2002, 92

On the basis of the characteristic triumphal configuration of its symbolic connotation, the image of the horseman in Christian literary production from the early period came to be associated with Christ as a victor over death and thus, through the soteriological dimension of His earthly mission, grew into an allegoric depiction of the incarnated Savior of mankind. In the texts of the church fathers from the period of the 2nd to the 3rd century, the horse was given the symbolic meaning of a zoomorphic structure representing the human appearance of Christ, while the rider symbolized His divine component. Hippolytus, for example, the greatest theologian of the Roman church of the 3rd century and a disciple of Irenaeus - the wise Bishop of Lugdunum in Gaul, considered that the Lord had appeared to his people as a horseman, uniting in that manner the royal dignity, divine dimension and triumphant connotation of His salvational mission. In his literary works, the Roman preacher and a prolific author of voluminous theological writings conceives the idea that the Saviour is represented to the believers as a dynamic rider since he is the chosen One who is set to gallop for the fall and rising of many. In other words, Hippolytus sees Jesus as the One who bravely rides to be placed at the sacrificial altar falling on his own will, voluntarily enduring the death of the flesh. Further on, the Roman religious scholar states that after the fall, Christ was destined to come to life again as risen from the dead in order to lead his followers into the blissful destiny of eternal life, thus triumphantly saving the sinful mankind¹⁶.

His teacher Irenaeus, on the other hand, explained the association of the personality of Jesus with the notion of the triumphant rider by reference to the apocalyptic verses of Saint John the Divine, identifying the rider of the white horse from the Revelation with the incarnated Messiah who triumphantly rides with the Gospel of Salvation. As one of the most influential Christian theologians of the 2nd century, he was among the first to interpret the horseman as Christ himself, while his white horse represents the successful spread of the Gospel. According to his notion on the salvational role of the chosen One, Irenaeus envisages Christ mounted on the white horse appearing as the Word of God. The appearance of Christ on a white horse in the Revelation (19:11) seems to confirm his interpretation of the Saviour as a victorious cavalier. Considering that the White Horse of the Apocalypse symbolizes Conquest, Irenaeus explains that this would signify that the "Conquest" is the spiritual conquest of Christ over the hearts of mankind as a dynamic dimension of His salvational mission¹⁷.

Similar ideas can be found in the works of the Alexandrian philosopher Origen, who, in his comments on the dramatic text of the Revelation, considers the horseman dimension of Christ to be associated with His victorious role in the dissemination of the word of God by which He triumphed over sinful mankind. According to Origen's views, the horseman is actually a symbolic representation of the triumph of the Word of God that spreads throughout the world as a continuous victory, starting from the tomb of resurrection

¹⁶ Hippolytus, *Comments on the Genesis* in: *Fathers of the Church* (ed. K. Knight), Buffalo 2009, 105

¹⁷ M. Denis, *Irenaeus*, Washington 1994, 88

all the way to the “borders of the land and the end of time”¹⁸. In Origen’s explication of the mystery of salvation, the Passion of Christ is always connected to the mission of the Word of God and the dissemination of salvational wisdom. In the white horseman of John’s Apocalypse Origen thus recognizes the image of the incarnated Christ who defeated the sins of the world through His teaching. According to the Alexandrian theologian, the horse on which the incarnated Christ rides is all white since it represents a symbol of the truth that confirms Christ’s glory, while Christ’s clothes are sprinkled with the drops of blood shed on the cross of Golgotha as a testimony to His triumphant victory over Death.

On the basis of these symbolic allusions to the horseman configuration of Christ as a salvational victor over death, the representation of the horseman in Early Christian art appeared in the 3rd century. Depictions of horseman figures can be found in the fresco decoration of the Roman catacombs, the relief décor of the stone monuments, as well as the design of the works produced within the sphere of artistic crafts. The representations of cavaliers in the fresco arrangement of the catacombs of Domitilla and San Callisto in Rome from the 3rd century¹⁹, the depiction of a rider executed on a ceramic slab discovered at the site of Cillium in Tunisia from the late 5th century²⁰, the rider pictured on the early 6th century terracotta lamp from the collection of Campo Santo Tedesco in Rome²¹, the cavalier motifs in the decoration of Late Antique bronze fibulas found in the territory of Italy and Gaul²², as well as the images of horsemen in the design of Coptic textiles from the 6th century²³ are but a few examples in the application of the popularized shape of one of the most characteristic sotheriological visual symbols in the Early Christian epoch.

