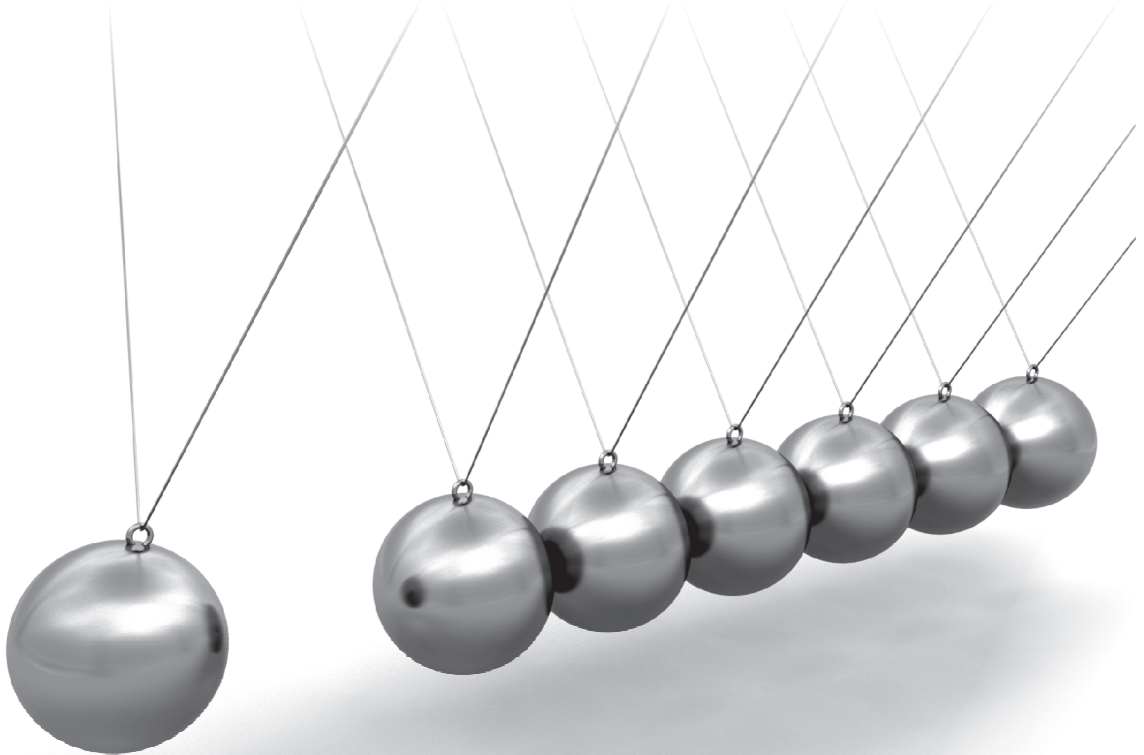


HUMANS AND SOCIETY IN TIMES OF CRISIS

Archaeology of Crisis

Edited by Staša Babić



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Archaeology (in Times) of Crisis

EDITOR'S NOTE

In December 2019, a previously unknown coronavirus was registered and the severe and potentially fatal illness it causes swiftly spread around the world. On January 30, 2020, the World Health Organisation declared a state of Public Health Emergency, followed by the declaration of a pandemic on March 11 of the same year.¹ More than a year later, while this volume is submitted for publication, the world is still struggling with a plethora of severe problems initiated by, but by no means reduced to, the medical aspects of the current crisis. The disturbances in the economic and social activities further induce profound distress in everyday lives around the globe. Depending on the current state of the epidemic curve, we are advised to observe more or less rigorous measures of caution, most of them limiting our movements and contacts. While maintaining distance in the real world, we are connected virtually, various technologies enabling us to compare experiences of restricted interactions. One can thus get a glimpse of the diverse ways in which people around the world make sense of their changed worlds. Many express their thoughts in words, but some use other means. Like, a photo series that invites us to choose and arrange objects that are essential to us under the current predicament.² The similarities in created assemblages (an assortment of face masks, hand sanitizers, laptop computers, comfort food, books...), as well as idiosyncratic objects reflecting particular lifestyles (dog leash, musical instruments...), illustrate eloquently what archaeologists know so well: our lives are framed in materialities that shape and are being shaped by our practices. Under the drastically changed circumstances, such as the ones we are currently enduring, our relationship with our material surroundings also changes, creating new possibilities and constraints to our practices. Our present experiences are not unique and throughout the history of our species, human groups have faced various crises, caused by a wide range of factors. From massive changes in their environment, population movements and violent conflicts, to profound shifts in attitudes, beliefs and value systems, these events have caused disruptions in everyday practices of communities and have invariably been reflected in some material form.

