THE WORLD OF LATE ANTIQUE SOPIANAE: ARTISTIC CONNECTIONS AND SCHOLARLY PROBLEMS

An important Roman town in the province of Pannonia, Sopianae became the capital of Valeria province in the AD fourth century when the province was divided into four new administrative units. In its heyday, the town of Sopianae was influenced as much by the west as the east, or the Balkans. This paper focuses on the artistic connections and their impacts, which can be traced in the late antique cemetery in Sopianae with the help of some examples. Some issues that seem important to describe the situation of the town within the Late Roman Empire will be discussed; for example, even though Sopianae did not lie within the Balkans as it is defined today, the town nevertheless had very strong connections with that region. The closest parallels for the paintings found in the burials chambers under the Early Christian mausolea of Sopianae are those found in Niš. However, the network of connections was not straightforward. Some influences have oriental features although they actually came from territories lying to the west of the town. Influences, which reached Sopianae from the Balkans were usually of western origin.

The Situation of the Town in Late Antiquity

Due to the constant Barbarian attacks along the Danube limes, the civil administrations of the newly organised, smaller provinces were established in the hinterland of Pannonia, while the military governors (duces) maintained their residences in the former capitals along the Danube (Carnuntum and Aquincum). Sopianae became the headquarters of the civilian governor (praeses) of the province of Valeria, located in the north-eastern territories of Pannonia. This change in the status of the town was followed by investments from the state. The first fifty years of the AD fourth century represented a period of rapid growth funded by imperial sources. Many buildings were reconstructed and a new street grid was laid down. The palace of the governor and the huge...

1 Amm. Marc., Res Gestae, 28:1; Ferenc Fülep, A pécsi ókeresztény mauzóleum ásatása (Excavations of the Late Roman – Old Christian Mausoleum in Pécs), JPMÉ 32 (1977), hereafter Fülep, A pécsi ókeresztény, pp. 31-44.
structure of a bath complex were built. Within these new circumstances, the Christian Church became the main player in the local society, funded by the emperors and wealthy individuals, although Christians were probably still in minority among the citizens. Local society included native Celts, Italian settlers, Dalmatians, immigrants from the Danube provinces, and families from other parts of Pannonia. This mixed local society was the result of the good commercial connections and trade routes which had run through the city. Sopianae had well-established commercial connections and complex economic links with Italy, Gaul, Germany, Rhaetia, the Balkans, Constantinople and even with the Barbaricum on the other side of the Danube limes. The population of the town comprised landowners, retired soldiers and their families, traders, craftsmen and bureaucrats. Among the local aristocrats, there were the members of the town’s council, as well. Although to be a member of a town’s council in Late Antiquity was not an easy matter, as one had to supplement the tax income if

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it did not reach the expected levels, which usually it did not. For that reason, financial power was in the hands of the landowners, who could avoid municipal obligations. This landowner-aristocracy had a considerable influence on the town.

The main military road between Constantinople and Trier ran through Sopianae in the AD fourth century. From Italy, an important trade route between Milan, Aquileia, Poetovio (Ptuj, Slovenia) and Mursa offered good connections to Sopianae and linked the city with another late antique western imperial capital: Milan. However, Aquileia was the main starting point for immigration from Italy to Sopianae, something clearly shown by the evident influences coming from the North-Italian metropolis on Sopianae. The limes road along the Danube was also within a day’s walking distance and linked the town to the Danube, another important route between east and west. In addition, of course, the town had good connections with other important Pannonian towns such as Carnuntum, Savaria, Siscia and Aquincum. On the other hand, the Balkan provinces were very close to Sopianae. Through these provinces travellers from the east came to the town via land and via water (from the Adriatic coast). The crossing point at the River Drave at Mursa was only two days’ walking distance from Sopianae; hence the Valerian town was on the route of every eastern traveller who wanted to cross the Drave towards the west. (fig. 1)

