

**EARLY CHRISTIANITY IN THE PERIOD OF RELIGIOUS
SYNCRETISM IN THE ROMAN EMPIRE: CASE STUDY
ANTIQUAE VIMINACIUM***

The first information about the existence of organized Christian community in Viminacium date from the 4th century. Besides written sources,¹ material remains including archaeological monuments either stable or portable antiqui-

* This paper represents the result of work on the project: *Viminacium, Roman city and military camp – research of the material and non material culture of inhabitants by using the modern technologies of remote detection, geophysics, GIS, digitalization and 3D visualization* (no 47018), funded by The Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia.

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¹ The earliest written sources about existence of Christians in the *Viminacium* territory is recorded in Hierocles who mentions that *Amantinus* bishop of *Viminacium*, who was registered in the Acts of the Council in Serdica in 343 AD. *Amantinus* did not personally take part at this meeting but he sent the priest Maximus also from *Viminacium*. Sometime later we are informed about another bishop *Cyriacus* who was mentioned in 356 AD in *Atanasius*' circular letter – *Epistola contra Arianos*, sent to the bishops in Egypt where he quotes the names of bishops having seats in capitals of the provinces. On that list is the name of *Cyriacus Mysiae*. On the basis of preserved documents Jacques Zeiller, who studied early Christianity in the Danubian provinces, assumed that *Cyriacus* could have been occupying bishop's seat in the capital of *Moesia Prima* in the mid 4th century. These two quotes are all the data offered by written sources about Christianity in *Viminacium* during the 4th century. It seems according to the information obtained so far that bishops of *Viminacium* did not play any significant role in the process of Christianization in the Balkans not even in the 5th century. There is just one document and that is the letter of Pope Celestine (*Epistolae et Decreta Celistini*) from 424 AD sent to the bishops of eastern Illyricum and among them is mentioned also the bishop of *Viminacium* although his name is not identified with certainty. After great invasion of barbaric tribes in the 5th century, first of all the Huns in 441-443 AD, life in the *Viminacium* bishopric sunk in complete darkness in the second half of the 5th century. We got to know what was happening in *Viminacium* not before the first half of the 6th century, in the time of Justinian I (527-565), great restorer of the Roman Empire when the bishop's seat had also been restored: J. Zeiller, *Les origines chrétiennes des les provinces danubiennes de l'Empire Romain*, 1967 (reprint), 148-150.



Fig. 1 Map of major early Christian cities in the territory of the Roman provinces in today's Serbia in the 4th century.

Сл. 1 Карта већих хришћанских средишта на територији римских провинција на тлу данашње Србије у IV веку.

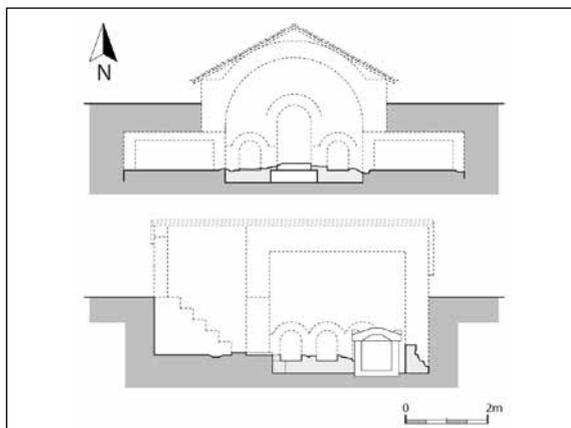


Fig. 2 Memorial building. (Reconstruction of G. Milošević).

Сл. 2 Меморијална грађевина. (Реконструкција Г. Милошевић).

ties are important source of our knowledge about the introduction of Christianity within city territory. When we talk about material remains the existence of the Christians in *Viminacium* during 4th and in the first decades of the 5th century, it is confirmed first of all on the basis of architectural monuments of sepulchral character, few reliably identified graves and epigraphic monuments.

Overview of monuments

Last thirty years, and intensively during the last decades, protective archaeological excavations in the necropolises of the Roman city of *Viminacium* have produced extremely rich material. So far, about 14,000 graves were excavated and found more than 30,000 items.² Among them, a special place is occupied by the discovery of a fresco painted tombs. So far, twenty eight tombs with interiors decorated with frescoes have been uncovered in the cemeteries of *Viminacium*. Chronologically, mainly belonging to the late Roman period. They were found independently or within memorial buildings (fig. 2).³ However, due to the poor state of preservation, the religion of the persons buried in them could be identified in only few cases.

