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## RE-CONSERVATION AND REINPRETATION OF A ROMAN FRESCO FROM SIRMIIUM

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*Abstract.* – This paper deals with the re-conservation of an old conserved unit and the new iconographic analysis of a wall painting that was kept in the Museum of Srem's (Sremska Mitrovica, Serbia) storage depot. Experts from the Provincial Institute for the Protection of Cultural Monuments started but did not finish the reconstruction in the 1990s, which has led to its further deterioration. Their conservation and restoration work on these fragments were extensive and offered a wealth of extraordinary technological and iconographic information.

*Key words.* – re-conservation, wall painting, gypsum, iconography, maenad, Sirmium

The majority of wall painting fragments from various buildings on the territory of the present-day Serbia come from the Roman town of *Sirmium* (Sremska Mitrovica, fig. 1). This large urban centre kept its artistic continuity throughout a long period, from the 2<sup>nd</sup> until the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>1</sup> Sirmium was one of the capitals of the Roman Empire and was among the biggest metropolises of its time. The urban expansion of the city began at the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century and lasted until the beginning of the 5<sup>th</sup> century. The remains of the imperial palace, surrounded by walls and trenches, parts of the hippodrome, public baths, horreum, several villas and houses decorated with wall paintings and mosaics, as well as cemeteries, were found in the city.<sup>2</sup> The fragments of wall painting analysed here were discovered during the archaeological excavations within structures of a residential character in 1990. The fragments of wall paintings were not found in situ, they were found in layers of soil, dating back to the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>3</sup> Their conservation started during the 1990s but was not finished. Since then, the fragments have been moved to the storage depot of the Museum of Srem. In recent

years they deteriorated, as it did not receive a new support.

It was assumed that the depicted figure on this piece represented the goddess Diana,<sup>4</sup> and later Atalanta, or the personification of Macedonia.<sup>5</sup> The re-conservation of the painting gave a different analysis of the iconographic content.

### Original condition of the wall painting

The painting was broken into 24 parts, and its overall dimensions are 55 × 50 cm (fig. 2). The background of the assembled unit was cast in gypsum (fig. 4a) and was not reinforced with a new support. During the process, gypsum poured over the edges of some fragments (fig. 3), making that level of the fragment higher than it originally was. The edges that were

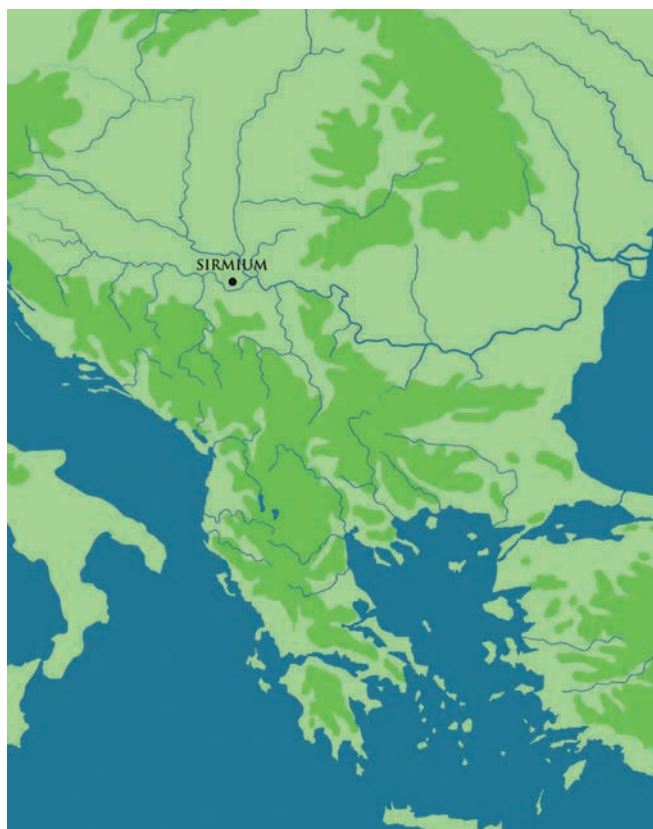
<sup>1</sup> Rogić 2018, 905.

<sup>2</sup> Mirković 2008, 84–85.

<sup>3</sup> Popović 2008, 43–45.

<sup>4</sup> Milošević 1994, 49.

<sup>5</sup> Popović 2008, 43–45.