Very few details are available about the Roman town itself in Sopianae/Pécs. The main database, for this research is the late antique cemetery, north of the town. The focus here will be on funerary remains. Late Roman funerary sites are commonly found everywhere in the territory of the former Roman Empire. The late antique cemetery of Sopianae/Pécs lies close to where scholars suspect the western gate of the Roman town-wall, which was located near a road that leads to the north. The use of the site as a burial ground had begun in the AD third century. In it there are pagan and Christian graves together with more than thirty funerary buildings. In the first decades of the AD fourth century, east-west oriented inhumations appeared amongst the burials. In the second half of the AD fourth century, rich mausolea were built with underground burial chambers (hypogeia), among other buildings like the unique cella septichora. They are later than similar developments in the catacombs of Rome. The most representative buildings will be discussed in this paper such as the ‘Early Christian Mausoleum’, the St Peter and Paul Burial Chamber and the ‘Burial Chamber of the Jar’.

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8 The name of the building is unfortunate, as nearly all funerary buildings from the cemetery are mausolea, and there are several, which are clearly Christian. It should be mentioned that the funerary buildings are often called burial chambers, even those which do not
More than thirty funerary buildings are known from the Early Christian Cemetery of Sopianae from the AD fourth century, many of them decorated with wall paintings. The subjects and the artistic style of the wall paintings display a close relationship with the paintings in the Roman catacombs. On the other hand, the Sopianae burial chambers belong to the Macedonian hypogeum type, which occurs in a region, centred in the Balkan provinces. Sopianae seems to be the northernmost settlement of this cultural tradition, as no painted burial chambers have been found in Pannonia north of the city.9

The wall paintings of the St Peter and Paul Burial Chamber in Sopianae represent the pinnacle of Early Christian art in Pannonia.10 The main painting on the northern wall of the burial chamber, depicting St Peter and Paul, is related to catacomb paintings in Rome.11 However, the closest parallel is the representation of St Peter and Paul in the burial chamber from Niš. The depiction of Christ and the two main apostles was the symbol of Rome in the second part of the AD fourth century and the symbol of catholic church, probably opposing the Arians. The acanthus tendrils on the southern and northern wall of the burial chamber are similar to the acanthus tendril motifs of the Theodorus mosaic in the double basilica at Aquileia, but before that, the motif occurred in Rome as well in the Case Romane and in the St John and Paul catacomb. Four male portraits can be

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11 Fülep, Sopianae, p. 39.
seen on the barrel-vault in medallions around a Chi-Rho symbol. Plants, flowers and birds around the portraits represent Paradise. There are stylistic parallels with the medallions in the Ciriaca catacomb in Rome\textsuperscript{12} and with the medallions on the Theodorus mosaic in Aquileia. The fin de siècle portraiture applied, and its characteristics overall are typical of the late AD fourth century.\textsuperscript{13} The composition of decoration in the whole burial chamber, especially the Paradise scene on the barrel-vault with its flowers, plants, doves and peacocks were probably inspired by similar work from Aquileia. However, these motifs can be found in the Balkans as well (again under the influence of Aquileia).\textsuperscript{14} In this single building an Italian influence can be observed which probably reached the town from the Balkans. (figs. 3, 4)

Another important building is the so-called ‘Early Christian Mausoleum’, which can be dated to middle of the AD fourth century. Its building type has a parallel in the mausoleum in Marusinac, near Salona.\textsuperscript{15} The mausoleum in Salona has a similar size, similar dimensions and a similar internal organisation as the mausoleum in Sopianae. The paintings on the northern wall of the ‘Early Christian Mausoleum’ of Sopianae depicts the Fall of Adam and Eve

