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REFLECTIONS OF THE NORTH ADRIATIC STONE-CARVING WORKSHOPS IN EARLY MEDIEVAL SISAK

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Abstract. The paper contributes to the interpretation of five fragments of early medieval sculpture and two capitals from the 5th century found around Sisak. Through the historical context and the analysis of the formal elements of early medieval sculpture, the authors discuss influences that came to the Pannonia Inferior from the cultural centres in the northern Adriatic, thus reflecting the specific circumstances in which Sisak is mentioned again after the late antique period in written sources of the early 9th century.

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Ancient Siscia, as the centre of the province of *Pannonia Savia* and the seat of bishops in the late antique period, met up with the turbulent migration period as a developed urban centre which, despite the decline of certain features of city life, still maintained its significance throughout the entire period of the early Middle Ages (Gračanin & Bilogrivić, 2014, pp. 1–26). In the 9th century, Siscia was still mentioned as a *civitas*, while the Pannonian Duke Ljudevit Posavski had his stronghold in the city or its vicinity during the rebellion against the Franks. The city most likely continued to be the administrative centre of Pannonia Inferior during the rest of the 9th and through the 10th century (Filipec, 2015, pp. 160–161). Although material remains from the early medieval period are rare, their discovery is even more valuable because, despite their sparsity, they testify the existence of a certain life standard in the city in the historical context that we generally know very little about. Among others, the findings include two early medieval capitals and five pre-Romanesque sculptural fragments similar to the sculpture from Apennine peninsula, Istria and coastal Dalmatian cities dated to the end of the 8th century, and the ones from the area of the medieval Croatian state from the mid-9th and 10th century.

These fragments are kept in the Archaeological Museum in Zagreb, formerly the National Museum in Zagreb, where they were spotted by Josip Brunšmid at the end of the 19th century (Brunšmid, 1910–1911, p. 65; 1912, pp. 132–133, 137–138) (Fig. 1). Along with short descriptions that include information on dimensions, material and the state of preservation, Brunšmid recorded that four of the five fragments (published under numbers 791, 792, 793 and 806) were of questionable origin, i.e. that “they may be from Sisak, but the provenance is not exactly established”, while for one fragment (number 805) he wrote that it was found in Sisak. He dated all fragments to the period from the 10th to 12th century (Brunšmid, 1912, pp. 132–133, 137–138). In the context of Croatian early medieval patrimony, the greatest value of these fragments lies in the fact that they are part of a group of interlace sculpture found in the continental part of today’s Croatia, which in comparison to similar fragments from Dalmatia

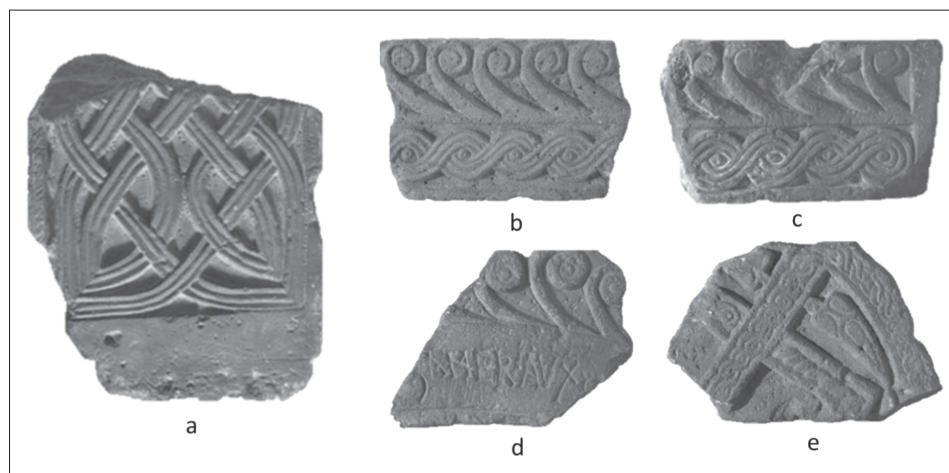


Fig. 1. a) fragment of the pilaster from Sisak (according to Filipec, 2010, p. 260); b–e) fragments whose exact provenance has not been determined, but it is assumed that they could have been found in Sisak or the Sisak area (according to Filipec, 2010, p. 260)

and Istria, is very scarce.⁴ In 1930, Ljubo Karaman enlisted them as evidence of the migration of stonemasons and the artistic influences from the Adriatic towards the continent, in relation to the “*artifices et murarii*” that were sent to Duke Ljudevit’s court around 821 by the Patriarch Fortunatus of Grado, with the task to fortify Sisak and protect it from the Franks (Karaman, 1930, pp. 108, 118). However, in 1948, after the discovery of two fragments of the architrave from the church of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Gora in Lobor, Karaman questioned their origin proposed by Brunšmid and, based on the similarity of the decorative patterns, he constructed the hypothesis that they could also have been brought to Zagreb from Lobor (Karaman, 1948, pp. 109–110). Also, based on the selection of motifs and the manner of their design, which he attributed to the later development period of interlace sculpture, he dated them all to the 11th century (Karaman, 1948, p. 110; 1952, p. 60). Anđela Horvat believed that the fragments could have been created before or after the uprising of Duke Ljudevit in 821. As arguments for the earlier dating, she referred to the hypotheses about the wave of Christianization of Pannonia Inferior as well as the record about foreign builders and stonemasons having been sent to Sisak. However, she concluded that the fragments probably date from the period after the uprising, since the uncertain times during and immediately after the riots were not at all favourable for construction and furnishing of churches. She

⁴ Compare: Ante Milošević (2000), “Pannonia” chapter and other chapters in the catalogue.

