

SHUMEN UNIVERSITY  
FACULTY OF HUMANITIES  
DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY AND ARCHAEOLOGY

STUDIA ACADEMICA ŠUMENENSIA

*TRANSITION FROM LATE PAGANISM TO EARLY  
CHRISTIANITY IN THE ARCHITECTURE AND ART IN  
THE BALKANS*

edited by  
Ivo Topalilov and Biser Georgiev

Vol. 3,  
2016



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## STUDIA ACADEMICA ŠUMENENSIA

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Ivo Topalilov, Stoyan Vitlyanov, Biser Georgiev and Rumen Vatashki

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## Evidence of Christianity in Viminacium: a study on historical sources, epigraphy, and funerary art

Ivan Gargano

**Abstract:** The Roman city of Viminacium – founded in the 1st century AD along the Danube, right in the middle of the Balkan area – went through a period of intense development and prosperity during the second half of the 3rd century and for all the whole 4th century.

Economic wealth and political importance of Viminacium during this period are the reasons that led to the establishment of a bishopric in the city, which is widely documented by many sources gathered along the middle and lower reaches of the Danube. These sources provide the name of some relevant bishops and may provide interesting information about Viminacium's position in the religious controversy against Arianism.

The first relevant information about Christian archaeology we can gain is the total absence of any find indisputably related to the Bishopric Complex in the city, or to any other building resembling urbane or rural churches. However, scholars have found some epigraphs, tombs, paintings and sepulchral buildings that represent indisputable evidence of Christians in Viminacium.

**Key words:** Late antiquity, Viminacium, christianization, literary sources, archaeology, bishop, epigraphy, burials

**Резюме:** Римският град Виминациум, основан през I в. на брега на р. Дунав, преминал през период на интензивно развитие и просперитет през втората половина на III – IV в. Икономическата му мощ и политическо значение довели до основаването на Епископска катедра в града, широко документирано в много извори. Тези извори предават и имената на някои от епископите, както и свидетелства за ролята на Виминациум в религиозните противоречия между ортодоксални и ариани. И докато за ранния период липсват каквито и да било археологически находки, свързани с Епископския комплекс или други религиозни сгради, основно градски и извънградски църкви, то са открити надгробни епитафии, гробове, станописи и гробни сгради, които представят християнизирването на Виминациум.

The Roman city of Viminacium – founded in the 1st century along the Danube, right in the middle of the Balkan area – went through a period of intense development and prosperity during the second half of the 3rd

century. This development was achieved not only for logistical reasons but mostly thanks to the status of 'Roman colony', which was bestowed upon the city during the reign of Gordian III;<sup>1</sup> and thanks to the reform of the provinces made by the emperor Diocletian,<sup>2</sup> which granted the city the status of capitol of *Moesia Prima*.

By the end of the 3rd century and for all the 4th century several emperors visited this center: in a fierce battle near the city, Diocletian defeated Marcus Aurelius Carinus<sup>3</sup> and then came back to visit it more than once,<sup>4</sup> whereas Constantine, during his travels, stopped by the settlement in many occasions.<sup>5</sup> In 338 Viminacium was also ground for the assembly between Constantine's progeny and Athanasius,<sup>6</sup> in which a new division of the territories of the Empire was defined.<sup>7</sup> The last recorded emperor to visit the city was Gratian, in 381.<sup>8</sup>

Between the 4th and the first half of the 5th century the city was still a flourishing settlement and the commercial hub of the region. Very significant of this period is an episode told by Priscus about a Greek merchant, who had built a huge fortune in Viminacium before being captured in a Hunnic raid;<sup>9</sup> this story is a record of both the economic development of the city and the growing threat represented by the Huns. The long period of prosperity of Viminacium, in fact, ended brutally around the second half of the 5th century: according to many written sources the city was destroyed by the Huns during a raid in 441.<sup>10</sup>

By the end of the 5th and the beginning of the 6th century Viminacium fell under the control of Germanic people that – as suggested by many artifacts found in the necropolis of Burdelj and Više Grobalja<sup>11</sup> –

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<sup>1</sup> This information is confirmed by many epigraphs, on which the city is defined 'colonia' – see for this Mirković 1986; Spasić-Djurić 2002; Milošević 2001.

<sup>2</sup> Rees 2004, 90.

<sup>3</sup> *Itin. Hier.*, 10. 19-20.