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and Daniel in the Lions’ Den. The inspiration for the paintings of the mausoleum was clearly the catacomb art in Rome, where the theme of the Fall was very popular. It is possible that wandering Italian painters worked in Sopianae from Italian sample books. Two epigraphs of such painters have been found in Savaria (Szombathely, Hungary) in northern Pannonia. Thus, evidence exists for the presence of wandering artists in the province.\(^{16}\) In Aquae Iasae (Varaždinske Toplice, Croatia) in southern Pannonia, a fragment of a wall painting depicting a saint found in the middle of the main basilica is also likely to be the work of an Italian travelling artist from Rome or Aquileia.\(^{17}\) The Daniel painting on the northern wall depicts the popular Early Christian topic: Daniel in the lions’ den. Daniel is the archetype of the persecuted Christians who in the end escaped from eternal death.\(^{18}\) This subject can be found many times in the catacombs of Rome (for example in the Lucina catacomb). However, the depiction of Daniel in the

\(^{16}\) Fülep, \textit{A pécsi ókeresztény}, p. 254-255.


\(^{18}\) Zoltán Kádár, \textit{Ókeresztény és kora bizánci művészet} (Budapest, Gondolat, 1959), p. 4.
Sopianae fresco displays similarities with the figure of the Good Shepherd in the Good Shepherd Grave in Thessalonica. In Sopianae, Daniel wears a tunic instead of the usual Persian dress, which is a typical western characteristic. There are numerous parallel examples to the paintings in the mausoleum. The plant decoration on the northeast wall is similar to that found in graves Nr 4 and 8 in Serdica (Sophia, Bulgaria). The figure in the white gown has parallels in the Noah figures in the catacombs and in Salonica, in the Good Shepherd grave. The plant decoration around this painting can also be found in Niš. The red ribbons, which are hung from the Chi-Rho symbol on the northeast wall and the position of Eve’s head and the style of her hair reflect similarities with the paintings in the Eustorgius grave in Salonica. The hair of the lions on the painting of Daniel is similar to the hair on the lions from Arles. (fig. 5)

Our third building is the ‘Burial Chamber of the Jar’ or Burial Chamber Nr 2. It is a rectangular building and there is a burial chamber under the mausoleum. The main importance of the building lies within the wall paintings in the burial chamber. The painting contains decorative elements rather than single wall paintings, apart from the image of the Glass and the Jug in a niche in the northern wall. There are two sections of paintings on the walls. The lower part is decorated in rectangles, painted to look like marble. As a part of this lower band, there is a rectangular imitation marble slab under the niche. Arrowhead-

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19 Nagyné Hudák, *Bibliai témák*, p. 36.
shaped yellow flowers with green leaves symbolize the Garden of Paradise. On the upper part of the northern wall, there is a representation of two vine tendrils with grape leaves and greyish-purple grapes. The vine tendril on the northern wall and the geometric decoration are closely connected with the Niš burial chamber. Marble incrustation imitation with rich floral and vine tendril decoration can be found in Grave Nr 7 in the church of Santa Sofia in Serdica. The Salonica burial chamber also has some panels with grid patterns and with the imitation marble incrustation that is similar to the Sopianae paintings. The trellis-motif decoration all around the lower section of the paintings is similar to the decoration found in Serdica, Grave Nr 7. To summarize, the ‘Burial Chamber with the Jar’ displays similar influences to the two previously mentioned funerary buildings from Sopianae although of the three, it was the least sophisticated and was decorated more simply. (figs. 6, 7)

Our last building is the Cella Septichora, which is a very unique building. No similar building with the same ground plan has been unearthed elsewhere in the Roman Empire. Ferenc Fülep suggested that it had been a funerary basilica where the Eucharist had been celebrated. On the other hand, the results of the new excavations in 2005/2006 suggest that it was never been used, but was left

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22 Fülep, Sopianae, p. 45.
23 Fülep, Sopianae.
unfinished.\textsuperscript{24} It was possibly intended to be a community place for large congregations or common burial place for rich citizens. The closest parallel to the Sopianae building is the mausoleum under the St Gereon in Cologne.\textsuperscript{25}