assumed that the “early Croatian” church was located in Sisak, because it must have been built of stone that was available from the ruins of the ancient city. She considered this construction project to be a product of cultural relations between Dalmatian and Pannonian Croatia and a proof of connection with the Dalmatian church organization (Horvat, 1954, pp. 97–98). Since the numerous archaeological campaigns in the Sisak area in the 20th century did not result in the finding of a single stone fragment that could be linked to previously known parts of liturgical furniture based on stylistic criteria, the interest in their study decreased. Most researchers mainly paraphrased Brunšmid’s text from 1912, referring to the conclusions by Karaman and Horvat.⁵ The origin of the entire group of the considered fragments, together with those found in Lobar, was thus chronologically placed in the 11th century and observed in the context of ecclesiastical and political connections with the medieval Croatian state, that is the diffusion of artistic impulses from Dalmatia towards Pannonia in the advanced pre-Romanesque, or early Romanesque period. The incentive to change the perception and way of thinking about stone liturgical furniture from Pannonia came from the research for the exhibition “Croats and Carolingians” in 2000. Although only four stone fragments were published in the catalog—two from Lobar, one from Sisak and one from an unknown site (Milošević, 2000, pp. 91–92 (II.13 and II.14), 104 (II.40), 115–116 (II.60))—their dating was moved to the first half of the 9th century. Thus, new theories were developed about development of pre-Romanesque style in the continental part of today’s Croatia. Analysing the stylistic characteristics of the decorative elements and inscriptions of the two architrave fragments from Lobar, Vedrana Delonga pointed out their similarity with the pictorial and epigraphic examples of similar chancel screens fragments from Veneto, Istria and some coastal areas of the Croatian Dukedom, from the first three decades of the 9th century. She concluded that they should be observed in the context of Carolingian missionary activity in Pannonia Inferior (Delonga, 2000, pp. 91–92). Nikola Jakšić noticed the characteristic tripartite division of the fragments’ front surface, which is found on sculpture in the northern Adriatic and Istria at the beginning of the 9th century, and which he also recognized on fragments from the Trogir area (the area of the activity of the Stonework workshop from Trogir). He reopened the hypothesis that the stonemasons and workshops in Pannonia could have been connected with the Grado’s Patriarch Fortunatus (Jakšić, 2000, p. 207). However, the only fragment whose provenance could be linked with more certainty to Sisak, the

⁵ In order to depict the historical circumstances of Sisak from the “old Croatian” time, Zdenko Vinski (1970, p. 47) briefly mentioned the considered fragments. Neven Budak (1994, p. 172) cited them as evidence of the Frankish Christianization of the peripheral parts of the Pannonian Plain from the beginning of the 9th century, while Marija Buzov (2004, p. 465) touched upon them in the context of the discussion on historical continuity and discontinuity in Siscia.

one published by Brunšmid in 1912 under number 805 (Brunšmid, 1912, p. 137), remained somewhat neglected in the catalogue (Simoni, 2000, p. 104). In 2007, the Archaeological Museum in Zagreb organized an exhibition on pre-Romanesque and Romanesque sculpture from the sites between the Sava and the Drava rivers, and the mentioned fragments were included in the exhibition catalogue (Goss, 2007, pp. 20, 94–95, 98–99). It was the occasion which most comprehensively presented medieval fragments from the region, but it did not provide any new information about the sculpture which are considered in this paper. The capitals from Sisak, which Brunšmid published in 1911, have remained completely unnoticed by the scientific public until today.

The stone fragment from Sisak (Fig. 1.a) has been described in the literature, from Brunšmid's publication until today, as part of a chancel panel, while in fact it is part of a pilaster. On the left side, along the entire height of the fragment, has been preserved the lateral groove, in which the panel was inserted, that clearly indicates the function of the fragment. It is broken at the top and damaged on the left side. On its lower part, a large section of the undecorated surface with a projection that was wedged into the base on the floor of the church has been preserved. The decoration of the front is made up of a complex interweaving of threefold ribbons, which in the middle form vertical rows of antithetically placed pretzel-like motifs. Furthermore, the right side of the stone block is cut flat, which indicates that it functioned as the ending element of a chancel screen and was located next to the passage to the sanctuary. The decorative field is bordered with smooth slats. The right side is better preserved and the interlace ends next to it, while on the left side where the edge is more damaged, the continuous flow of interlaced ribbons and the logical completeness of the chosen motif do not leave the possibility of its multiplication or continuation into a wider network of the eventual main field of the panel, which also confirms that the fragment in question was part of a pilaster. We assume that researchers who have written about the Sisak fragment so far were led to the wrong conclusion about its function by the unusually large width of 48 cm.⁶ Such pilasters are very rare, and only a few examples are known, for example, in the Istrian pre-Romanesque churches (Fig. 2).⁷ All of them belonged to the ensembles with fairly large altar screens. This feature provides element for a hypothesis that the church in Sisak could have housed such a liturgical installation.

Based on a visual comparison of the stone surfaces, Brunšmid asserted that the Sisak pilaster and one of the two fragments of the architrave⁸ (Fig. 1.c) were

⁶ The width of pilasters usually varies between 15 and 30 cm.

⁷ Nikolina Belošević, 2019, catalogues: I.53 (Pula), XII.8 (Brijuni), XXX.3 (Marčana); Matejčić & Mustač, 2014, pp. 210–212, cat. 73 and 74 – Novigrad.

⁸ Brunšmid describes them as parts of a portal frame.



Fig. 2. Istrian examples of large-width pilasters: a) ex-Cathedral, Novigrad – w. 58.5 cm; b) ex-Cathedral, Novigrad – w. 62 cm; c) Cathedral of St. Mary (?), Pula – w. 40 cm; d) St. Mary, Brijuni – w. 46.5 cm (photo by N. Belošević)

made of yellow sandstone quarried in the mountains near Petrinja⁹, which could indicate that they were part of the same construction or renovation project. The frontal of the aforementioned architrave was divided into two zones. The upper one is decorated with a series of hooks with large heads on a high single leg, and the lower with a neatly carved two interlaced threefold ribbons with half-spheres inserted in the folds. Morphologically identical, but of a higher quality in execution, the decoration is also preserved on another piece of architrave (Fig. 1.b), which corresponds to the previous one in terms of dimensions, but is carved in “whitish sandstone” (Brunšmid, 1912, p. 133), abundant among the ancient ruins of Siscia.¹⁰ An equally regularly carved interlace with half-spheres in folds is found on a fragment of the gable of the altar screen from Lobar (Fig. 3.a), which is why it was assumed that both fragments were carved by the same group of stonemasons (Filipec, 2015, pp. 250–251).¹¹ Since direct analogies to such interlacing on fragments mostly dated to the end of the 8th or the beginning of the 9th century are found in the historical region of *Venetia et*

⁹ Anđela Horvat (1954, p. 97) has already pointed out that Brunšmid’s assessment of the type of material used to make the fragments is based only on a visual analysis of the surface of the stone fragments, and that accurate data on the provenance of the raw material could only be obtained by chemical analysis of the core of the stone blocks. Such an analysis has not been done to date.