<sup>4</sup> *Cod. Iust.*, 2.19.8 - 5. 16. 20 - 6.2.11 - 8.35. 5, 44.22, 50. 16 - 9. 22. 12.

<sup>5</sup> *Cod. Iust.* 8.10.16. *Cod. Theod.* 12. 1. 21.

<sup>6</sup> Athan., *Apol. ad Constantium Imperatorem*, 5. 11.

<sup>7</sup> Piganiol 1972, 82-90.

<sup>8</sup> *Cod. Theod.* 1. 10. 1.

<sup>9</sup> Priscus *Fr.* 8; see also Mirković, 1986, 25.

<sup>10</sup> Priscus *Fr.* 2; see also Vulić 1938, 15; Mirković 1986, 25. Procopius tells of a city burnt to the ground, but it might have been exaggerated just to highlight the reconstruction by Justinian - see Procopius, *De Aed.* 4. 5.

<sup>11</sup> We have no archeological evidence of the Germanic settlement of the 5<sup>th</sup> century and we don't know whether it was related to the roman buildings. Next to the Byzantine relics of the 6th century, instead, Germanic shacks possibly belonging to conscript soldiers have been discovered - see Ivanišević *et al.*, 2006.



settled there and started a flourishing handicraft activity. Not many years later though, the settlement was recaptured by the Byzantine army within the general program for the recovery of the Balkan territories, initiated by emperor Justinian and well recounted by Procopius in his '*De Aedificis*'.<sup>12</sup> Justinian established once again *Moesia Prima* as a Roman Province and ordered to rebuild an actual city just on the opposite bank of the Mlava river, in front of the old Viminacium; he demanded the construction of a stronghold and appointed the new settlement as a bishopric.<sup>13</sup>

The stronghold then capitulated in 584 at the Avars and the Slavs,<sup>14</sup> but the Byzantine army reconquered it soon after. However, in the beginning of the 7th century *Biminakion* was invaded again by the Slavs, which this time managed to overcome the Byzantines and imposed their control over the settlement. The last mention of the city comes from Theophylact Simocatta, who recounts that just after the Byzantines had reconquered the city after the first invasion, the generals Priscus and Komentiolos launched a counterattack towards the Avars and the Slavs.<sup>15</sup>

Economic wealth and political importance of Viminacium during the 4th century are the reasons that led to the establishment of a bishopric in the city, which is widely documented by many sources gathered along the middle and lower reaches of the Danube.<sup>16</sup> These sources provide the name of some relevant bishops such as *Amantius* and *Cyriacus*;<sup>17</sup> the first of them is mentioned also by Athanasius as one of the signatories of the Acts of the Council of Serdica.<sup>18</sup> As inferable from a letter sent by Pope Celestinus in 424 to nine bishops in East Illiryicum,<sup>19</sup> in the first half of the 5th century the city was still recognized as a bishopric. Five of those bishops are mentioned

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<sup>12</sup> Proc. *De Aed.* 4. 5.

<sup>13</sup> The new settlement didn't rise on the ruins of the old *castrum* but was built on the left bank of the Mlava, just where it intersects the Danube and forms a defensible peninsula. *Spolia* from the old city were used in the reconstruction. For further information - see Milošević 1988, 39-57; Popović 1988, 1-35.

<sup>14</sup> Teof. Sim., *Hist.*, 1.2.2 - see also Daim 2008, 413; Mirković 1986, 25;

<sup>15</sup> Teof. Sim., *Hist.*, 1. 3. 5; Paulus Diac., *Hist. Rom.*, 16; see also Mirković 1986, 26.

<sup>16</sup> At the present status of research, we don't have any archeological evidence of the importance of *Viminacium* for the expansion of Christianity in the region: no relics of the bishopric palace or other Christian places of worship have been found, indeed. However, as written later in this article, many Christian burials and epigraphs unearthed in the area confirm what was told in the historical sources - see Milinković 2012; Zeiller 1968.

<sup>17</sup> He held this office surely in 356; Athanasius mentions him as '*Cyriacus Misiae*' in *Athan. Epist. ad Episcopos Aegypti et Lybiae* 1. 8.

<sup>18</sup> *Athan. Epist.* 46.