In this context, the representation executed on the Vinica plaque in the form of a horseman—accompanied by Biblical quotations associated with Old Testament prophecies of the messianic incarnation of the Savior and their realization in the New Testament—embodies the sotheriological features of the notion of salvation through Christ’s victory over sin and death²⁴. For these reasons, the horseman executed on the Vinica relief which symbolizes the victorious image of the incarnated Messiah triumphing over death is accompanied by depictions of the sun and the moon, as symbolic marks of the heavenly aspect

¹⁸ Origen, *Commentary on the Revelation* in: Ante Nicene Fathers. Writings of the Early Christians to A. D. 325 (ed. E. J. Goodspeed), New York 2010, 78

¹⁹ J. Wilpert, *Die Malereien der Katakomben Roms*, Freiburg am Breisgau 1903, 195; F. Mancinelli, *The Catacombs of Rome and the Origins of Christianity*, Firenze 1981, 25-26; A. Baruffa, *The Catacombs of St. Callixtus*, Vatican 2006, 79

²⁰ F. Cabrol - H. Leclercq, *Dictionnaire de la archeologie chrétienne et la liturgie*, vol. II/2, Paris 1924, Fig. 2106

²¹ A. de Waal, *Campo Santo de Tedeschi* in: The Catholic Encyclopedia vol. III, New York 1908, 56

²² F. Cabrol - H. Leclercq, *Dictionnaire de la archeologie chrétienne et la liturgie*, vol. III/1, Paris 1948, col. 1301, pl. 2783

²³ K. Wessel, *Koptische Kunst*, Recklinghausen 1963, 87

²⁴ E. Dimitrova, *The Vinica Mystery. The Ceramic Treasures of a Late Antique Fortress*, 183-187

of the eternal God. Represented as artistic symbols of Christ's chronological signatures 'α' and 'ω' in the sacred constellation of His rule over the world, they crown the salvational iconography of the relief with the triumphant heavenly dimension of the eternal glory of the incarnated and victorious Savior of mankind. As a structural element of the eschatological repertoire of the Vinica collection of relief tiles, the plaque with the depiction of the triumphant horseman as a symbolic image of the incarnated Christ is yet another Old Testament pre-figuration shaped as an announcement of Christological themes. Pictured as a symbolically configured biblical vision founded upon the most dramatic verses of the Scripture, the Vinica cavalier embodies the glory of God's incarnation, as well as its salvational dimension for the blissful destiny of Christian believers. Being a structural element of the iconographic design of the Vinica relief repertoire and within the context of the funerary character of its program arrangement, the image of the incarnated Savior of humanity expressively visualizes the mystical idea of life after death as a prize attained by the faithful through the sacramental dimension of their solemn prayers to God.

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“RIDERS ON THE STORM”
Драматично јахање Виничког коњаника

Током рецентних истраживања касноантичког археолошког локалитета Кале код Винице у југоисточној Македонији откривени су фрагменти још једног керамичког рељефа који представља део аутентичне колекције ранохришћанских теракота, којима су били декоративно обложени зидови фунерарних конструкција изграђених на прелазу V и VI века. Састављањем пронађених фрагмената добили смо рељефни приказ у облику јачаха представљеног као темпераментног коњаника, у горњем делу фланкираног симболичним облицима сунца и месеца. Око представе исписан је латински текст који, на основу реконструкције сачуваних делова, гласи: „*EMANUEL (QUOD EST INTERPRETATUM) NOBISCUM DEUS SALVU(M ME FAC ET SALVUS ER)O HR(ISTO)F(OR)O*“, репродукујући други део 23 стиха Првог поглавља Матејевог јеванђеља и други део 14 стиха Седамнаестог поглавља Књиге пророка Јеремије. Полазећи од: иконографских одлика композиције, постојећих аналогија у уметничким споменицима ранохришћанске епохе и теолошког значења исписаног текста, идентификовали смо приказаног коњаника као симболичну слику овоплоћеног Спаситеља, што потврђују и радови великих мислиоца Хришћанске цркве са почетка наше ере у којима је представа триумфалног јачаха увек повезана са спасоносним доласком Месије. У том контексту, винички рељеф са представом коњаника, уоквиреним библијским цитатима повезаним са старозаветним пророчанствима о месијанској инкарнацији Спаситеља и њиховом остварењу у Новом Завету, приказује сотериолошку идеју спасења путем Христове победе над грехом и смрћу. Због тога је јачах који симболише триумфални лик овоплоћеног Месије који побеђује смрт фланкиран представама сунца и месеца, т. ј. симболичним ознакама небеског аспекта вечног Бога. Приказане као симболичне алузије Христових хронолошких сигнатура α и ω сакралној констелацији Његовог господарења светом, оне крунишу сотериолошку иконографију рељефа триумфалном димензијом вечне славе овоплоћеног и победоносног Спаситеља човечанства. Као део есхатолошког репертоара Виничке колекције, рељеф са представом инкарнираног Месије, приказаног као иконографски сублимаг библиске визије утемељене на најдраматичнијим стиховима Светог Писма, открива славу Божје инкарнације и Његову сотериолошку димензију за блажену судбину хришћана.