¹⁰ Krešimir Filipec (2015, p. 259) assumes that the fragments of whitish sandstone could have been carved from ancient spolia.

¹¹ Filipec (2015, pp. 250–251) brings analogies in Slovenia, in the vicinity of Maribor and the area of the Diocese of Petovija.



Fig. 3. Fragments of the architrave from the Church of Our Lady of Gora in Lobar (according to Milošević, 2000, pp. 91–92)

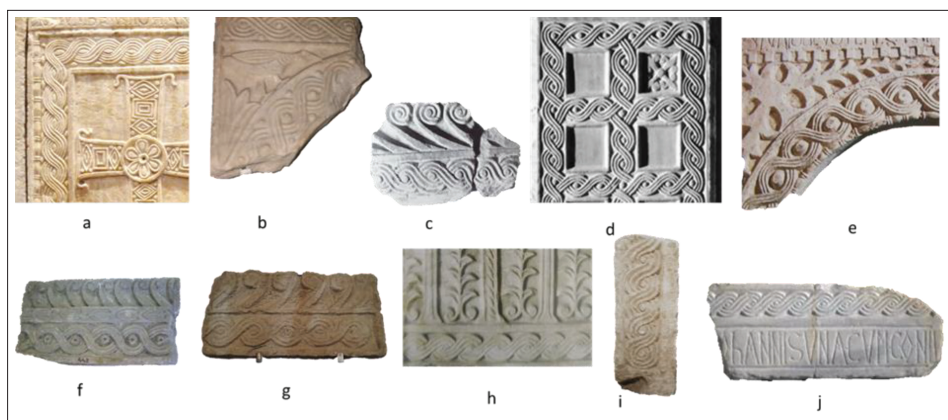


Fig. 4. Examples of interlace with half-spheres in folds: a) Ratchis's altar (detail), Cividale (photo by N. Belošević); b) ciborium arcade (detail), Sta. Maria in Sylvis, Sesto al Reghena (according to Lambert, 2004, p. 93); c) fragment of the architrave, Sta. Eufemia, Grado (according to Tagliaferri, 1981, T-CCXIII); d) Piltruda's plaque (detail), Cividale (http://www.tempietolongobardo.it/_it/sarcofago_piltrude.asp); e) arcade of Mauricius's ciborium (detail), ex-Cathedral, Novigrad (photo by N. Belošević); f) part of the architrave, Cathedral of St. Mary, Pula (photo by N. Belošević); g) part of the architrave, ex-Cathedral, Osor (photo by N. Belošević); h) chancel panel (detail) Cathedral of St. Anastasia, Zadar (according to Josipović, 2013, T-VI/4); i) fragment of pilaster, ex-Cathedral, Biograd na moru (photo by N. Belošević); j) fragment of the architrave, St. Mary, Kotor (according to Zornija, 2014, A. 1b. 12/2)

Histria (Fig. 4.a–f) and the coastal towns of Dalmatia (Fig. 4.g–j),¹² and not in the territory of the Croatian Dukedom, it is not excluded that the first impulses of the pre-Romanesque artistic repertoire reached Pannonia precisely from the northern Adriatic. In this context, it is certainly worth reconsidering the hypothesis put forward some time ago by Nikola Jakšić that the appearance of some design solutions, whose source can be recognized in the aforementioned Adriatic regions, could in Pannonia be connected with the activity of the Patriarch Fortunatus of Grado, who in the second decade of the 9th century sent stone-masons to Duke Ljudevit, and who moved from Veneto and Istria to Byzantine Dalmatia (Jakšić, 2000, p. 207). Jakšić's hypothesis, admittedly, refers to the characteristic design of the architrave, with a tripartite division of the front (Fig. 5) that were found on the sites of the churches furnished by the Trogir stonework workshop (Jakšić, 1999, p. 284; Josipović, 2013, pp. 85–102). Significantly, however, is that one such architrave was also discovered in Lobar (Fig. 3.b). The lower part of this architrave is decorated by a double threefold interlace, and at the very left end trace of the twisted rope motif can be recognized. Both decorative elements can be recognized on the panel fragment with the remaining relief of the centric composition - a square inscribed in a circle (Fig. 1.e), which was also published by Brunšmid, with the remark that it may have been found in Sisak. Double threefold interlace and twisted rope are motifs that derive from the Lombard stone sculpture and are mostly associated with the earlier phase of the development of interlace around the middle of the 8th century. Already at the beginning of the 9th century, we often encounter them in the sculpture of Istria, the Kvarner islands, Zadar and Boka Kotorska, which suggests that we can connect the previously described monuments with the influences that penetrated Pannonia in the first decades of the 9th century from the northern Adriatic.

In the ecclesiastical-historical context, two things should be kept in mind here: the fact that Pannonia Inferior belonged to the Aquileian sphere of missionary activity (Filipec, 2015, fig. 90, pp. 248, 256) and that there was a strong rivalry between the patriarchs in Aquileia and Grado in regards to the jurisdiction over the dioceses of the northern Adriatic. At the moment of the "cooling of relations" between the Carolingians and Patriarch Fortunatus, following the death of Charlemagne (Ančić, 2000, pp. 82, 98), this rivalry could

¹² Such interlacings are very common in the works of Lombard workshops, and on the eastern coast of the Adriatic they appear on fragments from churches furnished at the end of the 8th or the beginning of the 9th century, such as the Pula Novigrad and Pula cathedrals, and on sites where the activities of the *Chencel panel Workshop of the Zadar Cathedral, Stonemason's workshops from the era of Bishop Ivan (Kotor) and the Kotor stonemason's workshop*, which were active in the same mentioned period. See: Ante Milošević, 2000, p. 54, I.41/4; Matejčić & Mustać, 2014, p. 165 (Novigrad); Nikolina Belošević, 2019, I.34, p. 319; Ivan Josipović, 2013, catalogue: T-6, 10, 12; Meri Zornija, 2014, catalogue: T-16, 18, 24, 26, 27.