<sup>19</sup> *Epist. et Decreta Celistini*, 3.

in relation to their diocese whereas the other four – *Sapius*, *Paulus*, *Aeternalis* and *Sabatius* – even though they are not linked to any specific bishopric, we can infer that they can be associated with *Creta*, *Moesia Prima*, *Dardania* and *Dacia Ripensis*.<sup>20</sup>

Another letter<sup>21</sup> sent by emperor Leo I to all the bishops in the Roman territories, instead, may provide interesting information regarding the Hunnic raids in the 5th century. In the letter, in fact, no bishop ruling over *Moesia Prima* is reported, this perhaps confirming the hypothesis that in the region, therefore in Viminacium, both the ecclesiastical and the imperial power had collapsed after the upheavals of those years, leaving a vacancy in the jurisdiction.<sup>22</sup>

Considering what Procopius<sup>23</sup> stated in some of his writings, we also know that during the 6th century Viminacium, along with the city of Singidunum, had been drawn again under the rule of Byzantium, which rebuilt the settlement and secured it by erecting a stronghold and restoring the bishopric;<sup>24</sup> posed under the control of the bishop of Justiniana Prima.<sup>25</sup>

In order to obtain a proper overview on the development of Christianity in Viminacium, it is fundamental first to gain wide knowledge of the certain evidence gathered so far on the existence of a Christian community in the settlement.

The first relevant information we can gain is the total absence of any find indisputably related to the Bishopric Complex in the city, or to any other building resembling urban or rural churches. Even though such buildings must have existed, in the current status of the research their presence on the territory has not been spotted even by the aerial photography, which has provided just a general outline of the area.<sup>26</sup> However, scholars have found some epigraphs nearby – written either in Latin or Greek – that represent indisputable evidence of Christians in *Viminacium*, even if it is not always possible to define in what context these inscriptions were discovered. The first find is a funerary epigraph engraved

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<sup>20</sup> Zeiller 1968, 149.

<sup>21</sup> Evagrius, *Hist. Eccl.* 2, 9, 10.

<sup>22</sup> Zeiller 1968, 149.

<sup>23</sup> Proc. *De Aed.* 4. 5.

<sup>24</sup> In ‘*Synecdemus*’ by Hierocles, *Biminakion* is classified as a metropolis of the eparchy of Moesia – see Hier. *Synec.* 657. 2

<sup>25</sup> *Nov. Iust.* 11. & *Nov. Iust.* 131.

<sup>26</sup> I will perform a deeper analysis of this topic in my PhD thesis, which is a study on Viminacium during late antiquity. In this work I will focus on the problems related to the bishopric and the progresses achieved by field research.

on a clay-brick (41 x 41 x 5 cm) (fig. 1)<sup>27</sup> found in 1979 in the necropolis of Pećine; the inscription, consisting of six different lines, shows important differences in size between the capital letters<sup>28</sup> that form the words, but also a quite precise layout.



*SINIA quae qui-  
escit in pace*  
3 *Romaea bi-  
duaann(is) XIV  
deposita VI*  
6 *id(us) Feb(ruarias)*

Fig. 1. Funerary epitaph on a clay-brick from Pećine  
(after Mirković 1986, 178, fr. 218)

The first word cannot be clearly identified but it is unquestionable that it stands for the name of the deceased, who originally was probably named 'SINIA'.<sup>29</sup> She is described by the term 'BIDUA' – which means 'widow' – followed by the number of years since the death of her husband. This line (3) is particularly important for recognizing the woman as Christian, since specifying the years of widowhood was extremely significant to them.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, 'QUIESCIT IN PACE' (1) and 'DEPOSITA' (5) are meaningful clues of the woman's religion as well.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Mirković 1986, 178, fr. 218.

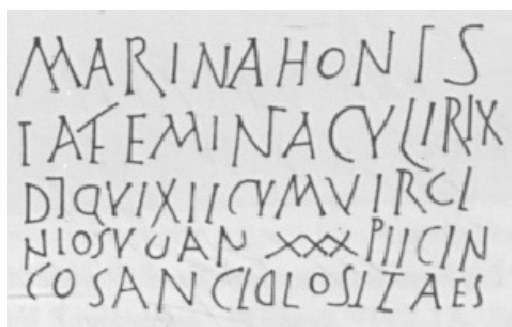
<sup>28</sup> Letters between 2, 5 and 5 cm – see Mirković 1986, 178, fr. 218.