² The data obtained by dr Snežana Golubović, long-term researcher of the site *Viminacium*. See: Lj. Zotović, *Viminacium – nekropola Više Grobalja*, Tom I, Beograd 1990; M. Korać, S. Golubović, *Viminacium - Više Grobalja 281-530 (kremacija) 268-560 (inhumacija)*, Tom II, Beograd 2009.

³ On the cemeteries of *Viminacium* it has been explored, so far, about a dozen memorial buildings: G. Milošević, *Arhitektura grobnica u rimskim centralnobalkanskim*



Fig. 3a Viminacium. G/5517, site Pećine. Western side of the tomb. Christogram with apocalyptic letters A (alpha) and Ω (omega). (Photo by M. Korać).

Сл. 3а Виминацијум. Г/5517 лок. Пећине. Западни зид гробнице. Христогорам са апокалиптичним словима А (алфа) и Ω (омега). (Фото М. Кораћ).



Fig. 3b Viminacium. G/5517, site Pećine. The angle of the western and the southern wall of the tomb. (Photo by M. Korać).

Сл. 3б Виминацијум. Г/5517 лок. Пећине. Угао западног и јужног зида гробнице. (Фото М. Кораћ).

In particular, we will use this opportunity to extract painted Christian tomb from the site of Pećine (G/5517). The tomb was discovered with several other typologically identical tombs.⁴

The difference between this and other tombs of the same type is in the narrative of the decoration: the scenes are composed as individual panels, but are arranged to be read as a story. The central motif on the west side is the Christogram in wreath, made of laurel leaves painted dark blue, turquoise and white (fig. 3 a-b). To the right and left of the Christogram are the apocalyptic letters A (alpha) and Ω (omega). Christogram is a common motif in tomb painting and expresses the hope in the eternal life through Christ. It is found in early christian's tombs in Pécs (*Sopianae*),⁵ (fig. 4), Jagodin Mala in Niš (*Naissus*),⁶ (fig.5). Besides

provincijama od IV do VI veka, unpublished PhD thesis, University of Belgrade, Faculty of Architecture, 2006.

⁴ The tomb is reconstructed and therefore not in its original location. Presented frescoes are replicas of the original ones kept at the National Museum in Požarevac. See: M. Korać, Late Roman Tomb with Frescoes from Viminacium, 1991, *Starinar* XLII, 107-122; *Idem.*, *Slikarstvo grobnica u Viminacijumu*, Požarevac 2000.

⁵ F. Fülep, *Sopianae. The History of Pécs during the Roman Era, and the Problem of the Continuity of the Late Roman Population*, Budapest 1984. K. Hudák, L. Nagy, A Fine and Private Place. Discovering the Early Christian Cemetery of Sopianae, Pécs, *Heritage Booklets* 6, Pécs 2009. Z. Magyar, The world of late antique Sopianae: artistic connections and scholarly problems, in: *Niš and Byzantium VII*, ed. M. Rakocija, Niš 2009, 107-118. *Idem.*, Sopianae. A study of cultural influences in fourth century southern Pannonia, XIV International Student Conference, Alba Iulia, Romania, (November 2006), http://istorie.uab.ro/publicatii/colectia_bcss_13/.

⁶ Л. Мирковић, Старохришћанска гробница у Нишу, *Старинар* V-VI, 1955, 53-72; M. Rakocija, Painting in the crypt with an anchor in: *Niš and Byzantium VII*, ed. M. Rakocija, Niš 2009, 87-105.



Fig. 4 Pécs. The Burial Chamber with Peter and Paul, northern wall. (After: Hudák, L. Nagy, 1984, fig. 18).

Сл. 4 Печуј. Северни зид гробнице са Петром и Павлом. (Према: Hudák, L. Nagy, 1984, сл. 18.).



Fig. 5 Niš. Early Christian tomb in Jagodin Mala, the burial chamber, western wall, before (After: M. Rakocija in: *Niš i Vizantija X*, 2012, fig. 8).