1 <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019>

2 <https://www.collater.al/en/paula-zuccotti-lockdown-essentials-photography/>

Bearing this in mind, the purpose of this collection is to investigate some of the instances of crises that afflicted past populations of the Central Balkans and adjacent regions, via the material traces accessible through archaeological investigation. The knowledge of the causes of disruptions and of the responses devised for overcoming them in the past may bring us closer to solutions applicable in our present. At the same time, the aim of the volume is to offer an insight into the vast range of approaches currently practiced by archaeologists, their possibilities and limitations, as well as synergies created in the domains of theoretical concepts and methodological procedures. The authors share the same working environment – the Faculty of Philosophy in Belgrade, and specifically its Department of Archaeology – but follow diverse research paths, illustrating the current state of the discipline in general, its many theoretical and methodological ramifications. It is our hope that our specific disciplinary knowledge of the past may contribute to more efficient responses to crises in the present and future.

Belgrade, May/June 2021

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Marko A. Janković*

REMESIANA IN THE 4TH CENTURY AD: LATE ROMAN AND/OR EARLY CHRISTIAN SITE?

Abstract: The research themes of scholars engaged in periods of Early Christianity and the late Roman Empire have vastly expanded in the last century. Yet, no large methodological and theoretical shifts were made, and archaeologists dealing with topics from these periods are still relying on the similar frameworks mostly borrowed decades ago from disciplines of art history and historiography. In this paper, both terms will be explored, Late Roman (or Late Antiquity) and Early Christianity respectively, and their possible (mis)use will be demonstrated in the case study of the Remesiana site. Both terms are loaded with various meanings that often influence the interpretations of past phenomena, which is why the necessity of identifying their strengths and limitations in each of the specific context is emphasized here. Since the period of the 3rd–4th centuries is perceived as a period of crisis, it is essential to establish a methodological and theoretical framework to understand and explain the contexts in which these crises occurred and how they affected the people involved.

Keywords: Late Roman Period, Early Christianity, Remesiana, knowledge transfer, terminology

Introduction

The Early Christian period (3–4th centuries) is perceived as highly important in Serbian archaeology, but also in the Serbian public (eg. Srejović, 1994; Jovanović, 2006; Popović and Borić Brešković, 2013). Some Serbian authors treat it as a period of the emergence, evolution, and institutionalization of Christianity. Buildings, small finds, frescoes, and inscriptions serve as the ultimate argument that Christianity was dominant and overwhelming, while traces of other religious groups are neglected, or represented as exceptions (eg. Zotović, 1978; Jeremić,

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2014). However, it can be argued this viewpoint is misleading, as it leads to a simplistic conception that Christianity emerged and developed without any social interactions or possibly religious tensions with other groups. Such an introduction of new religious practices had to stir up communities and produce various social crises within the Roman Empire (cf. Elsner, 2003). By accepting this assumption, we open a vast field of research concerning the intensive interactions between different religious groups, the social crises caused by these interactions, and finally, the different outcomes of such crises.

The terms we use to explain a certain phenomenon of the past are rarely, if ever, neutral. Quite the opposite – they are often burdened with subtle meaning or even a whole package of differently nuanced meanings. Most of them are implicit and usually represent “commonplaces” that are rarely questioned (Stoczkowski, 2008, p. 350). There is always a constant threat that these hidden meanings will influence the final interpretation of events of the past, and to avoid such occurrences it is necessary to clearly define the terminology we employ in each specific context. The terms I would like to examine in this text are “Late Antiquity” and “Early Christianity.” Late Antiquity could be described as a period of crisis, or even better, as a whole set of crises, and by dealing with these crises the Empire became completely transformed. The emergence of legal Christianity can be regarded as one of the crises that struck the Empire in the 4th century. Even though they are mostly used as chronological labels, their character is often much more complex. The terms “Late Antiquity” and “Early Christianity” represent kind of sublimated and rather simplified denominations that imply a whole set of layers of significance. So, their usage without the necessary definition of conceptual limitations inevitably implies an input of hidden meanings. This way, the final picture is distorted and the interpretation could be partially or even completely on the wrong track. Both terms are loaded with decades, even centuries, of research that occurred in different disciplines (Elsner, 2002; Bowes, 2008). The term Late Antiquity (*Spätantike*) was first introduced within the scope of art history and only later transferred to archaeology and history (Elsner, 2002). Still, the theoretical and methodological frameworks of these disciplines, when it comes to the period of the 3rd and 4th centuries AD are very similar, as we will see in the following sections. For example, scholars of all three disciplines rely on architectural style to determine the chronology and purpose of the buildings, solely to fit them into the broader “historical context” constructed based on data obtained through written sources. Those textual data, mostly from medieval periods, are used heavily as assistance in the interpretation of archaeological results. The main issue with such an approach to ancient texts is often the complete absence