<sup>29</sup> Suggested by the presence of an oblique line between the second and the third vertical line - compare it with Diehl 4224D; see also Mirković 1986, 178.

<sup>30</sup> In (4) I chose to read 'ANNIS' instead of 'ANNORUM' basing on a comparison with Diehl 1581, 1742, 2142 and 4752, in which the ablative case or the accusative case are used when referring to this phenomenon.

<sup>31</sup> For regarding the occurrence of 'QUIESCO' – see Diehl *index*, 575-578. Regarding the usage of 'DEPOSITUS' instead – see Carletti 2010, 222-234.

A second epigraph – another funerary inscription, engraved on a broken marble slab (36 x 56 x 2 cm)(fig. 2) – was found in unknown location and is currently lost; however the text, perfectly readable, has been copied and goes as follows:



*Marina honis-  
ta femina cultrix  
3 di q(uae) vixit cum virgi-  
nio suo ann(is) XXX P. <L>icin  
Cosanciolo sita es(t)*

Fig. 2. A funerary epigraph on marble slab (after Mirković 1986, 177, fr. 217)

The term 'CULTRIX DI', rather than 'HONISTA',<sup>32</sup> is clear evidence of the woman's faith, since this expression is extremely common among several Christian inscriptions;<sup>33</sup> 'VIRGINIO' refers to her husband.<sup>34</sup>

A third funerary epigraph,<sup>35</sup> equally found in unknown background, presents instead a bilingual inscription<sup>36</sup> written on a damaged marble plate (40 x 45 x 4 cm.) in both Greek and Latin:



*Ούαλέριος ἐμῶ Θεοδύ[λω]. Τόδε μὲν μνημ[α]  
ἐμον· ἡ δὲ δόξα σήμαθ[ί] ἐτώσαν οὖν παῖδες]  
τοὺς θρῆψαντας φιλ[εῖν· χάριν ἔχω σοι]  
καί ζῶν καί ἀναπαυόμενος διάπα]  
5 ντος. Valer(ius) [meo Theodu]  
lo. Haec [memoria]  
quidem me[a tua autem laus]  
Discant igit[ur pueri]  
Nutritores a[mare. Gratiam habeo li]  
10 bi vivus et qu[iescens in perpetuum]*

Fig. 3. Funerary bilingual epitaph (after Mirković 1986, 178, fr. 219)

<sup>32</sup> As Mirković 1986, 178, n. 217.

<sup>33</sup> Diehl 1925/1931; 1049, 2148 – 2477, No. 330.

<sup>34</sup> Regarding the usage of this term – see Janssens 1981, 107-112.

<sup>35</sup> Mirković 1986, 178, fr. 219.

<sup>36</sup> Letters 2-3, 8 cm – see Mirković 1986, 178, fr. 219.

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The main feature of this epigraph is the simultaneous presence of both languages,<sup>37</sup> either of them transmitting exactly the same text. The terms 'ΤΡΕΨΑΝΤΑΣ' (3) and 'NUTRITORES' (9) show how the deceased was buried by his foster parents;<sup>38</sup> whereas spread throughout the inscription we can see several symbols that identify the religious matrix of the plate: at the beginning of text (1) an unidentifiable monogram is engraved that Diehl believes to be of Christological origin, two crosses (2) and a Constantine's christogram (5).

Even if of minimal relevance, we can also count as evidence a fragment of an inscription found on a limestone slab<sup>39</sup> (36 x 72 x 13 cm) that carries a text in Greek introduced by a christogram (fig. 4).



*ΧΡ ΓΡΑ[---]*

Fig. 4. Fragment of an inscription  
(after Mirković 1986, 179, fr. 220)

On the other hand, an extremely significant inscription is found on a clay-brick (41 x 55 x 2,5 cm)<sup>40</sup> whose text is fully and perfectly preserved and goes as it follows:

CRIS TVSDIVSDEI	<i>Cristus deus dei</i>
FILIUS CUSTODIAT	<i>filius custodiat</i>
ARTIFICES OMN	3 <i>artefices omnes</i>
NIS QUI HOC	<i>qui hoc</i>
OPUS FECERUNT	5 <i>[o]pus fecerunt</i>
IN DOMINO	<i>in domino</i>

Fig. 5. Inscription on clay-brick  
(after Mirković 1986, 177, fr. 216)

<sup>37</sup> For further information on the bilingual inscription – see Felle 2007, 475-482.