Сл. 5 Ниш. Ранохишћанска гробница у Јагодин Мали, западни зид, некад. (Према: М. Ракоција у: *Ниш и Византија X*, 2012, сл. 8).

these two sites, similar decorative setting are found in great numbers in fresco painted tombs, grave panels, as well as on sarcophagi in the East and West of the Roman Empire.⁷

As a counterpart to the west side, the east wall is decorated with a presentation of the Garden of Paradise, with a peacocks, a fountain in the form of a cantharus and the tree of life (fig.6). The artist was obviously well versed in the Christian doctrine. Presentations of paradise are common in painted tombs, both pagan and Christian.⁸

On the north and south lateral sides are hunting scenes within a dark red border (Fig.7).

A frieze with vine is painted above the figural scenes on the front and lateral walls, motif that symbolizes the Garden of Paradise.

All the tombs in *Viminacium* were used for multiple burials, confirm an example of this Christian tomb. The bones had been dislocated and fragmented by plunderers. Anthropological analysis was showed that four people were buried. A coin of Constantine the Great struck in 307, was found in the grave. Based on the findings and stylistic elements of the paintings, the tomb should be dated into the first half of the 4th century.

Unlike this tomb, most of the other early Christian tombs in *Viminacium* are built of secondary used material with the cover of bricks, which often have Christogram consists of overlapped Greek letters *X* and *P*.

It should be noted lead sarcophagus which was unfortunately lost.⁹ On the lateral sides of the sarcophagus are displayed three crosses, triangularly ex-

⁷ More details in: R. Pillinger, Early Christian Grave Paintings in Niš between East and West, in: *Niš and Byzantium X*, ed. M. Rakocija, Niš 2012, 25-36.

⁸ M. Korać, *Slikarstvo grobnica u Viminacijumu*; I. Popović, Motif of „Railing of Paradise“ on frescoes from tombs in Jagodin Mala (*Naissus*) and Čalma (*Sirmium*), in: *Niš and Byzantium X*, ed. M. Rakocija, Niš 2012, 65-83.

⁹ N. Vulić, *Antički spomenici u Srbiji*, *Spomenik XLVII*, Beograd 1909, 133.

panded at the ends of arms. A summarized description of crosses by Nikola Vulić does not allow precise dating of the case, so that this sarcophagus can be roughly dated to the period from the 4th to the 6th century.

Among the rare, Christian graves, it should be mentioned children's tomb in the site of Pećine (P/G-213), in which explorers were found two silver rings containing the monogram of Christ carved in flat head. Christogram consists of overlapped Greek letters *X* and *I* and is typical of the 4th century.

Among the epigraphic monuments we could pay attention to few tombstones with motives of Christogram or with text displaying early Christian character.

On one of the monuments, which is marble tombstone, is engraved the text mentioning certain *Marina* and her husband *Licinius* and she is identified in the Christian manner as – *honesta femina*, i.e. honorable woman who respects the Lord. Monument could be classified as early Christian but without closer chronological determination (fig. 8b).¹⁰

Yet another tombstone made of marble (nowadays lost) has engraved bilingual inscription, in Greek and Latin that indicates Christian character by its content. It is the funerary inscription of the person having Latin name *Valerius*. In the middle of the tombstone is Christogram separating Greek and Latin text (fig. 8c).¹¹

On a fragmented tegula was scribbled early Christian text. Author of the text could have been the Christian, who was working in some workshop producing bricks. According to one explanation of that text it is possible that inscription represents clandestine Christian characteristic in some sacred structure, so if that is the case it must have been written before AD 311, i.e. prior to Galerius' edict of toleration (fig. 8a). Such possibility is suggested by the contents of the text where the writer asks Christ to save the builders of certain possibly sacred structure.¹²

Also worth mentioning is another marble tombstone of which just top left corner is preserved where are three Greek letters in front of which is Christogram inscribed in a circle (fig. 8d).¹³

It should be borne in mind that in the earlier period of Christianity when bearers of new religion were still persecuted we rather rarely encounter their



Fig. 6 Viminacium. G/5517 site Pećine. Eastern side of the tomb. Representation of the Garden of Paradise. (Photo by M. Korać).

Сл. 6 Виминацијум. Г/5517 лок. Пећине. Источни зид гробнице. Представа рајског врта. (Фото М. Кораћ).

¹⁰ M. Mirković, *IMS Viminacium et Margum*, vol. II, Beograd 1986, 177, no 217.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 178, no 219.

¹² N. Vulić, *op. cit.*, 136; M. Mirković, *op. cit.*, 177, no 216.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 179, no 220.