*Fig 1. Geographical position of Sirmium*

*Сл. 1. Географски положај Сирмијума*

covered in gypsum gained a lighter colour and some fragments have moved as a result of this process.

When the unit was broken, the original appearance of the plaster was seen (fig. 4). The size and the thickness of the plaster fragments were different. There was a visible difference between two plaster layers, but it is assumed that there were more, as the plaster was levelled (making it thinner by removing a major part of arriccio) during a previous conservation process. The intonaco aggregate is made of fine sand, while the arriccio contains sand of coarser granulation, with visible traces of straw (fig. 4b). The intonaco surface was smoothed over.

The wall painting was executed using the fresco technique, which can be deduced based on the visibility of the hairs of the brush that was used for painting. These brush traces on the surface of the coloured layer were of great help when determining the position of the fragments. On the coloured layer, some surface dust and occasional calcification are present. There were some mistakes during the previous assembling of the fragments, the most visible of which is a fragment with a foot set next to a face with the sole turned upwards (fig. 5).

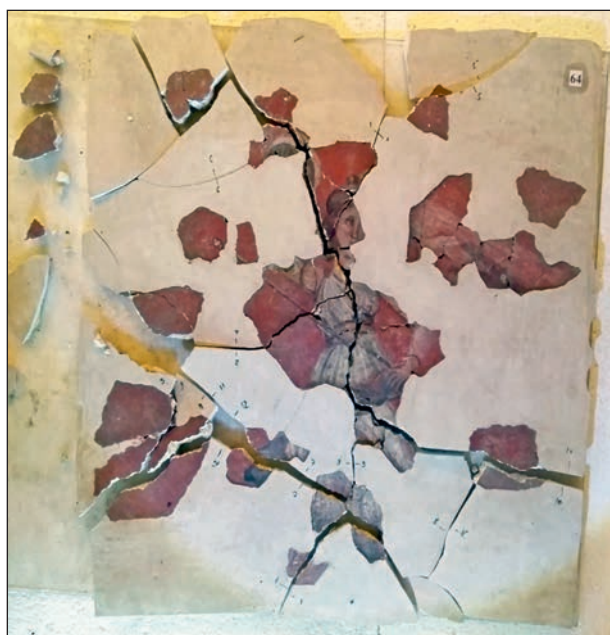
#### **The conservation and restoration work<sup>6</sup>**

As there were many inconsistencies with the earlier assembling of the fragments, the gypsum had to be removed, so that the fragments could be set correctly. Wet compresses were used to soften the gypsum. The gypsum removal process itself was a long one, and performed carefully so as to prevent the original fragments from breaking (fig. 6). After the removal of the gypsum, the fragments were classified according to their pictorial content and set in a large wooden case with sand to make the assembling and levelling easier (fig. 7a–b). In this case, only those parts whose edges were clearly linked to one another were placed together. The remaining parts were set some distance apart, with an assumption made regarding their correct position.

The coloured layer was consolidated using a 3% solution of Paraloid B72 in acetone. The fragments were stuck together with acrylic glue, and the lacunes

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<sup>6</sup> The re-conservation and restoration of the unit was performed by Kristina Ponjavić, Sanja Blagojević and Dragana Gavrilović.



*Fig 2. Found state of the wall painting*

*Сл. 2. Забичено стање зидне слике*



between the fragments were filled in with a layer of temporary plaster (fig. 8). The face of this unit was secured with the application of facing<sup>7</sup> in order to secure its successful move to a new support.

The levelling of the background, or thinning of the plaster from the original fragments, was necessary as the thickness of the plaster varied, after which the fragments were consolidated.<sup>8</sup> The original plaster was reinforced with new plaster, made of sand and slaked lime. After drying, the unit was set on a new support – an aluminium honeycomb panel (43.5 × 65 cm).