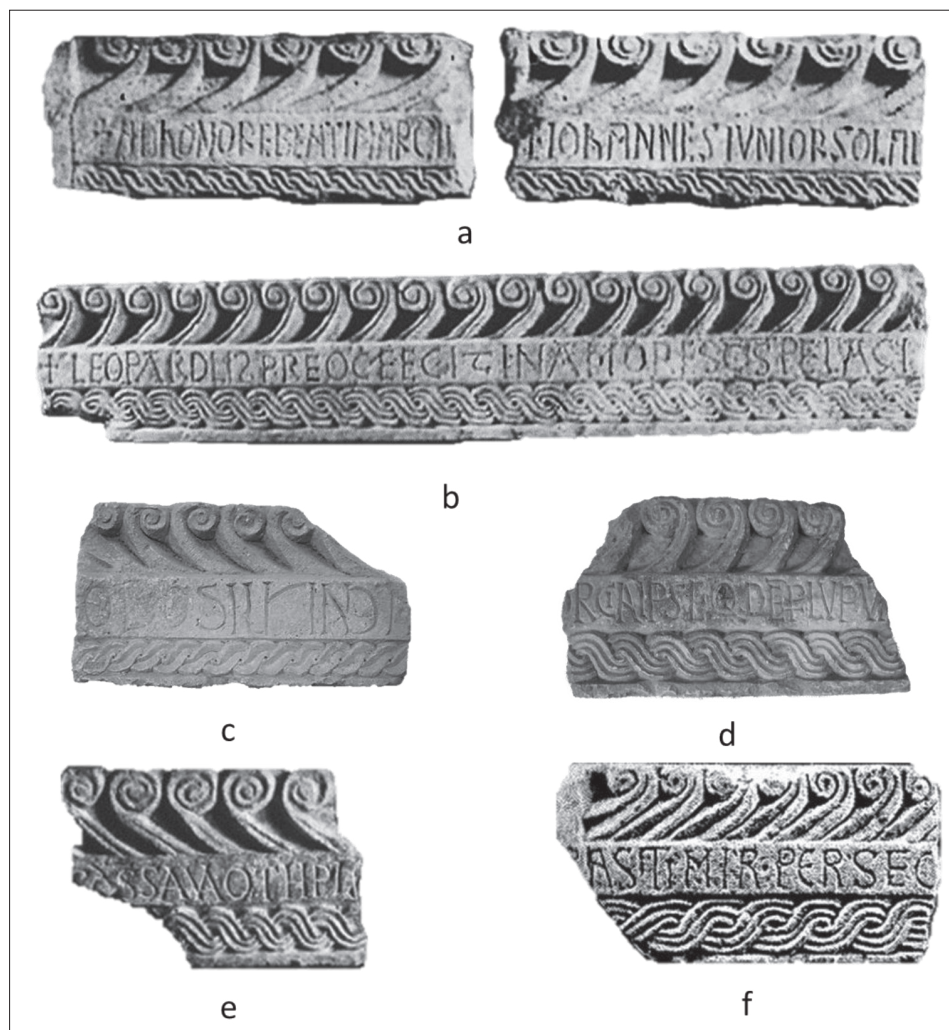


Fig. 5. Examples of the tripartite division of the front surface of the architrave: a) Sta. Maria delle Grazie, Grado (according to Jakšić, 1999, p. 283); b) Cathedral, Poreč (according to Jakšić, 1999, p. 283); c) Cathedral, Pula (photo by N. Belošević); d) unknown site, Pula (photo by N. Belošević); e) Sv. Vitalis, Divulje (Žedno on Čiovo) (according to Josipović, 2013, T-XIX/8); f) Pađene near Knin (according to Josipović, 2013, T-XVIII/3)

have also been reflected on the areas of interest inland. The opinion that the primary task of the craftsmen and masons sent by the patriarch was to build or strengthen Duke Ljudevit's fortifications used in the conflict with the Franks is almost regularly expressed in the literature (Rački, 1877, pp. 325–326; Kos, 1906, pp. 60–61; Klaić, 1972, p. 18; Klaić, 1975, p. 191; Ančić, 2000, pp. 81–82;

Bertoša, 2003, p. 123; Goss, 2007, p. 20; Škunca, 2014, p. 71; Goss, 2020, pp. 165, 177–178; 2021, p. 108).¹³ It is significant that from 806 to 810 Fortunatu's seat was temporarily moved to Pula, which at that time was an important northern Adriatic centre of construction and stonemasonry, and that it was written in his will that he invited "*magistros di Francia*" to Grado (Gaberscek, 1980, p. 397). Although we cannot know which part of the Frankish territory these craftsmen came from, nor whether they came to Grado before or after the patriarch's stay in Pula, we can assume that at least some of the craftsmen he sent to Duke Ljudevit were from Istria, where, in after decades of coexistence with the Slavs, they mastered Slavic language, which was required for communicating with patrons in Pannonia Inferior.

The initiators of construction and patrons of early medieval churches were regularly more influential members of the clergy or richer secular dignitaries. After the fall of the Avar Khaganate (795) (Filipec, 2015, p. 67) and the pacification of Pannonia, people of Slavic origin began to appear as patrons and a segment of the name of one of them was preserved on a fragment of a gable, that could have been discovered in the Sisak area (Fig. 1.d).¹⁴ A wide field with the inscription [...De]SAMER AVXS[it...] is located below a row of left-leaning hooks, from which it can be concluded that the fragment belonged to the right side of the arch of the altar screen. According to the interpretation of Vedrana Delonga, a certain Desimir had the church enlarged or embellished (Delonga, 2000, pp. 115–116), which means that it was constructed earlier and was remodeled or expanded in the pre-Romanesque period. The form of hooks, with large heads and slender, single leg, is significant. Their soft shaped edges and the shallowly carved background are quite similar to those on the previously described architraves. It is significant to note that such hooks, sometimes in combination with a wide inscription field and sometimes with a simple interlace with inserted globules, appear only on the sculpture from the beginning of the 9th century from the cathedrals in Grado, Pula and Osor (Fig. 6), which is yet another indicator of the possible direction and period of adoption of pre-Romanesque artistic expression in the continental part of today's Croatia.