As far as simple graves are concerned, many different types of graves can be found in the late antique cemetery of Sopianae. Most had some kind of roof, and many of them had walls. All graves were subterranean, and the simplest ones were earthen. For constructed graves, the main building material was brick. These graves were usually plastered. The types of graves found in Sopianae were not unique in Pannonia. For example, a grave vault similar to a type found in Sopianae was found in nearby Certissa (Srbinici, Croatia). The structure of the graves in Manastirine, next to Salona (Solin, Croatia) is also similar to the Sopianae graves.\textsuperscript{26} A rare feature is the children’s cemetery west of Burial Chamber Nr 13. The cemetery contained sixty-five children’s skeletons altogether, including newborn babies, infants and teenagers. This cemetery is similar to the children’s cemetery in Ziegelfeld (Austria) (Graves 72-77) dated to the AD fifth century.\textsuperscript{27} The finest example among the Sopianae graves is a double tomb constructed of stone and brick. The inner walls of the tomb were


\textsuperscript{25} Friedrich Gerke, cited in Fülep, *Sopianae*, p. 58.

\textsuperscript{26} Migotti, *Evidence for Christianity*, pp. 37-38.

\textsuperscript{27} Fülep, *Sopianae*, p. 176.
plastered and decorated with Chi-Rho monograms and red and yellow flowers. This kind of decoration may often be seen in the painted funerary chambers of the Balkan provinces and the catacombs of Rome.

The Nature of Influence

The evidence presented here shows the mixed influences that arrived in Roman Sopianae. It is easy to recognise the strong influence of Rome, Italy and other western provinces. However, the eastern influence is also considerable. How did these artistic influences come to Sopianae? There were several possible routes. For example, as has already been mentioned, travelling artists may have played an important role in promoting a certain artistic style. The elite culture of Rome would also have been an important model. Aristocrats around the governor would be eager to keep up with new cultural movements in Rome (see for example the reform of Pope Damasus, which can be followed in catacomb art). Funerary art was especially important because that was the only memory of a person’s life that remained after his/her death. High-ranking people were especially sensitive to questions of remembrance. It should not be forgotten, however, that influences did not travel. People did, and in the AD fourth century people moved around extensively. By the fourth century, the oriental influence was considerable in the area. People from everywhere in the Empire ended up in Sopianae, and no doubt they brought their funerary art with them. However, what has biased the results of the archaeological record is the status of those who were buried. Most of the remains are from high-status burials (funerary buildings), hence our data came from a high-status context. This does not mean that the lower classes were also subject to the same kind of influences.

One should not forget that the real reason behind erecting a monument I discussed (except the mysterious cella septichora), was the commemoration of the social self of the deceased. The type of commemoration was influenced as much by the social, religious, regional identities of the families, erected the monuments, as the artistic impacts of the artist, who undertook the task of the decoration. The real question should be asked in a longer work is why a certain family choose a special type of representation, and why they picked up a special kind of decoration from the available options. It would be also useful to investigate the shift in the late antique society, where the deceased citizens of the towns played as important role in the towns’ local society, as earlier, but new patroni emerged, the martyrs. While in the case of Naissus we have clear details, that the funerary monuments of the late antique cemeteries clustered around martyr burials, in Sopianae we do not have such a data, yet.

It is also problematic to divide the artistic and other influences into ‘eastern’ and ‘western’. Even the linguistic differences were not very great because at least within the upper classes, many Latin writers chose to write in Greek, and vice versa. The language of the administration in the East was Latin until the AD sixth century. Furthermore, even if it would be possible to demonstrate

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28 For more information on that see: Rutgers, Subterranean Rome.

29 Mango, The Oxford History, p. 5.
influences of eastern origin, these impulses could have arrived from the west to Sopianae. Hence even apparently eastern style artistic influences demonstrate western influence, not eastern, from the town’s point of view. There is enough evidence for a strong western influence in Sopianae in the AD fourth century through the influence of the Roman catacombs, Aquileian Christianity, and trade from Gaul and the Danube provinces to support this argument archaeologically. Study of the archaeological remains reveals the strong influence of wall paintings from the Roman catacombs although North Italian examples were also applied. Rich finds from Gaul and the Danube provinces confirm additional connections with these areas.