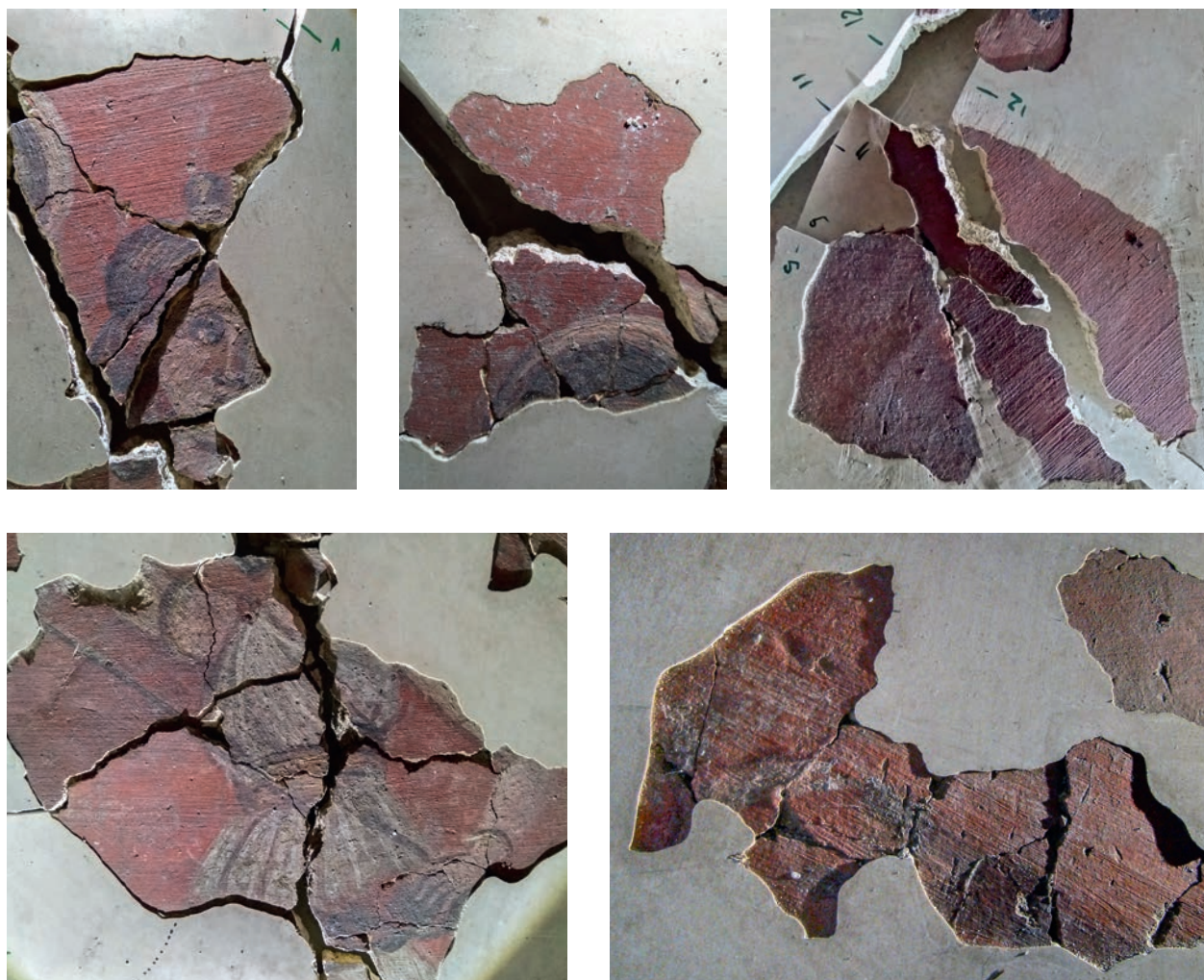
The advantage of an aluminium honeycomb composite support in comparison to other supports is its

durability, solidity and ease of handling. Before this, in conservation works on wall paintings in Sirmium, wooden supports were used.<sup>9</sup> Based on the processed conserved material from the Museum of Srem, we can conclude that gypsum or marble powder were most commonly used for the new plaster.