Although the circumstances of the discovery of the described fragments are mostly unknown, and the church to which at least some of them may have belonged to has not yet been identified, the very fact that few of the fragments were found in Sisak testifies to the existence of a pre-Romanesque church in

¹³ Krešimir Filipec (2015, p. 112) departs from this, he expresses the opinion that Patriarch Fortunato could have been falsely accused, given the possibility that he simply sent craftsmen as part of missionary activity and that Duke Liudewit used them to strengthen the fortifications.

¹⁴ Since Brunšmid was not convinced that this monument was certainly found in the Sisak area, V. Delonga listed it in the catalogue "Croats and Carolingians" as a fragment from an unknown site, even opening up the possibility that it originated from Dalmatia or Lika.

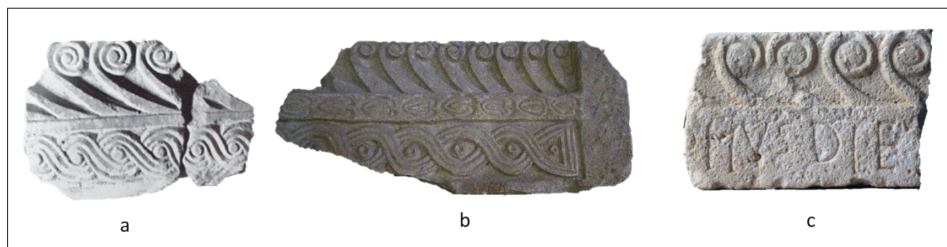


Fig. 6. Fragments of the architraves: a) S. Maria delle Grazie, Grado (according to Tagliaferri, 1981, T-CCXIII); b) Cathedral, Pula (photo by N. Belošević); c) Cathedral, Krk (photo by N. Belošević)

the city area. However, its position can only be guessed because the remains of that early medieval church have not yet been discovered. It might be built in a position outside the perimeter of the ancient ramparts of Siscia, or some building within the city could have been renovated and used for the church, perhaps one of the city's late antique churches, or the early Christian cathedral.

Considering the size, status, and especially the traffic and commercial significance of ancient Siscia, it is possible to conclude that the early Christian community in Siscia was certainly quite numerous, and several churches were probably built in the city over time, i.e. from the 4th century onwards. The diocese was founded already in the middle of the 3rd century (Póczy, 1980, pp. 245, 268; Vuković, 1994, p. 128; Buzov, 1999, pp. 245–271) and its existence can be traced back to the fourth decade of the 6th century through the mention of the name of the bishops in the acts of church councils (Hoti, 1992, pp. 149–150, 152–153; Gračanin & Bilogrivić, 2014, pp. 15–16). It is significant that we don't know the name of a single bishop of Siscia from the 5th century, but this does not mean that they did not exist, rather the absence of their signatures in the acts of church councils may be only a reflection of the changed political and demographic circumstances, caused by the passage of the barbarian invaders through Pannonia Inferior, because of which the bishops of Sisak could not attend the councils. Moreover, considering the establishment of Ostrogothic rule at the end of the 5th century and the stationing of significant military forces in Siscia, there was probably an Arian cathedral in the city as well (Migotti, 2011, pp. 61–64; Buzov, 2004, p. 464).¹⁵

¹⁵ Branka Migotti, 2011, pp. 61–62, 63–64; Marija Buzov, 2004, p. 464; The Arian church in Siscia certainly continued to exist even after the Ostrogothic rule, since already at the end of the 540s, the Byzantine emperor Justinian ceded numerous strongholds in southern Pannonia and Norik, including today's Sisak, to the Lombards, who were also Arians, in a federal agreement. See Gračanin & Bilogrivić, 2014, pp. 16–18; Gračanin & Pisk, 2015, pp. 345–346.

Although there are few written sources about the history of early medieval Sisak, there is no doubt about the continuity of the settlement at the site of ancient Siscia. In addition to many toponyms, numerous archaeological finds testify to it, primarily numismatic and other items found inside the former city walls or in their immediate vicinity (Sekelj Ivančan, 2001; Gračanin & Bilogrivić, 2014; Filipec, 2015). Archaeological research in recent decades carried out mainly during the renovation and construction of the modern city,¹⁶ have determined traces of prehistoric dwellings, remains of Roman residential and public architecture, ancient and late antique necropolises, and possibly a few early Christian sacred buildings. For example, based on a description and a sketch from the 19th century, the remains of a three-nave building with a spacious apse or perhaps a rotunda are assumed to be an early Christian Basilica. Its position in today's city and all information about this find on the address Antun and Stjepana Radić street n. 44, are however based only on one written source from the mid-19th century and subsequent archaeological research was not conducted (Migotti, 2011, pp. 56–57; Gračanin & Bilogrivić, 2014, p. 16; Lolić & Burmaz, 2020, pp. 321–335; Buzov, 2009, pp. 59–60). If the location is correct, the ancient building was located near the main Siscian forum (which was located in the area of the Sisak railway station (Jerončić et al., 2018, pp. 173–197)) and next to the *cardo*, which probably connected the northern and southern city gates of Siscia (Lolić, 2022, p. 90).

Confirmation of the existence of a spacious, stone-built church in Sisak is provided by two large capitals of the colonnade (Fig. 7.a), found in 1908, during the construction of the foundations for today's municipal court, in the



Fig. 7. a) the better-preserved capital from Sisak (according to Brunšmid, 1910–1911, p. 279); b) the capital of the colonnade from the Cathedral of Pula (<http://www.zupa-uznesenja-marijina-pula.hr>)

¹⁶ See reports in *Hrvatski arheološki godišnjak* (retrieved July 24, 2023).

area of today's Ljudevit Posavski Square (Brunšmid, 1910–1911, p. 65). On the better-preserved capital, two rows of eight smooth fleshy leaves stand out clearly, separated from each other by a carved groove. The lower part of the leaves is firmly attached to the cube, and only their pointed tips bend slightly. Pairs of neatly carved volutes extend from the top row of leaves towards the corners and the recessed centre of the abacus. This type of capital appeared already in the 5th century, as a simplified derivative of the classical Corinthian capital, and the closest analogy to the Sisak examples are four late antique capitals from the presbytery of the Pula Cathedral (Fig. 7.b).¹⁷ Considering the similarity that the aforementioned capitals share not only in terms of typology and design, but also in terms of dimensions, we can conclude that already in the 5th century, in Sisak there was a large church with colonnades, or a triumphal arch emphasized, as in Pula, by a pair of columns with capitals. Such a church would have been spacious enough to accommodate a chancel screen with massive pilasters as previously described (Fig. 1.a).