<sup>38</sup> Regarding the relationship *nutritores/alumni* – see Janssens 1981, 181-190.

<sup>39</sup> Mirković 1986, 179, fr. 220.

<sup>40</sup> Mirković 1986, 177, fr. 216.

What makes this inscription so important can be easily seen at the first line (1), where Christ is identified as 'DEI FILIUS', the 'son of God'. This epithet, in fact, is a sign of Orthodox Christian faith and was put there to state a clear refusal of Arianism,<sup>41</sup> which confirms the description given by Athanasius about Viminacium being an Orthodox center during the religious tensions in the 4th century. After the declaration of faith we can see some words that show the identity of the authors of the inscription, as they call themselves 'ARTEFICES' (3) – literally 'the makers' – and ask for Christ's blessing after the conclusion of a work 'IN DOMINO' (6), 'made for the Lord'. From this we can infer that the epigraph was made by manual workers or masons, who probably took part in the construction of a holy building or an artifact of worship on which this epigraph was placed.<sup>42</sup> This inscription significantly grows in importance if we take in consideration what stated at the beginning of the article: since there are no finds of churches or holy buildings of any kind in or around the city, this epigraph could potentially be the only evidence of their existence.

One last inscription has been found near Svetinja, next to the ruins of some Byzantine buildings: it is a Greek cross engraved on a clay-brick from the 6th century.<sup>43</sup>

More consistent and significant information comes from the southern districts of Viminacium, where excavations carried out from 1976 until 1997 unearthed more than 13.500 burials performed either by cremation or inhumation; some are very basic whereas some other are monumental tombs richly decorated. Since burials of various kind attributable to different faiths have been found in this part of the city, we can infer that this necropolis was used also by Christians.<sup>44</sup> In the necropolis of Pećine<sup>45</sup> graves carrying symbols and inscriptions that classified them as indisputably Christian have been discovered. In this area, in fact, was found the burial of a child coming from a period within the 4th and the 5th century covered by clay-bricks, which contained two silver rings decorated with a christogram engraved in variation 'X' and

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<sup>41</sup> For further information - see Ferrua 1991, 155-266.

<sup>42</sup> Compare it with Diehl 1925/1931, No. 2330

<sup>43</sup> Zotović 1994, 66.

<sup>44</sup> Zotović 1995; Milošević 2005.

<sup>45</sup> We know of a cross from the 6th century found in the burial of a child in the Germanic necropolis of Više Grobalja, which however doesn't provide any information regarding the Christians in the old roman settlement.

'I'.<sup>46</sup> Other significant finds related to this necropolis are those regarding several burial buildings that contain some clay-brick coffins in trapezoidal shape, which have been unearthed throughout the whole area; one grave of the same kind has been discovered also in the site of Pirivoj and two in Više Grobalja. Each and every of these coffins present a specific feature: the inside walls of the structure are decorated with frescoes that, despite their artistic value, were not intended to be shown outside but were there just for the deceased.

Only one specific tomb of those found in this area in 1990 shows very visible signs of Christian background, even though quite recent grave robberies have heavily damaged its cover (fig. 6).<sup>47</sup> The analysis of the grave goods belonging to a woman and three men found in it suggests that this grave might be placed within the first half of the 4th century.<sup>48</sup> These frescoes, painted on all the four sides of the tomb, are still perfectly preserved. On the western side there is a white christogram on blue background put in a laurel wreath, which is delimited by two red bands hemmed with green stripes and surrounded by a vegetable spiral motif;<sup>49</sup> on the eastern side a kàntharos is painted within two facing peacocks and stylized trees under vines, grapes and spirals;<sup>50</sup> on the northern side is painted a knight spearing a lion surrounded by a blue and green vegetable motif; on the southern side there is a knight with his dog hunting some sort of felid, again set on a vegetable motif that fills every empty space. All the depictions in these frescoes are strongly rooted in the collection of bucolic tradition in art, to which the peacocks, kàntharos and hunt scenes refer.

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<sup>46</sup> Zotović 1994, 65.

<sup>47</sup> Korać 2007, 259 n. 5517.

<sup>48</sup> Korać 2007, 259.

<sup>49</sup> This Christogram appears in many tombs from the 4th century found along the lower-reach of the Danube, like in Pécs or Niš, and it has significant importance. The comparison with these graves could help dating the one we are discussing now. For further information see Gàbor 2008; Zsolt 2007; Rakocija 2009; 2011.