Fig. 7 Viminacium. G/5517 site Pećine. Hunting scenes on the northern and southern lateral sides of the tomb. (Photo by M. Korać).

Сл. 7 Виминацијум. Г/5517 лок. Пећине. Сцене лова на северној и јужној страни гробнице. (Фото М. Кораћ).

official religious assignment. Because of that the epigraphic monuments with direct religious declaration are very rare as these few finds from *Viminacium* confirm.

Conclusion

When we consider early Christianity in *Viminacium* we should say that at this moment we do not have evidence for the existence of early Christian churches, which undoubtedly must have existed in the city being the Episcopal seat.

Also we do not have at our disposal the data about existence of graveyard churches despite the fact that large Late Roman necropolises¹⁴ where also the Christians had been buried have been discovered. We have, so far, just the data about memorial structures, which along their basic function as tombs had also been used for performing Christian rituals associated with the decedent.

Small in numbers the Viminacium Christians did not have their separate necropolis. They buried their dead within pagan Late Roman necropolises in already established rows. It is obvious that there was no ban for Christians to be buried among the pagans and that was no exception. There is no doubt that there had not been imposed strict control of regulations about interment of Christians in the Danubian provinces of the Empire during the 4th century. Similar situation was encountered also at another large necropolis in the territory of Upper Moesia province like the one at Jagodin Mala in Niš (*Naissus*).¹⁵ We should assume that besides the graves with apparent Christian characteristics there were also unidentified graves of Christians whose aboveground signs disappeared or those, which due to poor socio-economic status of the decedent did not have grave signs made of more permanent material on which the religious affiliation was declared.

It seems according to these scarce data provided by the material remains but also by the written sources that *Viminacium* did not play important role in

¹⁴ As we have already mentioned above, over 14,000 graves have been hitherto discovered at five investigated necropolises: Više Grobalja, Pećine, Kod Bresta, Velika Kapija and Drmske Carine, where Christians had been buried alongside the pagans.

¹⁵ Most recent investigation results published G. Jeremić, The late antique necropolis in Jagodin Mala, Niš Naissus), Serbia – eight years of research, *Strategie e Program mazione della Conservazione e Trasmissibilità del Patrimonio Culturale*, Roma 2013, 272- 281.

the early Christianization despite being capital of the province. In contrast to *Viminacium* written sources record considerably more data about Christianization from the same period in some other Roman provincial cities in the territory of central Balkans like *Sirmium*, *Singidunum* and *Naissus* (fig. 1).¹⁶ However, it should be taken into account that our information about early Christianity in *Viminacium* is based first of all on investigations encompassing south and east necropolis. It could be expected that archaeologically uninvestigated area of military camp and civil settlement will bring to light in the course of future archaeological investigations new evidence about sacred architecture of early Christian *Viminacium*.

Our information about spiritual life of the inhabitants of Late Roman urban centers in the Roman provinces of the central Balkans in the time of introduction of Christianity reveal so far that official Roman religion was dominant. Something that surprises us to a certain extent is the fact that Mithraism or other cults from the sphere of solar theology or from agrarian pantheon had not been widely supported here. In contrast to such situation in *Viminacium* existed besides official state religion also strong Mithraic cult, which was dominant considering other religious movements characteristic of the Late Roman period. It is confirmed by relatively numerous monuments of Mithraic cult discovered in this city.¹⁷ Particularly interesting among them are small ceramic icons made in the molds that made possible quick and cheap production intended for mass consumption.¹⁸

In such religious affinities of the inhabitants of large Roman cities of the central Balkans we should look for main reasons for quicker or slower introduction of Christianity. The fact is that Christians and Mithraists gathered their adherents in similar social circles. There were also similarities in the basic reli-

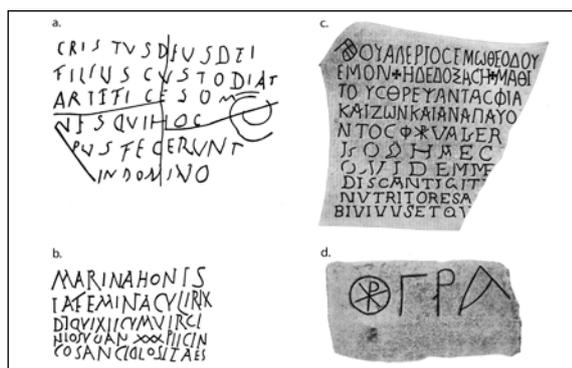


Fig. 8 Viminacium. Epigraphic monuments with Christian characteristic. (After: M. Mirković, 1986).