of any critical reflection. Information procured from such sources is usually treated as objective fact, or as direct insight into the past (Janković, 2014). The methodology of critical assessment of such sources is rarely introduced into the fields of the Late Roman period or Early Christianity, so many scholars concerned with the period are using them without any grounded theoretical framework (Bowes, 2008). So far, a great part of the archaeology of the Late Roman period is mostly caught between stylistic analyses of buildings and art, and historiographical data describing the lives of early Christians. However, these are not “good examples” of interdisciplinarity as one may assume, but actual examples of situations where each of the disciplines operates within its own field of research while borrowing, usually without any critical analyses, the results from others (cf. Babić, 2018, pp. 116–120).

This article will explore the usage of these terms within the contexts of the site of Remesiana, modern-day Bela Palanka. Most of the contemporary academic works treats the Late Roman or/and the Early Christian phase of the site as the most important, since most of the data comes from the period of 3rd and 4th centuries (Gušić, 1987; Pejić, 2015). Despite the fact that the period of the 3rd–4th centuries was a period of various social crises, often accompanied with intensive social interaction and tensions, Christian objects in Remesiana are rarely interpreted from that point of view.

On Late Antiquity

Discussion on the chronological span of Late Antiquity or the time of the beginning of the medieval era probably demands a separate study dedicated solely to these issues. For decades, historians, art historians, and archaeologists debated on where to draw the line between the Ancient and Middle Ages, Rome and Byzantium, Late Antiquity and the Migration Period (Mitchell, 2014, pp. 5–11). This discussion is yet another example of the instance where labeling, in this case of the chronological era, carries a vast spectrum of meanings, which is why participants in the debates cannot agree on the criteria for differentiating between two periods. Late Antiquity is the term usually employed to describe the period that started sometime during the 3rd century – whether with Caracalla’s edict on civil rights (Beard, 2015), the Severan dynasty (Gibbon, 2006), the beginning of the Tetrarchy (Mitchel 2015), or even with the 3rd-century crisis caused by political but also social and economic turmoil during which a great number of Roman emperors were appointed and removed, mostly due to military units (Mirković, 2007).

It is also a period perceived as decadent and the time when the old glory of Rome gradually faded in the political, military, moral, and every other sense (Ferjančić, 2013b, p. 26). The term was first introduced in the 19th century as a label for distinguishing this period from the previous one, a time when Ancient Rome was in full vigor, expanding and conquering, building monumental structures and “civilizing Barbarians.” In opposition to that “golden age”, Late Antiquity is a period of decay and downfall of the once-great Empire (Elsner, 2002).

In the political sense, the period of the 3rd and 4th centuries was characterized by instability manifested in the short rule of a number of emperors, conflicts between pretendants and usurpers followed by military revolts, barbarian incursions, and even the separation of the Empire’s territories (Ferjančić, 2013a, p. 23). At the same time, such a political climate contributed to economic instability as one gathers by, among other things, Diocletian’s Edict on Maximum Prices by which he tried to recompose and consolidate Roman markets, or through monetary reforms made by him and Constantine the Great (Vasić, 2008, pp. 29–35). All these events, together with other archaeologically more or less visible ones, led to the final transformation of the Empire into a new polity at the end of the 3rd century AD – the Tetrarchy (Popović, 1993, p. 253; Ferjančić, 2013b, p. 27; Jeremić & Ilić, 2018, p. 198). These changes most likely provoked great tremors in everyday life for people living inside the state – the Empire was divided into four parts, and soon new administrative divisions followed. The provinces were reshaped, some old administrative centres gradually lost their significance, while new ones were formed. Within this social and political chaos, another big change occurred at the beginning of the 4th century – Galerius’ (311) and Constantine’s (313) edicts of toleration were issued. Christianity became legal for the first time within the borders of the state, and their priests and followers were free to practice their faith without fearing for their freedom and lives (Popović, 2013).