<sup>50</sup> For the Early Christian tradition, these animals represent the immortality of the flesh that will resurrect in Christ, thus they are common in paintings and frescoes. We can see similar depictions on the mosaics in the Mausoleum of Constantina in Rome, San Vitale in Ravenna; or in the catacombs of Rome and Syracuse. We have the same depictions also in other graves found in Viminacium itself – see Pieri 2008, 3980; Korać, 2007.



Fig. 6. A tomb from the necropolis of Pećine (after Grašar *et al.* 2012)



The hunt is a very recurrent motif on various steles in Viminacium<sup>51</sup> and associates huntsmen with knights: the painting in the grave, therefore, indicates the will of the deceased to be identified as a member of a wealthy elite, along with the intention to be identified as a Christian.

We also know of a lead sarcophagus<sup>52</sup> that, if it had not gone lost, would have been a reliable source of information. The only valuable evidence one could gain from this find now, instead, is an incomplete description<sup>53</sup> where it is told that the two long sides of this sarcophagus were decorated with three crosses, which reasonably suggest Christian affinity. The description, unfortunately, is too vague to advance any possible dating or to infer any other information.

Another reliable evidence of Christianity is a set of precious artifacts made of silver – goblets, bowls and spoons all dating variously between the 4th and 7th century – it is very likely that they were used for liturgical purpose.<sup>54</sup> The oldest of these artifacts, a silver goblet from the end of the 4th century,<sup>55</sup> is characterized by a christogram engraved on the bottom of it,<sup>56</sup> together with this one, two other goblets with a Christian Cross and the letters 'B' 'Z'<sup>57</sup> carved on them have been found in a storage, next to four silver spoons which carry the letters 'A S E' on the grip.<sup>58</sup>

Five more goblets found in a different location represent a very intriguing discovery: these relics, in fact, were originally dated around the 6th century,<sup>59</sup> however, the possibility that the goblets might come from the 5th century has been also considered.<sup>60</sup> This last proposal may lead to the hypothesis that the Christian community was still present and active in the area in spite of the Hunnic raids of that time, which might have been much less harsh and destructive than originally thought.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Mirković 1986.

<sup>52</sup> See AA. VV. DACL 1925, *cercueils en plombe*, 3282-3286 and Franchi de' Cavalieri 1916/1917, 214-215, n. 1-2.

<sup>53</sup> Vulić 1909, 133.

<sup>54</sup> Ilić 2006.

<sup>55</sup> Ilić 2006.

<sup>56</sup> Ilić 2006, 49.

<sup>57</sup> Ilić 2006, 49.

<sup>58</sup> Ilić 2006, 49.

<sup>59</sup> Ilić 2006, 49.

<sup>60</sup> Popović 1994, cat. 277-281; Kondić 1994, cat. 319-324.

<sup>61</sup> I will carry out a wider study on these artifacts in my PhD thesis, in which I will explore in more detail the actual effect of the barbarian raids on the city and its population.

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At the present status of the archeological studies on Viminacium, everything that has been described so far constitutes all the reliable evidence gathered up to now on the presence of Christians in the city. In addition to this, however, there are also several ruins of religious buildings that could be considered valuable finds, although their origin cannot be certainly ascribed to the Christian community and scholars haven't found sufficient data to prove their hypothesis on them yet.



Fig. 7. A frescoe from a tomb from Pećine (after Raičković & Milovanović 2011)

One of these debated relics is a tomb<sup>62</sup> unearthed in Pećine in 1983, which comes in the typical trapezoidal shape and presents evident signs of

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<sup>62</sup> Since the original one was destroyed during some operations on the power plant Kostolac B, nowadays we can only see a copy of it, whereas the authentic frescoes are exhibited in the museum of Požarevac.