Somewhat south along the aforementioned *cardo*, next to the southern city gate (in front of today's Church of the Holy Cross), were found the remains of a very large five-nave building. In the Roman period, when it was built, it probably served as a granary (*horreum*). It seems that it was rebuilt in the 4th century, and at least one part of it was sacralised and turned into a place of Christian worship (Migotti, 2003, p. 109; Gračanin & Bilogrivić, 2014, p. 4; Buzov, 1999, p. 259). The position on the periphery of the city, next to the rampart and the city gate, is comparable to numerous analogous examples of episcopal centres that emerged on the outskirts of other Roman cities, such as Aquileia, Salona, Poreč, Pula, etc. In these cities, the centers of bishoprics developed in very similar positions, and continued to exist at the same place in the following centuries. Unfortunately, it is currently not possible to establish similar analogies in Pannonian Roman cities, considering that so far not a single position has been discovered that could be confidently claimed to be an early Christian episcopal complex. In Savaria (today's Szombathely), a church building was found inside the city wall and near the northern city gate. It is dated to the end of the 4th century, and its origin is related to the transfer of the relics of St. Quirinus from the martyrium at the eastern necropolis to the newly built church inside the city. However, although it is assumed that Savaria was an episcopal center considering that it was also the administrative center of the province of Pannonia Superior (later *Pannonia Prima*), the assumption of the existence of an episcopal complex still cannot be confirmed by sources or archaeological findings (Hudák, 2019, pp. 32–34). It is possible that the church of St. Anastasia

¹⁷ Two capitals are still *in situ* today on the columns in front of the triumphal arch, while the other two were reused as sprinklers. See Obad-Vučina, 2007, pp. 24, 30–33; Matejčić & Mustać, 2014, pp. 54–56.

in Sirmium (today's Sremska Mitrovica) was built within the city walls, and it is assumed that it was built during the 4th century. Its existence is confirmed by an epigraphic source, but the exact position of the church is not certain. It is assumed that it was located next to the northern rampart of Sirmium on a site that was documented but was destroyed by construction at the end of the 19th century (Popović, 2013, p. 107). In Sirmium, the existence of a city basilica is confirmed. It was probably dedicated to St. Demetrius, dated around the year 426, and positioned next to the main city *cardo* and near the original city forum. This would be a similar situation as in Siscia if the documented remains of the building at address Antun and Stjepan Radić street n. 44 were indeed a church. However, at the time of the creation of the city basilica of Sirmium, the ancient city had already been reduced by constructed inner rampart. The original forum had already been abandoned, and the church itself was located near the new, inner-city rampart and was surrounded by burials within the city walls. In this example, the possibility of continuity of the sacral place from earlier periods is excluded, and the function of the episcopal seat is not even assumed in this case (Jeremić, 2004, pp. 64–67). Despite the established existence of at least one city church, as well as known cemetery churches or martyriums in the Sirmian necropolises, the position of the late antique episcopal complex in Sirmium has not yet been established. The city church is also confirmed in Aquae Iasae (today's Varaždinske Toplice), but in this case it was remodeled and repurposed older thermal complex that was located near the forum. The city itself was not a bishopric center, so in this case, it can't be an episcopal complex (Hudák, 2019, p. 40; Migotti, 2002, pp. 53–54; Migotti, 2015, pp. 62–63; Buzov, 2010, pp. 308–309). The positioning of early Christian churches on the site of ancient thermal baths is not unusual, but in Siscia, where the location of thermal baths is known along the western rampart of the city towards the Kupa River, archaeological research did not confirm such a situation (Lolić, 2022, pp. 114–121).

Although the position of the Siscian episcopal center has not yet been determined in Sisak, it is indeed possible that the stated position next to the *horreum* and the southern city gate is related to the tradition from the early Christian period before the 4th century (Buzov, 2010, p. 312; Jurić, 2011, pp. 315–319). However, the latest archaeological research in and around the church of The Holy Cross (i.e. the present-day Sisak cathedral) still did not support such assumptions. Under today's cathedral, the foundations of an older church were discovered, which sat on the Roman street that led to the southern city gate. However, this building still dates back to the late Middle Ages, while traces of early medieval or early Christian structures have not yet been found at that location.¹⁸ So, those are probably the remains of the same church of The Holy

¹⁸ The research was carried out as part of the restoration of the cathedral due to damage caused during the earthquake at the end of 2020. The results of the archaeological

Cross in Sisak mentioned by the archdeacon Ivan of Gorica in the list of parishes of the Zagreb bishopric from 1334. On its site the church of the same titular was rebuilt or built at the end of the Ottoman threat after the victory in the battle of Sisak in 1593 (Buturac, 1984, p. 44; Cvitanović, 1996, pp. 133–141; Jurić, 2011, pp. 303–310). Furthermore, this church probably had to be created after the system of ancient streets, ramparts and city gates ceased to function, given that its position completely negates the main *cardo* and access to the southern gate.

Early Christian contents and traces were also found in Siscian necropolises, next to the southern, southeastern, and northern city gates, as well as in the Pogorelac area on the opposite (right) bank of the Kupa River (Sekelj Ivančan, 2001, p. 200; Buzov, 2010, p. 313). At the position of the northern city gate and the necropolis, there was the chapel of St Quirinus with the cemetery, but its titular and location are probably related to the modern revival of the cult of the most famous bishop and martyr of Sisak, St Quirinus (270–303) (Šourek, 2011, p. 354).¹⁹ The cemetery next to the chapel is also of an earlier origin because it was formed there only at the end of the 18th century when the older cemetery next to the parish church of The Holy Cross was abandoned (Slukan Altić, 2004, p. 63). As a possible positions of the early medieval church, the southeastern necropolis along today's King Tomislav Street or the necropolis that was formed in Pogorelac are suggested (Filipec, 2015, pp. 123, 261).²⁰

The archaeological findings, although rare, still lead to the conclusion that the early medieval settlement developed in the central or southern part of ancient Siscia and the early medieval cemetery next to the southeastern ancient necropolis (Sekelj Ivančan, 2001, pp. 202–204; Gračanin & Bilogrivić, 2014, p. 22). Therefore we are inclined to conclude that the early medieval church was also located within the perimeter of the ancient city and that it was created either by *ex novo* construction or by the renovation of the remains of the early Christian church. Considering the continuity of medieval burials in the southeastern ancient necropolis, the church might be located exactly on the southern edge of the settlement, somewhere near the position of the present-day Sisak Cathedral, i.e. the late medieval parish church.