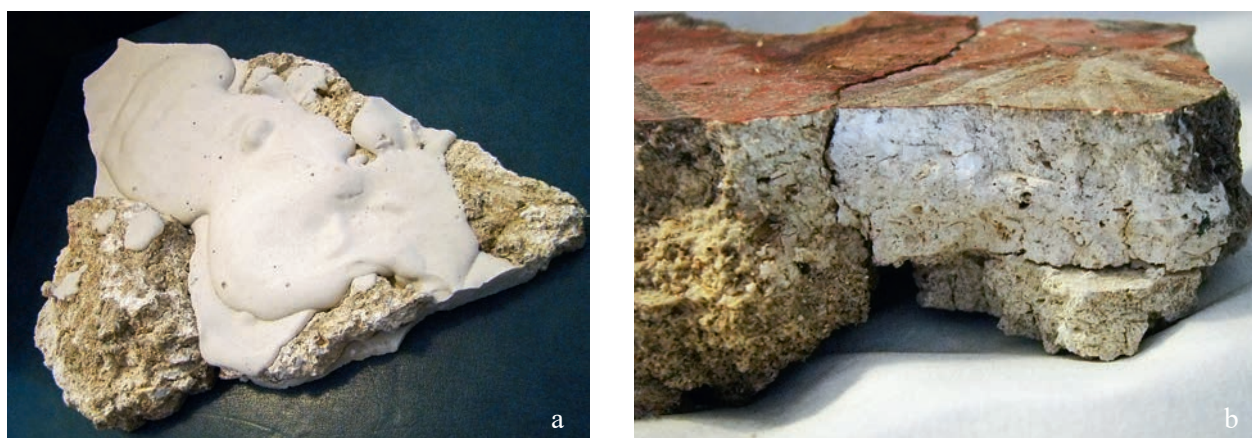
<sup>7</sup> An application of protective paper or fabric with an appropriate adhesive to the face of a painting.

<sup>8</sup> Primal WS 24 was used for consolidation.

<sup>9</sup> The Provincial Institute for the Protection of Cultural Monuments, Novi Sad.



*Fig 3. Appearance of the fragments in raking light*  
Сл. 3. Изглед фрагментів під бочним освітленням



*Fig. 4. a) Appearance of the back of the fragment; b) Appearance of the original plaster*  
Сл. 4. а) Изглед йолеїине фрагментів; б) Изглед ориїнальної малїєра



Fig. 5. Fragment showing the foot turned upwards, set next to the face

Сл. 5. Спљошало које је окренуто наопако и које се налази поред лица

When the entire unit was turned around, the temporary facing was removed, then the decorative plaster was applied.<sup>10</sup> For the filling of the missing parts in the painted layer, slaked lime and finely sifted marble powder were used. After this process, the surface was retouched with aquarelle using the *tratteggio* technique (fig. 9).

### Iconographical interpretation

The iconographic analysis of the re-conserved fresco has given us a reinterpretation of the preserved motifs. Since the figure is fragmented and the majority of the composition is missing, it is not possible to comprehend it in its entirety. On the red background there are parts of a graceful looking standing figure. The face is turned to the viewer and is not completely preserved. The eye on the left is visible, and the figure is looking to the right. Above the eye, a short, thin eyebrow is painted. The nose is modeled with a mixture of ochre and white and the shadow and contour are brown. The hair is curled beneath the ears and slightly below the chin line, while there is a bun on the top of the head, wrapped with a white band. The hair was

painted in brown lazure, with black brush strokes used to render the curves of the hair. The lighter parts were painted using short brush strokes of ochre.

Carnation on the face and body is made using a pastose mixture of colours giving them a pink nuance, while the modelling of the facial forms was done by addition white, and accented with white. The drawing of the nose, eyes, eyebrows, lips, chin, arms and legs is in brown while the lines of the eyelids, irises, nostrils and the corners of the mouths are accentuated with short black strokes.

The figure is wearing a long white dress, with a wide ochre belt emphasising the thin waist. The dress is pinned on the right shoulder with a fibula. The dress shows gentle light and dark wrinkles in thin strokes that follow the upper body line, while the lower part is depicted as swaying, which gives the effect of a smooth, light cloth.

<sup>10</sup> For the decorative plaster and edges, sand and stone aggregate of finer granulation were used as filler, while slaked lime was used as a binder.



*Fig. 6. Gypsum removal process*

*Сл. 6. Уклањање гипса*



*Fig. 7. a) Fragments set in a sand-filled tub; b) Fragment with a painted foot*

*Сл. 7. а) Постављање фрагмената у коријо са њеском; б) Фрагмент са насликаним стојојалом*



*Fig. 8. Connecting the fragments using temporary plaster*

*Сл. 8. Повезивање фрагмената у целину њомоћу њривременој малтера*



*Fig. 9. Wall painting appearance after conservation work*

*Fig. 10. Top of the stick on the wall painting*

*Сл. 9. Изглед зидне слике након конзерваторских радова*

*Сл. 10. Врх штипаја на зидној слици*

The right arm is raised and bent at the elbow, holding a partially preserved round object. The item is painted in brown with a white rim and suggests a drum or a tambourine (fig. 9). Diagonally across the figure there is a stick with shape on the top that cannot be precisely defined, because the ochre paint has fallen off considerably, but it could represent a small pinecone (fig. 10). The lower part of the stick is covered by an arm, with a golden bracelet on the forearm. The same type of jewellery is seen on the right upper arm.