grave robbing on the external walls;<sup>63</sup> frescoes well preserved have been found inside it, together with the rests of a mature man and a young woman.<sup>64</sup> The grave is commonly placed under the reign of Constantius II.<sup>65</sup> The portrait of a woman is painted on the western wall, whereas the eastern one is decorated with a man painted in full body; the northern and the southern walls, instead, present specular decorations: a peacock facing a kàntharos within a frame of thick red lines and thin green lines, surrounded by flowers and wreaths.<sup>66</sup> Among these four decorations, the most important are certainly the ones on the western and eastern walls. The first can be considered a self-celebration painting, for the woman portrayed has her head enclosed in a blue nimbus<sup>67</sup> surrounded by two red wreaths, which holds both strong artistic value – it highlights the face of the woman – and clear symbolic meaning – it connects undoubtedly the painting to the deceased (fig. 7).<sup>68</sup> Even though this grave is considered by many as a non-Christian one,<sup>69</sup> some other stated that the painting is supposedly the depiction of a saint,<sup>70</sup> a celebration of the defunct giving her a holy aura. This hypothesis, however, is hardly credible inasmuch in the grave no symbol, inscription or artifact has been discovered that could be identified as certainly Christian; and because in Viminacium – unlike other cities in the region such as Sirmium, Singidunum and Naissus<sup>71</sup> – we don't know of any saint or martyr especially worshipped or connected in any way to the settlement. The only certain information we can gain from this tomb, indeed, is that the woman portrayed was member of the local elite<sup>72</sup> – as inferred by the garment and the presence of the nimbus – and that the depiction of the woman in half-length can be attributed to the roman artistic tradition, for which nobles and higher class people were pictured in such way.

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<sup>63</sup> Korać 2007, 247.

<sup>64</sup> Korać 2007, 247.

<sup>65</sup> Korać 2007, 247.

<sup>66</sup> The vegetable motifs fill the space around the main depictions and, together with the peacocks and the kàntharos, give bucolic atmosphere to the painting.

<sup>67</sup> This illustration originated during the time of Antonine dynasty period and merged into the Christian art in the 4th century. It was used for conveying a message of transcendental power associated with emperors, people who had been useful for the community, gods or Christ; when used in grave paintings it was a sign of immortality for the deceased – see Ahlqvist 2001, 221; Jastrzebowska 1994.

<sup>68</sup> The nimbus here might indicate that the woman was very important for her community.

<sup>69</sup> Korać 2007, 247.

<sup>70</sup> Janicjjević 2009.

<sup>71</sup> Zeiller 1968, 105-108.

<sup>72</sup> It does not matter that the paintings were not visible from outside, because self-representations were intended to be a message to carry into the afterlife.

However, also the painting on the eastern wall – the servant pictured in full-length – is quite significant, since it reinforces the self-celebration message delivered by the other decorations in the grave. The man, painted carrying a huge tray with two loafs on it,<sup>73</sup> resembles two other portraits of servants, one in 'Tomb with Cupids', Viminacium,<sup>74</sup> and the other in a tomb in Silistra.<sup>75</sup>

Besides this highly debated sepulcher, also the relics of five monumental vaults have been unearthed in the area of Pećine and one in the necropolis of Burdelj; among those in Pećine, one comes in cruciform shape whereas the other four present multiple apses, as the one from Burdelj does. All of these constructions have been dated between the end of the III century and the V, and some of them have ruined pavements that show signs of later maintenance works. Some have advanced the hypothesis that the pavements may have been worn out by crowds of believers, thus indicating that the buildings were used for funerary rituals.<sup>76</sup> Although the usage of these structures was clearly very high and frequent, no evidence that could undoubtedly prove any affinity with Christians have been found inside them, thus they are not certainly recognizable as funerary chapels. It is more likely, indeed, that the vaults hosted the relatives of the deceased during religious celebrations of various kind. As much as it is true that occasional usage by small groups of believers wouldn't explain such bad condition of the pavements, we should also bear in mind that there were many more burials which went lost,<sup>77</sup> therefore we can likely deduce a higher turnout of believers that lasted possibly for periods longer than those examined.

Among the buildings that are considered funerary churches we can enumerate three structures with three apses discovered near the necropolis of Pećine and a building of cruciform shape. The first of triconchal vaults, dated to the reign of Constantius II,<sup>78</sup> has been found nearby a roman *villa* and contained the tomb of a woman<sup>79</sup> and the tomb of a child.<sup>80</sup> In the

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<sup>73</sup> Regarding the meaning of bread in Roman religion – see Torelli 1995.

<sup>74</sup> Korać, 2007, 261, G 160.