Considering the significance and reputation of Siscia as the center of the province, which continued to exist even under Avar rule, and regarding the position of the city on a river waterway and at the intersection of important Roman roads that directly connect it with Dalmatia and Aquileia, it cannot be completely ruled out the possibility that a small Christian community was

research have not yet been published, so we thank Ms. Spomenka Jurić for the information provided.

¹⁹ The chapel was first mentioned in 1653.

²⁰ As an analogous example, Filipec proposes the development of the cathedral in Pécs on the ancient or early Christian necropolis outside the city walls.

preserved in the area of the city despite the very violent arrival of pagan Slavs and Avars (Budak, 1994, p. 171). Namely, in the record of the council that was held in 796 under the leadership of the Aquileian patriarch Paulinus and in the presence of King Pippin in a Frankish military camp somewhere on the banks of the Danube (*ad ripas Danubii*), it is stated that priests still serve in some churches in the area under Avar rule (Filipec, 2015, p. 244). Admittedly, this is a record that was created about two hundred years after the Slavic occupation of Siscia in the first half of the 7th century, but one could still assume at least some remnants of the Christian population (Filipec, 2015, pp. 240–245). Moreover, systematic missionary activity probably developed with the beginning of the 9th century and the end of the Frankish war with the Avar Khaganate, and the first missionary centers were founded in the former ecclesiastic centers (Filipec, 2015, pp. 245, 250; Goss, 2021, pp. 107–108). Christianization probably spread from the centers of the local elite and under the protection of local rulers, given the common assumption that process moved from the upper social class to the wider population. Perhaps Siscia was already formed as a seat of some Slavic ruler and predecessor of the Pannonian Duke Ljudevit, in whose time, in the year 822, dates the first early medieval mention of Sisak.

The aforementioned council held in 796 on the banks of the Danube is significant because at that time the border of the missionary area between the Patriarchate of Aquileia and the Archdiocese of Salzburg was determined on the Drava River. The territory south of the Drava came under the jurisdiction of Aquileia, and north of the Drava under the jurisdiction of Salzburg. This also implied the border between the two mentioned ecclesiastical metropolises (Filipec, 2015, pp. 64, 98). With this, Sisak also entered the area of activity of the Aquileian missionaries, and thus also under the Aquileian cultural influence. It is likely that already around Siscia, some space was being prepared for the functions of the Christian cult, and it is possible that in this context stonemasons from the coastal regions soon arrived and participated in the construction and furnishing of at least the more prominent church buildings in the established centers. In 822, the city is mentioned in written sources as a *civitas* and Duke Ljudevit's seat, and during the war against the Franks, the sources provide information about the accusation that the Patriarch of Grado, Fortunatus, helped Ljudevit's rebellion by sending masons and craftsmen (Karaman, 1930, pp. 108, 118; Jakšić, 2000, p. 207; Filipec, 2015, p. 112; Goss, 2020, p. 165; Goss, 2021, p. 108).

Ljudevit's uprising was suppressed in 823, and after him Count Salahon was mentioned as governor for the area between the Sava and the Drava rivers, and then in the second half of the 9th century, Duke Braslav (Filipec, 2015, pp. 116–117, 159). During the Braslav's rule, the Frankish king Arnulf in 885 sent representatives to the Bulgarian king Vladimir, who, because of the war with the Great Moravian Duke Svatopluk, avoided the usual waterway through the

Drava and the Danube, so they used the route through Braslav's Pannonian Dukedom along Sava and Odra to Sisak, then along Kupa and again Sava to the east (Gračanin, 2011, pp. 190–191; Filipec, 2015, p. 160). This can testify to the favorable traffic position of Sisak in the early Middle Ages, and archaeological finds from that period point to the conclusion that the elite layer of the Slavic Pannonia Inferior Dukedom lived in Sisak (Budak, 1994, p. 172; Gračanin & Bilogrivić, 2014, p. 23; Filipec, 2015, p. 161). In the entire area of Pannonia Inferior, Christianity was already widespread among the population, so when the Diocese of Sisak was mentioned in written sources in 928, there was a record about a well-populated area with a sufficient number of priests (Budak, 1994, p. 172; Filipec, 2015, p. 222).

This reference is also the first news about the existence of the Diocese of Sisak after the 6th century. Based on the results of researches so far, it is not possible to determine what the fate of the Sisak diocese was after the invasion of the Avars and Slavs into southern Pannonia and their conquest of Siscia in the first decades of the 7th century.²¹ Most researchers believe that the bishopric was extinguished in those troubled times (Gračanin & Bilogrivić, 2014, p. 20), although it is possible that the bishop lived for some time in some elevated and fortified position (Bratož, 1996, pp. 215–218; Buzov, 2009, pp. 65–66; Gračanin & Pisk, 2015, p. 347), or that as a “visiting bishop” he took refuge in the territory of another, less threatened diocese (Bratož, 1996, pp. 215–218). Considering all that was said earlier, it is not impossible to presume certain continuity of the diocese, which could have kept jurisdiction over remaining Christian (although probably very small) population, and certainly, the restoration could be supposed based on systematic activity of missionaries from the Aquileian area at the beginning of the 9th century (Filipec, 2015, p. 314).