Although it was assumed that the figure represented Diana or Atalanta,<sup>11</sup> the re-conservation of this female figure opened the possibility for further interpretation. Atalanta was not a common motif in Roman wall painting. Atalanta and Maleager were represented on the fresco from the House of Centaur (Pompeii, 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, north tablinum wall).<sup>12</sup> Atalanta was depicted with a helmet, spears and a quiver, whereas the

head of the Calydonian Boar lies on the ground. On a mosaic from Halicarnassus, Atalanta is shown on horseback (found in a Roman villa in Halicarnassus, present day Bodrum, 3<sup>rd</sup>–4<sup>th</sup> century AD)<sup>13</sup> in a short dress (chiton), holding a spear and a quiver on her shoulder. A Greek sculpture of Atalanta from the Vatican Museum<sup>14</sup> shows her as a young girl in a chiton, with a palm branch next to her (1<sup>st</sup> century BC).

The representations of Diana in Roman paintings are numerous, and the most common one is of her in a short chiton. She is depicted with a quiver, bow and

<sup>11</sup> Milošević 1994, 49; Popović 2008, 43–45.

<sup>12</sup> Bragantini, Sampaolo 2013, 226.

<sup>13</sup> The fresco is in the British Museum, catalogue no. 1857, 1220.439.

<sup>14</sup> Vatican Museum, inv. no. 2784.

arrow, a torch, a deer and a small altar. On a fresco found in the Villa Arianna (Pompeii, 1<sup>st</sup> century BC), Diana is shown with a bow and arrow, wearing a long dress,<sup>15</sup> while Diana on a pedestal in the painting in the National Archaeological Museum in Naples (1<sup>st</sup> century BC)<sup>16</sup> is depicted with a bow and arrow, wearing a short dress and boots.<sup>17</sup> On the north wall of the Via Livenza hypogeum in Rome, Diana is seen hunting, in a short tunic.<sup>18</sup> In sculpture and mosaic, she is commonly shown in short dresses, with a bow and arrow.<sup>19</sup>

Thus, another similarity was noticed when analysing the figural representation from Sirmium – the similarity with Dionysus seen on a mosaic from the House of the Masks (Delos, 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC).<sup>20</sup> The main points of comparison were the dress, patera and thyrsus. Dionysus is wearing a two-coloured chiton, tied under the chest. He is holding a patera in one hand and a thyrsus in the other.<sup>21</sup> The thyrsus is a stick that, according to the myth, was used by Dionysus and his entourage to revive nature.<sup>22</sup> However, as the representation from Sirmium has undoubtedly female attributes and decorative jewellery characteristic of women, the research of the iconography was pointed towards someone from Dionysus' entourage.

What causes doubt in determining the Sirmium representation is the stick ending in a very specific ornament. Dionysus' (Bacchus') thyrsus is presented in so many different ways, both in painting and mosaic. It can be seen as a stick with a pinecone on the top; a stick with twigs and bands; or as a spear decorated on both ends with floral motifs, as in the mosaic "The triumph of Bacchus", from Tunis.<sup>23</sup> It can further be seen as a golden spear with a circle and bands beneath it – as is the case with the mosaic from Algiers, "Dionysus' Triumph" (3<sup>rd</sup> century AD);<sup>24</sup> or simply as a spear with a star-shaped ornament and bands, as in the mosaic "Dionysus' Triumph" from The House of Poseidon, in Zeugma.<sup>25</sup> It is quite possible that the decorative bands existed on the figure from Sirmium's staff and that these fragments were not preserved. Furthermore, we should consider artistic freedom in the presentation.