The Balkan provinces, which formed a relatively united region, at least on a cultural level, also played its role in the town’s life. After Italy and Rome lost their leading position within the Empire in the AD fourth century, the provinces became more important, and the importance of the Balkans, with Sirmium at its centre, has been emphasised by scholars. In the person of the Emperor Constans (AD 337-350), this central part of the Empire had an independent ruler, who reigned in the Balkans, Italy and Africa. The effect of the Greek-speaking eastern and Balkan culture was strong in fourth-century Sopianae, as can be traced through art historical evidence. Naissus – called ‘Martyropolis’ in the AD fourth century – was clearly an important centre of the martyr cult. It is obvious the Naissus influenced Sopianae in one or other way.

What is now necessary, however, is a complete study of funerary practices of the Balkans. The results of that future research may potentially establish the presence of a culturally flourishing region between east and west in the Balkans and surrounding regions. As this region lay partly in the Western and partly in the Eastern Empires, the results should be striking and may reveal a variety of mixed cultural influences.

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на погребним остацима. Употреба ове локације као као земљишта за сахрањивање почела је у Њих век нове ере. У првим деценијама Њих века на погребима се почивање са сахрањивањем у правцу исток-запад. У другој половини Њих века, грађени су богати маузолеји са подземним погребним просторијама (hypogeia), између осталих, грађевина попут јединствене Cellae Septichora. Оне насталију као сличне грађевине у римским катакомбама. У овом раду разматрају се најрепрезентативнији грађевине попут „Ранохришћанског Маузолеја", гробница Св. Петра и Пола, и „Гробница са крчачом". Предмети и уметнички стил фресака показују близину повезаност са фресакама у римским катакомбама. Са других страна, гробнице Сопиане припадају македонском ху- рогеум типу, који се јавља у региону смештеном у центру балкансских провинција. Изгледа да је Сопиане најсеверније насеље ове културне традиције, са обзиром да осликане гробнице нису пронађене у Панонији, северно од града.

Доказ који је овде презентиран, приказује мешане утицаје који су пристигли у касно античку Сопиане. Лако се препознаје јак утицај Рима, Италије и осталих западних провинција. Међутим, постоји и знатан оријентални утицај. Како су ви уметнички утицаји стигли у Сопиане? Постајало је ниско могућих путева. На пример, могуће је да су путујући уметници одиграли значајну улогу у промовисању одређеног уметничког стила. Елитна култура Рима би такође могла да представља један значајан модели. Аристократе којима је гувернер био окружен желели су да буду у току са новим културним претканим у Риму. Погребна уметност била је од изузетног значаја јер је представљала једино сећање на живот преминуле особе после њене смрти. Особе високог ранга биле су посебно осетљиве по питању успомена и сећања. Али, не треба заборавити да утицаји нису путовали а људи јесу, и да су се у Њих веку људи екстензивно кретали наоколо. До Њих века, постојао је знатан оријентални утицај у овој области. Људи из читаве империје пристизали су у Сопиане и, несумњиво, са собом доносили своју погребну уметност. Међутим, ово што је створио предsume када се ради о археолошком материјалу јесте статус оних који су сахрањивани. Већина остатаака потиче из високо-статусних сахрани (погребне зграде), тако да се наши подаци односе на високо-статусни контекст. Ово не значи да су ниже класе такође подезале истој врсти утицаја. Треба имати на уму да је прави разлог за подизање споменика, које сам овде разматрао, била комеморација друштвеног дела личности преминулог. На врсту комеморације утицај је, колико друштвени, религиозни, национални идентитет породица које су подизали споменик, толико и уметнички утицај уметника чији је задатак био украшавање. Балканске провинције, које изгледа да су биле релативно уједињена област, макар на културном нивоу, такође су играле своју улогу у градском животу. Након што су у Њих веку Италија и Рим изузели своју водећу позицију у царству, провинције су постале важније, а Балкану, са Србију као центром, научници су придавали већ значај. Ефекат грчко-говорне источне и балканске културе био је јак у Сопиане у Њих веку, што се може пропратити кроз уметничке историјске доказе.