Conclusion

Until now, the stone fragment from Sisak was mostly interpreted as the chancel panel, but this work establishes that it was a pilaster. Its dimensions testify that the early medieval church in the Sisak area must have been a fairly large stone building. Two fragments of architraves, which according to their formal characteristics can be connected to the mentioned pilaster and dated at the same time, have decorative elements similar to examples that appeared in the northern Adriatic in the first decades of the 9th century, but not in the territory of the Croatian Dukedom. This leads to conclusion of the direct influence of

²¹ Historians generally agree that Siscia was conquered in the period between the fall of Sirmium in 582 and the invasion of the Slavs to the Adriatic coast in the first years of the 7th century. See Horvat, 1954, pp. 93–94; Budak, 1994, p. 171; Gračanin & Bilogrivić, 2014, pp. 19–21; Gračanin & Pisk, 2015, pp. 346–347.

the stone-carving workshops from the northern Adriatic on the Pannonian area, instead of the previous assumptions about the adoption of influences in Pannonia via Croatian Dukedom, where the aforementioned artistic characteristics began to appear only after the middle of the 9th century. Due to these earlier assumptions, the Pannonian fragments were initially dated to the 10th and even the 11th century. The conclusion above is in accordance with the historical course of events in Pannonia after the suppression of the Avars and the establishment of Frankish rule at the end of the 8th and the beginning of the 9th century. Then the territory was administratively and culturally integrated into the Frankish political system with organized missionary activity and the restoration of the authority of the Patriarchate of Aquileia in the area south of the Drava River. It is possible that by that time Sisak had already become the seat of a local Slavic ruler, and probably a missionary center was formed here at the beginning of the 9th century (if not earlier). The local elite and ruling social class were Christianized, and somewhere in the settlement or next to it a stone church (restored early Christian building or built *ex novo*) was equipped with stone furniture. Fragments of early medieval sculpture from the Sisak area can be connected precisely to these circumstances. Duke Ljudevit of Pannonia, as a Frankish governor, was certainly already baptized when he organized his uprising against the central government from 819 to 823, and in Sisak as his seat, which is mentioned in the sources as a *civitas*, a church must have already existed by then. It could be assumed that the Diocese of Sisak was already restored then under the authority of the Patriarchate of Aquileia. The activities of the Patriarch of Grado, Fortunatus, are mentioned in the sources in connection with the anti-Frankish uprising of Duke Ljudevit, and the early medieval stone sculpture in the Pannonia Inferior area is regularly brought into some relationship with this information. It cannot be established when exactly Fortunatus sent the stonemasons to Pannonia, but it can be concluded that they arrived there before 821 when the aforementioned accusation appeared in the sources. However, this should not mean that craftsmen who know how to work with stone could not have worked in Pannonia Inferior earlier as part of missionary activity with the task of building and equipping churches in that area, regardless of the connections of Patriarch Fortunatus with Duke Ljudevit and his role in Ljudevit's uprising. There is no additional information about the masters themselves, but it would be logical to assume that they came from an area where they have overcome the barrier of communication in the Slavic language—whether they were in contact with Slavs or were Slavs themselves. Considering the similarities in the execution and formal characteristics of the decorative elements of the fragments considered in this paper with those from the northern Adriatic, it is easily possible that the sent stonemasons came from the Istrian area.

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Резиме

Иако малобројни, до сада откривени фрагменти раносредњовјековне скулптуре на подручју Сиска помажу употпунити сазнања о повијесним околностима и континуитету античке Сисције у раздобљу за које су и повијесни извори и материјални трагови врло ријетки и штурни. Град се успио одржати као административно и бискупијско средиште до почетка VII стољећа када славенско-аварским освајањем замиру обиљежја градског живота, но *Siscia* ипак наставља постојати. Придошло поганско становништво у неком тренутку формира насеље на подручју унутар бедема запушеног античког града. Материјални трагови пронађени на подручју Сиска свједоче о ранокршћанском слоју у животу касноантичког града, но повијесни извори не пружају нам информације о томе што се догодило са Сисачком бискупијом и самим бискупом након VI стољећа, а ни досадашња археолошка истраживања још увијек нису открила позицију сисцијског епископалног комплекса. На темељу документације настале тијekom XIX стољећа претпоставља се позиција једне градске базилике на главном *cardu* који је преко форума повезивао сјеверна и јужна градска врата, но других информација о самој грађевини нема. Могуће је да су два капитета из V стољећа пронађена приликом изградње котарског суда у Сиску повезана управо с том грађевином с обзиром на то да је зграда суда у близини документираних позиција наводне градске цркве. Крајем VIII стољећа потискивањем Аварског каганата доњопанонско подручје долази под франачку власт, те се формира територијална организација у оквиру Франачке. Истовремено се интензивно развија мисионарско дјеловање под ингеренцијом Аквилејске патријаршије, а претпоставља се да се мисионарска исходишта оснивају у касноантичким црквеним средиштима, вјеројатно под заштитом локалних владара и формираног елитног друштвеног слоја који је прихватио кршћанство те који је могао финансијски подржати градњу или обнову и опремање црквених грађевина као и само дјеловање мисионара. Раносредњовјековно насеље на темељима античке Сисције се врло вјеројатно прометнуло у сједиште локалног славенског владара јер франачки писани извори око 820. године изричито спомињу Сисцију као *civitas* и сједиште побуњеног панонског кнеза Људевита, као и оптужбе да је градешки патријарх Фортунат помагао Људевитов устанак слањем градитеља који је требало да му помогну да утврди његова упоришта.

Фрагменти раносредњовјековне скулптуре управо потврђују описане повијесне околности с почетка IX стољећа јер се формалне карактеристике видљиве на скулптури могу повезати са сличним примјерима везаним уз сјевернојадранске центре као што су Градо и Пула, а који настају управо у том раздобљу. Може се претпоставити да се путујући клесари с истарског подручја који су вјеројатно у свом крају већ стекли искуство споразумијевања на славенском језику (или су и сами били Славени) појављују на панонском подручју у оквиру мисионарског дјеловања са задатком опремања црквених грађевина које се или граде *ex novo* или се обнављају старе ранокршћанске цркве. О томе свједочи и дио архитрава олтарне преграде с натписом који према интерпретацији Ведране Делонга управо сугерира предроманичку обнову од прије постојеће цркве. Надаље, пиластар олтарне преграде из Сиска, који се до сада углавном интерпретирао као плутеј, својим димензијама свједочи о постојању прилично велике зидане цркве на подручју Сиска почетком IX стољећа. Нажалост, њезина позиција још увијек није утврђена, но склони смо закључити да се раносредњовјековна црква у Сиску налазила на подручју унутар античког бедема, можда негдје у близини данашње сисачке катедрале, уз јужни руб насеља те у близини југоисточне некрополе, уз коју се наставља развијати раносредњовјековно гробље.

Кључне ријечи: Сисак; Siscia; рани средњи вијек; фрагменти камене скулптуре; сјеверни Јадран; клесарске радионице, Панонија.



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