If we assume that the figure from Sirmium represents a female deity, the staff in her hand might be a sceptre. Sceptres of such a shape are found on the mosaic "The Judgment of Paris", from the Roman villa in Antioch (2<sup>nd</sup> century AD), where Athens, Hera and Aphrodite are shown.<sup>26</sup> Aphrodite and Hera hold sceptres similar to those from Sirmium. On a medallion

in The House of Marcus Fabius Rufus, in Pompeii, there is Aphrodite with a tiara and sceptre (1<sup>st</sup> century AD). Juno is presented in sculpture in a hieratic pose, with a sceptre in one hand and a libation dish in the other – as is visible on the marble sculpture from The Louvre (2<sup>nd</sup> century AD).<sup>27</sup>

The figure from the Sirmium fresco is too playful to be any of the goddesses, the figure is characterised by a specific movement of the arms, which is further extended to the long and breezy dress. Such a playful motion is seen in depictions of maenads in painting, mosaic and the decoration of objects. According to the myth, the maenads are Dionysus' followers, frenzied women in trance, strong, violent and sexually deviant. Their eccentric craze was explained as being influenced by the use of alcohol and drugs. They are seen crowned with ivy, shrouded with fawn or panther skin, often wearing elegant dresses. Their attributes are a fawn, a thyrsus, a torch and a tambourine,<sup>28</sup> but they are also seen with other musical instruments.

In the case of Cicero's villa, playful maenads were shown, some carrying a thyrsus, and some tambourines and hand cymbals (fig. 11).<sup>29</sup> Another maenad with an instrument – a double flute – is seen on a mosaic from a house in Antioch.<sup>30</sup> She is entertaining Dionysus and Heracles during a drinking competition. The maenad is wearing a long tunic, gathered below the chest, then falling freely to the ground.

<sup>15</sup> Valladares 2007, 75.

<sup>16</sup> The fresco is in the Naples, National Archaeological Museum, inv. no. 9301. It was found in *Casa di Diana* or *Casa della Danzatrice*.

<sup>17</sup> Bragantini, Sampaolo 2013, 191.

<sup>18</sup> Baldassarre et al. 2002, 375.

<sup>19</sup> Examples are a sculpture of Diana from the Louvre – Inv. MR 152 and from the Vatican Museum Inv. no. 42; Diana on a mosaic from Tunis, 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD, Bardo National Museum. Inv. No. 2384.

<sup>20</sup> Dunbabin 1999, 37

<sup>21</sup> Janićijević 2019, 127–130.

<sup>22</sup> Cermanović, Srejšević 1996, 971.

<sup>23</sup> Fradier 2007, 155.

<sup>24</sup> Blanchard-Lemee 2001, 537.

<sup>25</sup> Ōnal 2003, 19.

<sup>26</sup> Dunbabin 2010, 163.

<sup>27</sup> Louvre, Inventaire CP 6409 (n<sup>o</sup> usuel Ma 2283).

<sup>28</sup> Cermanović, Srejšević 1966, 343.

<sup>29</sup> Ciardelo 2012, 140–149; Now in Naples, National Archaeological Museum, inv. no. 9297.

<sup>30</sup> Talgram, Weis 2004, 51.



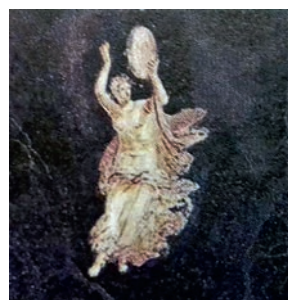
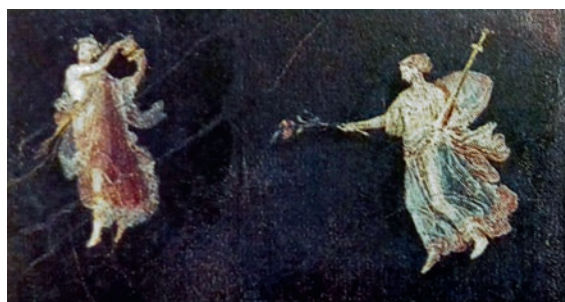


Fig 11. Maenads from Cicero's Villa  
 (After: Bragantini, Sampaolo 2013, fig. 20b)

Сл. 11. Менаге из Цицеронове виле  
 (преузето из: Bragantini, Sampaolo 2013, fig. 20b)



Fig 12. a) Mosaic from Stara Zagora  
 (After: Камшиева 2014, 19);  
 b) Maenad from Murecine (The photo is used by  
 kind courtesy of the Archaeological Park of Pompeii;  
 su concessione del Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali  
 e per il Turismo – Parco Archeologico di Pompei)

Сл. 12. а) Мозаик из Старе Загоре  
 (преузето из: Камшиева 2014, 19);  
 б) Менада из Мурецине (Фотографија се користи  
 љубазношћу Археолошкој парка Помпеји)

