PALEOCHRISTIAN SEPULCHRAL MONUMENTS OF VIMINACIUM AS AN INDICATOR OF SOCIAL STATUS OF BURIED INDIVIDUALS*

In ancient cities in the territory of the Roman province of Moesia Prima, we can notice an unequal representation of early Christian monuments during the 4th and 5th century. Poor information provided by historical sources, but also the small amount of material remains, indicate that Viminacium, as the capital of the province, had no significant role in the early Christianisation of the Balkan provinces of the Roman Empire (Map. 1). Most of the early Christian findings from Viminacium originate from the site of Pećine, where the presence of Christians is documented with sepulchral monuments, memorial buildings that were used not only as tombs, but also for Christian rites, some epigraphic monuments with mainly funerary characteristics and a few graves with Christian memorials or grave goods. Given that these monuments were discussed in the previous works of different authors, I will just briefly recall several significant monuments.

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1 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 are known (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; 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, Les origins chrétiennes des les provinces danubiennes de l’Empire romain, Paris 1918, (reprint Roma 1967), 105-128.

In particular, we will use this opportunity to discuss the painted Christian tomb from the site of Pećine (G.5517). The tomb was discovered with several other typologically identical tombs. The difference between this and other tombs of the same type is in the narrative of the decoration.

The central motif on the west side is the Christogram in a wreath composed of painted laurel leaves Christ (figs. 1,1а). The Christogram is a common motif in tomb painting and expresses hope for eternal life through Christ. As a complement to the west side, the east wall is decorated with a presentation of the Garden of Paradise, with peacocks, a fountain in the form of a cantharus and the tree of life (fig. 2). On the north and south lateral sides are hunting scenes within a dark red border (fig. 3). A frieze with a vine is painted above the figural scenes on the front and lateral walls, a motif that symbolises the Garden of Paradise.

All the tombs in Viminacium were used for multiple burials, a fact that is also true of this Christian tomb. The bones had been dislocated and fragmented by plunderers, but anthropological analysis has determined that four people were buried in the tomb. 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 researchers dated tomb to 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 a cover of bricks, which often include a Christogram consisting of overlapped Greek letters Χ and Ρ. In this context, we can distinguish several tombstones, epigraphic monuments with motives of a Christogram or with text displaying early Christian characters. It should be borne in mind that in the earlier period of Christianity when followers of the

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new religion were still persecuted, we somewhat rarely encounter their official religious assignment. Consequently, epigraphic monuments with direct religious declarations are very rare, as these sparse finds from Viminacium confirm.

We should assume that, besides the graves with apparent Christian characteristics, there were also unidentified Christian graves whose above ground signs have disappeared or those which, due to the poor socio-economic status of the decedent, did not have grave signs made of a more permanent material on which the religious affiliation was declared.

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Based on the current level of investigation of ancient Viminacium, we can conclude that data regarding the first Christians is not complete. All present knowledge of early Christianity in Viminacium, based mainly on archaeological excavations that mostly covered the southern and eastern necropolis while re-
searching the military camp and civilian settlement, is still in its infancy. 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, given its status of the Episcopal seat. Also, we do not have at our disposal any data about the existence of graveyard churches, despite the fact that a large Late Roman necropolis where Christians had also been buried has been discovered. We have, so far, only data about memorial structures which, along with their basic function as tombs, were also used for performing Christian rituals associated with the decedent.

Small in number, the Viminacium Christians did not have their own separate necropolis. They buried their dead within pagan Late Roman necropoles, in already established rows. It is obvious that there was no ban on Christians being buried among pagans, and this was no exception. There is no doubt that there was no strict control of regulations imposed regarding the interment of Christians in the Danubian provinces of the Empire during the 4th century. A similar situation was also encountered at another large necropolis in the territory of the Upper Moesia province (later Dacia Mediterranea), at Jagodin Mala in Niš (Naissus). If we try, based on the registered monuments, to determine the social status of the first Christians in Viminacium, it can be seen that there are only two economically differentiated layers. One layer consisted of wealthy and influential citizens, while the second group belonged to those Christians who came from the poor strata of society. The first layer of wealthy Christians built luxury buildings for family funerals or the burials of a small Christian community. Some of them were solid burial structures painted using the fresco technique, to which were attached typical Christian symbols, clearly confirming that they were Christian tombs. From the above examples we can see that the Christogram is the most common symbol found in Viminacium. At the same time, the poorer Christians buried their dead in ordinary earthen graves or in graves whose coffins were constructed from secondary used material.

Gravestones with memorials written in Greek and Latin are mainly made from brick or fragments of tegulae and, on rare occasions, slabs of limestone or marble. The poverty in this stratum of society is evident when we look at their

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Fig. 2 Viminacium. G/5517 site Pećine. Eastern side of the tomb. Representation of the Garden of Paradise. (Photo by M. Korać). Сл. 2 Виминацијум. Г/5517лок. Пећине. Источни зид гробнице. Представа рајског врта. (Фото M. Корах).