Сл. 8 Виминацијум. Епиграфски споменици са хришћанским обележјем. (Према: М. Мирковић, 1986).

¹⁶ In historical sources has not been recorded a single name of martyr from *Viminacium*, while the names of some martyrs from other large centers in north Illyricum (*Naissus*, *Singidunum* and *Sirmium*), including bishop of *Sirmium* Iraeneus and his deacon Demetrius (there are churches dedicated to him in *Sirmium* and Thessalonica, and also St. Anastasia and St. Synerotes from *Sirmium*, and from *Singidunum* deacon Fortunat and Christians Donat, Ermil and Stratonicus. It is assumed that Naissus was among the first cities having its martyrs and it is recorded already in the 4th century by *Sanctus Victricius*, bishop of the city of Rouen in France (*Rotomagensis*), in his writing *De laude sanctorum*, cf. J. Zeiller, *op. cit.*, 105-128.

¹⁷ Љ. Зотовић, *Митраизам на тлу Југославије*, Београд 1973; *Idem.*, *Симболични приказ ватре на новооткривеним деловима Митрине иконе из Виминација*, *Старинар* XXX, 1980, 89-96.

¹⁸ *Idem.*, *Керамичка икона Митриног култа*, *Старинар* XL-XLI, 1990, 197-201.

gious principles. Nevertheless, all these common elements were not sufficient to unite the believers of two most massive religious movements in the Late Roman period. Not getting into exhaustive discussion about this question we would like to stress on this occasion one significant difference between these two religious concepts that is included, among other things, in the Christian regulations forbidding the believers to take part in military service and in civil service as well. Mithraists in contrast to Christians strengthened their already acquired positions in the army. Just to mention that supreme god Sol was often depicted in the scenes of triumph as the god crowning the Emperor. It is not negligible that Mithraism was restricted only to men, mostly legionaries and armed forces, so we could assume that it was one of the reasons why Mithraic cult never spread in such a degree as the Christian teachings.

It is obvious already from this information that Mithraism with support of the state became strong barrier in the battle against Christianity. If we accept this explanation then we could answer the question why there were so few Christians in *Viminacium*, strong military station of the legion *VII Claudia*, in the 4th century, despite the fact that the city was Episcopal seat. Rich layers of urban population remained supporters of official pagan religion of the Roman state, while soldiers mostly coming from the eastern provinces showed their religious affinities in the solar theology, i.e. the Mithraism. Christians, on the other hand, could not have found spiritual way to higher social categories – Roman citizens and the army and it seems that rural population in the city surroundings was neglected. Because of such situation, in *Viminacium* as the most important center of defense of the Danube limes in the time of more and more frequent intrusions of barbarians in the Late Roman period solar monotheism prevailed over official state religion and the Christian faith for a long time.

Оливера Илић

РАНО ХРИШЋАНСТВО У ПЕРИОДУ РЕЛИГИЈСКОГ СИНКРЕТИЗМА
У РИМСКОМ ЦАРСТВУ: ПРИМЕР АНТИЧКОГ ВИМИНАЦИЈУМА

Христијанизација Виминацијума, главног града римске провинције *Moesia Prima* започета је у IV веку. Поред писаних извора, материјални остаци у виду археолошких споменика, како непокретних, тако и покретних налаза чине важани звор сазнања. Када говоримо о материјалним остацима, присуство хришћана у Виминацијуму током IV и у првим деценијама V века потврђено је пре свега архитектносним споменицима сепулкралног карактера, малобројним гробовима хришћанског карактера, као и епиграфским споменицима. Посебно место заузима откирће гробнице са фреско осликаним зидовима на којима су приказани хришћански симболи карактеристични за IV век (Г/5517 лок. Пећине).

Ипак, треба имати у виду да су досадашња сазнања о раном хришћанству у Виминацијуму заснована пре свега на истраживањима којима су биле обухваћене јужна и источна некропола града. Могло би се очекивати да ће археолошки неиспитан простор војног логора и цивилног насеља, будућим систематским истраживањима, донети нова сазнања о сакралној архитектури ранохришћанског Виминацијума.