A segment of Dionysus' procession is seen on a floor mosaic in a residential unit from Stara Zagora (Augusta Traiana-Beroe) in Bulgaria. On the preserved part of an emblem, a figural scene of the procession is depicted, with Maenads led by a satyr in ecstasy (fig. 12a). The maenad on the left side is wearing her hair in a bun on the top of her head. Her arms are raised, and she is holding castanets (*crotalum*). The other Maenad, leaning towards the satyr, wears an ivy crown, with long hair and carries a rattle. They both have long dresses, pinned on one shoulder. The mosaic dates to the third quarter of the 4<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>31</sup> These Maenads are, both in style and iconography, closest to the representation from Sirmium.

In triclinium C of the complex found on the site Murecine or Moregine, outside the walls of Pompeii (1<sup>st</sup> century AD), a maenad is painted in a whirling

dress and a cloak, a thyrsus in one hand and in the other a round object, probably a drum, on a red background (fig. 12b).<sup>32</sup> A similar example is a maenad dancing in a breezy ochre dress with a white cloak, also carrying a thyrsus and a tambourine (*tympanum*). It was found on a wall of the triclinium in Pompeii (1<sup>st</sup> century BC and 1<sup>st</sup> century AD).<sup>33</sup>

Dionysus' triumph over India is depicted on a mosaic from Neos Paphos,<sup>34</sup> where his entourage consists of two maenads on the left. The maenad on

<sup>31</sup> Kamisheva 2014, 18–19.

<sup>32</sup> Ciro Nappo 2008, Fig 16.

<sup>33</sup> The House of Nevillius, Pompeii. The wall painting is now kept in Naples, National Archaeological Museum, inv. no. 9298.

<sup>34</sup> Dunbabin 2010, 227.

the far-left has a thyrsus in one hand, and a Dionysian casket and religious objects, whereas the other one carries a libation bowl. The central part is Dionysus' triumph over India, with slaves and leopards. The maenad on the left is standing next to a kneeling slave and she carries hand cymbals. On the mosaic from Kissamos (3<sup>rd</sup> century AD), a maenad is depicted with a tambourine, standing behind Dionysus.<sup>35</sup> Dionysus and his entourage were represented on a mosaic from Cologne, where the maenads are half naked and playful, with an instrument in their hands.<sup>36</sup>

A dancing bacchante leading Dionysus in a tiger-chariot managed by Nike is shown on a mosaic "Dionysus' return from India" (Euphrates villa, Zeugma, 2<sup>nd</sup>–3<sup>rd</sup> century AD).<sup>37</sup> The mosaic from Sousse (Tunis) shows a glorious procession of Dionysus, with a maenad in front of him and the goddess Nike, dancing and carrying tambourine.<sup>38</sup>

The identification of the thyrsus and the tambourine of the Sirmium wall painting were of paramount importance for the correct interpretation of the figure as a maenad.

### Conclusion

Extensive works on conservation and restoration jobs are usually parts of big conservation projects, but often, due to the lack of funds, it often happens that the archaeological treasures in museum depots remain hidden from the eyes of both the public and researchers, or that conservation procedures start with insufficient funds and are not finished in time. The conservation of the wall painting from Sirmium described in this paper started at the end of the last century but was not finished, and it was subsequently broken. Its re-conservation was completed in 2018.

The importance of this re-conservation is in the prevention of further damage to the unit and that appropriate protection was used. It is also important that certain fragments have been now moved to their proper places, as was the case with the foot set next to a face, this significantly narrows the composition.

With the correct conservation and restoration of the whole wall painting, a reinterpretation of the iconographic content was enabled. The painted figure is refined and with plenty of details, as is seen with the facial lines, the hair style, jewellery and the hand. All this suggests that it was probably painted in the central panel, as it is small in dimensions and the painter could easily deal with the details, or the figure could have been a part of a larger composition.

The plaster that serves as a base is smoothed over and was painted using the fresco technique. This can be concluded based on the visibility of the brush strokes on the red background and in the fine layers in the representation itself.