6 Most recent investigation results published: G. Jeremić, The late antique necropolis in Jagodin Mala, Niš (Naissus), Serbia – eight years of research, Strategie e Programmazione della Conservazione e Trasmissibilità del Patrimonio Culturale, Roma 2013, 272-281.
graves and inscriptions, which are mostly carved by ignorant stone masons or people who are not professionally engaged in this trade, perhaps someone in their immediate environment. The funerary texts were written in crooked lines, with unevenly sized letters. From this we can conclude that the poor stratum of early Christians were educated, but not wealthy enough to pay for high-quality craftsmen. In contrast, members of the first group were a small number of wealthy citizens or, more likely, dignitaries who had risen in the new Christian hierarchy.

Based on current knowledge regarding the beginnings of Christianisation in Viminacium, only a small number of middle-class citizens accepted the new religion that was coming from the east. The logical question is: why, among the middle class, were there no prominent Christians? A partial answer to this question is provided by preserved material remains. Namely, the rich of the urban population remained supporters of the official Roman religion or solar cults. Most of the late antique religious cults that came from the east, among them Christianity, did not find a spiritual path to the higher classes of armies and citizens. There were probably many reasons for this, with one being the possibility that this richer section of Roman citizens was not inclined to the new religious learning in which equality in poverty was preached.

We could also think about the negative impact of heretical views. It is a fact that the initial period of development of the Christian church was in conflict with various heresies that appeared with greater or lesser intensity and encompassed almost the entire then Christian world. The first heresy that created a huge rift in the church during the 4th century was the teachings of the Alexandrian presbyter Arius. In the period after the Council of Nicea 325, many important events related to the Arian teachings took place precisely in the area of the Illyrian prefecture. Among the supporters of Arius in the Danube region were the bishops Ursacius of Singidunum, Valens of Mursa, Germinius of Sirmium and Palladius.

of Ratiaria. Arius’ teachings, thanks to the bishops of Singidunum, Sirmium and Ratiaria, out lived him, who died in 336, contributing to the fact that the Illyrian prefecture became an Arian stronghold for the next few decades. Owing to this situation, in Viminacium, the official Roman religion and solar monotheism long dominated Christian teaching within the larger part of the urban population, particularly the higher social strata.

It could be concluded, based on the limited data provided by the material remains, but also by the written sources, that Viminacium did not play an important role in the early Christianisation, despite being the capital of the province. In contrast to Viminacium, written sources record considerably more data about Christianisation during the same period in some other Roman provincial cities in the territory of the Central Balkans, such as Sirmium, Singidunum and Naissus (Map. 1). However, it should be taken into account that our information regarding early Christianity in Viminacium is based primarily on investigations encompassing the southern and eastern necropolis. It could be expected that the area of the military camp and the civil settlement that has yet to be archaeologically investigated will bring to light, in the course of future archaeological investigations, new evidence about the sacred architecture of early Christian Viminacium.

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ПАЛЕОХРИШЋАНСКИ СЕПУЛКРАЛИ СПОМЕНИЦИ ВИМИНАЦИЈУМА
КАО ЈЕДАН ОД ПОКАЗАТЕЉА СОЦИЈАЛНОГ СТАТУСА САХРАЊЕНИХ
Питање ране христијанизације Виминацијума, главног града провинције Moesia Superior односно Moesia Prima, још увек представља тему која није довољно обрађена међу истраживачима који су протеклих деценија вршили ископавања на овом локалитету. Присуство хришћана у Виминацијуму током IV и у првим деценијама V века документовано је поред писаних извора и материјалним остацима. Већина ранохришћанских налаза из Виминацијума потиче са локалитета Пећине, где је присуство хришћана током IV и раног V века потврђено поуздано опредељеним ранохришћанским споменицима који се односе на меморијалне грађевине, затим малобройне гробове са хришћанским обележјем и епиграфске споменике.

Ако бисмо на основу регистрованих споменика добијених досадашњих археолошким истраживањима, покушали да одредимо социјални статус првих хришћана, античког Виминацијума, можемо запазити да постоје само два економски диференцирана слоја. Један слој који су чинили малобројни имућни грађани, највероватније великодостојници који су се уздигли у новој хришћанској хијерархији, док су другој grupi припадали верници који потичу из сиромашних слојева друштва.

Треба имати у виду да подаци о раном хришћанству у Виминацијуму нису комплетни, будући да су досадашња сазнања заснована на археолошким истраживањима кога су углавном биле обухваћена јужне и источне некрополе града. Истраживања војног логора и цивилног населења тек су у зачетку и ту свакако треба очекивати нова сазнања која ће потврдити или можда изменити досадашњу sliku o ранохришћанском Виминацијуму.