<sup>75</sup> Dimitrov 1958/1997; Atanasov 2007. The design of these human bodies fits perfectly in the style of Post-Constantin Roman art, for which the characters are completely disconnected from the surrounding space. The heads are very round and the eyes big and expressive, which is an anticipation of Byzantine abstract art (Borda 1958, 366); the bodies are very flat and the bodily nature is inferable only by the dispositions of the clothes. Other Examples of this kind of funerary paintings can be found in numerous Roman catacombs – see Nestori 1993.

<sup>76</sup> Zotović 1994/1995.

<sup>77</sup> Years of grave-robbery have severely compromised the relics.

<sup>78</sup> Milošević 2005, 180.

<sup>79</sup> In a lead sarcophagus – see Milošević 2005, 180.

building we can see the remains of two different pavements: the first covered the graves, whereas the second must have been built in order to replace the older one, which presents evident signs of erosion; however, cement patching can be spotted on the newer one as well.<sup>81</sup>

The second building, dated to the second half of the 4th century,<sup>82</sup> unfortunately has been found in very poor conditions and only some parts of two walls<sup>83</sup> are left of it, although the remains of a burial have been discovered inside. Just by this building, however, an area (20m x 15m) containing burials from the 12-13th century of ten men, nine women, five children and three indefinable corpses have been spotted.<sup>84</sup> This could indicate that the vault might have been very significant for the people living nearby, who perhaps used it as a funerary chapel, even though the lack of Christian finds and burials within the construction seems to suggest different usage. In the third construction<sup>85</sup> – dated between the end of the 4th century and the beginning of the 5th century<sup>86</sup> – four burials, older than the ones in the apses, have been unearthed from the central section: the tombs were separated from the rest by dividing walls and were covered by bricks of hypocaust<sup>87</sup> that worked as temporary pavement.

The last building<sup>88</sup> found in Pećine presents a cruciform shape and could be entered through a flight of steps, which leads into a central square area covered by groin vaults and surrounded by three *arcosolia* overtopped

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<sup>80</sup> Zotović 1995, 340. The rests of the body were missing; it is likely that they were stolen during a tomb-raid. The sarcophagus was made of lead and presented a hole on its cover, probably used for depositing funerary offers in the tomb.

<sup>81</sup> It is likely that the building contained many other burials, whose presence may have led to the high turnout of people that ruined the pavements.

<sup>82</sup> Mikić & Korać 2012, 185.

<sup>83</sup> Milošević 2005, 178. These walls divided the vestibule from the central hall. We can suppose that a vault covered the building, whereas we can infer its planimetry by the traces of the foundations.

<sup>84</sup> Zotović 1994, 62.

<sup>85</sup> Zotović 1995, 342. The main structure is made of clay-bricks and cement, whereas the three apses were built on it subsequently and more roughly. A demand of space higher than the one originally estimated probably is the reason behind this expansion, and the mediocre result may indicate that workers had to hurry: two burials in fact were found under the northeastern apse and three under the southeastern one. However, the expansion might have been motivated also by a matter of style, since the three apse buildings were very common in *Viminacium*.

<sup>86</sup> Zotović 1994, 73.

<sup>87</sup> Zotović 1995, 341.

<sup>88</sup> Korać 2007, 255. Scholars have found several coins in this building, which perhaps could help dating it to the second half of the 4th century.

by barrel vaults.<sup>89</sup> In this structure evidence of transit of people, reasonably for ritual purposes, can be inferred by the bevels on the stairs and the ruined pavement, on which cement patching can be easily detected.

As we can understand from the information summarized in this article, the dynamics of the development of Christianity in Viminacium are still largely unclear: there is, indeed, great discrepancy between the high value that written sources have attributed to the city as Christian center and the little archeological evidence we have found of this value.<sup>90</sup> As far as we know from historical sources, in the 4th century the city was undoubtedly a very important bishopric and even if archeology have not yet found validation of this, we can reasonably believe that further studies will prove more successful. Overall, the studies on Viminacium led us to classify the city in the group of Balkan settlements that present a necropolis equally used by Pagans and Christians, and to the discovery of an important monumental Christian tomb made in the traditional late-roman architectural style but decorated with the sign of the new religion.

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<sup>89</sup> Korać 2007, 255. This building was largely decorated and we can see traces of those illustrations on the steps, which present red strips on the borders; on the *arcosolia*, which present rests of black and green motifs; and generally all over the crypt, which was painted with polychrome motifs.

<sup>90</sup> We haven't found any relics of the bishopric from the 4th-5th century, nor any of the one from the 6th century.

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