Previously, with the interpretations of this painting, it had been suggested that this figural representation is wearing a short tunic, but with the newly set material we have concluded that she is wearing a long dress. A band around her head is also mentioned, which cannot be seen as such with more careful analysis; the band is actually around her hair bun. The foot that was placed next to her face was assumed to be a crescent moon.<sup>39</sup> The figure in the painting was seen as the goddess Diana, Atalanta or a personification of Macedonia.<sup>40</sup> The circular object in her hand was characterised as a shield.<sup>41</sup> This object is far too small in circumference to serve as a shield, and even its position is questionable, given that shields are not usually held so high.

Following the iconographic analysis in this work, we have reached a different interpretation of the shown figure. Atalanta is mostly shown with a bow and arrow, a quiver, a spear and in a short tunic, which is also the case with Diana.<sup>42</sup> Both are mythological figures linked specifically with hunting and nature, which is not seen in the case of the Sirmium figure. The figure from the Sirmium representation could rather be associated with maenads.<sup>43</sup> This female figure could hold a stylised thyrsus, or a decorated staff in one hand, and a drum in the other<sup>44</sup> or a tambourine while dancing, which is suggested by her arm and dress movement, but also by other attributes.

Chronologically, stylistically and territorially, the closest parallel is with the mosaic from Stara Zagora. One of the maenads had a hair bun just like the figure from Sirmium. She has a long dress, her arms are raised, holding castanet-like objects.<sup>45</sup> Another analo-

<sup>35</sup> Markoulaki 2011, 54.

<sup>36</sup> Dunbabin 2010, 83.

<sup>37</sup> Darmon 2011, 40.

<sup>38</sup> Fradier 2007, 155.

<sup>39</sup> Popović 2008, 43–45.

<sup>40</sup> Милошевић 1994, 49; Popović 2008, 43–45.

<sup>41</sup> Popović 2008, 43–45.

<sup>42</sup> Simon, Bauchhenss 1984, 792–855.

<sup>43</sup> Simon, Simon 1997, 780–803.

<sup>44</sup> Di Giulio 1991, 2–7.

<sup>45</sup> Камишева 2014, 18–19.

gous example is the representation from the site of Murecine or Moregine (1<sup>st</sup> century). On the red background, a maenad is painted, also wearing a long dress, with a swaying robe, holding a thyrsus in one hand and a drum in the other.<sup>46</sup>

Based on the analogies, the red background, drums or tambourine, stylised thyrsus and the playful movement depicted, the representation from Sirmium has a Dionysian character. This leads to the conclusion that the female figure is most likely a member of Dionysus'

entourage, a maenad. The composition probably had more figures, however that cannot be confirmed due to the lack of (preserved) fragments.

The re-conservation process has, once more, proved the importance of multidisciplinary work in archaeological science. The practical conservation of the Sirmium fresco allowed its new interpretation, showing the necessity of careful conservation of an archaeological find following its iconographical content.

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<sup>46</sup> Ciro Nappo 2008, Fig. 16.

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## РЕКОНЗЕРВАЦИЈА И РЕИНТЕРПРЕТАЦИЈА РИМСКЕ ФРЕСКЕ ИЗ СИРМИЈУМА

*Кључне речи.* – реконзервација, зидно сликарство, гипс, иконографија, менада, Сирмијум

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Рад се бави реконзервацијом фрагмената римске зидне слике као и новом интерпретацијом њеног иконографског садржаја. Конзервација ових фрагмената започета је током деведесетих година прошлог века и тада није била завршена. У међувремену је целина поломљена, јер није имала потпорни носач, те је поновна конзервација изведена 2018. године. Значај ове реконзервације огледа се не само у томе што је спречено даље пропадање експоната извођењем адекватне заштите већ и у томе што су поједини фрагменти враћени на своја места, попут стопала које је било постављено поред лица, што је композиција знатно сужена и што су делови хаљине распоређени у логичну целину.

У литератури је наведено да је фигурална представа у краткој туници, а поновном обрадом материјала дошло се до закључка да је она у дугој хаљини. Такође, поменута је трака која иде око главе, али пажљивом анализом она није уочена. За стопало које је било постављено поред лица претпостављено је да је у питању месечев срп. Иако се за ову представу до сада сматрало да приказује Дијану или Аталанту, она би у ствари могла да представља Менаду – која би могла држати елегантни тирс и даире у рукама док игра, на шта сугерише вртлог покрета руку и хаљине.

Најближе паралеле налазимо у мозаику из Старе Загоре, као и на фресци са локалитета *Murecine* или *Moregine*.