Serbian archaeologists (and Yugoslavian before them) introduced the concept of Late Antiquity in their scholarly work together with the already established method of using classical texts as supreme evidence in interpretations of the past. Archaeological evidence was mostly interpreted through data obtained through those texts, so archaeologists greatly reduced their maneuvering space. By building a strong connection between Late Antiquity and Christianity, Serbian archaeologists made their work even more difficult. Namely, while most academic communities consider the period of the 3rd and 4th centuries as a time of the institutionalization of Christianity, Serbian archaeologists usually use the term “Early Christianity” despite the fact that Christianity emerged almost three centuries earlier. The most obvious flaw is that we can expect and search for differ-

ent processes in the time of the emergence of this phenomenon and in the time of its institutionalization centuries after, which also greatly affects the final interpretation. This artificial connection is too strict a framework, limiting us in our efforts to either search for Christians before that period, or to explore late Roman finds within the “Christian” context. The whole field of research is based on a set of unchangeable position, from which very few scholars question theoretical viewpoints or methodological principles, let alone the aims of the research. So far, the concept of Late Antiquity in Serbian archaeology was rarely critically examined and explicated and just a few efforts were made to change the theoretical framework which would maybe change the assumptions.

On Early Christianity and Archaeology

It has been a long time since the first excavations of Roman catacombs in the 19th century¹ which are usually used to mark the origins of Christian archaeology. From the initial search for apostolic presence in the city of Rome, this discipline went through extensive methodological changes, inducing the interpretative one as well (Bowes, 2008, p. 576). Through most of the 19th century, the main focus was on identifying the Christian architecture and material culture while mapping the Christian topography of the late Roman Empire. The 20th century brought changes in the use of typology as the main tool for dating but also determining the purpose of the objects (Bowes, 2008, p. 577). Scholars engaged with issues of early Christian archaeology today see this 20th-century approach as a methodological fault, pointing out the lack of methodological apparatus capable of communicating between material culture and a great amount of preserved texts from this period. In most cases, scholars either use material culture for illustrating the data from textual sources or to eventually search for activities which were never described in the texts. On the European level, most of the researches and interpretations are grounded in the positivist approach, as Kim Bowes puts it:

“One searches in vain for the writing of a Foucault, a Geertz or a Hodder in the footnotes of Christian archaeology as the field clings resolutely to its positivist heritage” (Bowes, 2008, pp. 578–579).

The situation within contemporary Serbian archaeology is not much different. As we saw in the previous section, early Christian archaeology

1 The first excavations of Roman catacombs occurred in the early 17th century, but first professional research were those of Giovanni Battista de Rossi in the 19th century (Bowes 2008, p. 576).

in Serbia is concerned with objects and contexts mostly from the 4th century AD onward (rarely the 3rd century AD), or immediately after Christianity gained its freedom and presumably its dominance among other religions. Archaeologists in Serbia are rarely concerned with Christians before the 4th century, mainly because Christians became “visible” only after the Edict of Milan. Nevertheless, since we have enough data and analogies with different sites within the Empire showing that Christianity was functioning long before the 4th century, we can only assume that the situation was similar within the province of Moesia Superior.

The Late Roman objects, necropolises, or material culture are labelled as Early Christian, often based on ambivalent arguments for tracing Christian practices (eg. Zotović, 1978; Gušić, 1987). Still, most Serbian archaeologists, just like their European colleagues, agree that there is no clear differentiation between Roman (or pagan) and Christian practices, at least within the archaeological record from that period (Zotović, 1978; Jeremić, 2014). Quite often researchers recognize the “nurturing of old traditions of pagan antiquity” at “Christian sites” (Jeremić, 2014, p. 58). This is frequently argued based on the same objects and practices that are treated as Roman at some other sites – like placing glass and ceramic vessels with the deceased or coins to pay for their trip into the afterlife. While it is easier to make this kind of connection with architecture in the cases of churches, baptisteries, or tombs decorated with frescoes with Christian motifs (eg. Zotović, 1978; Gušić, 1987; Jeremić, 2014), it is much harder to label small finds as Christian (or any other way for that matter, cf. Cvjetičanin, 2013). Several studies criticized such interpretations, stating that one cannot establish a direct relationship between religious identity and material culture, and that such practices of labelling could lead us in the completely wrong direction (cf. Elsner, 2003).

That does not necessary mean that Serbian archaeologists are wrong when defining some of the buildings and graves of the 4th century as (Early) Christian, but that the same term could have different meanings in different contexts. Regarding its conceptual package within previous scholarly work, Early Christianity implies a whole set of information – in the case of a necropolis, this usually means that the deceased were all Christians, some of them even priests, bishops or martyrs, which further implies that they had a Christian burial with appropriate rites, grave architecture, and objects for the afterlife. Any trace of “different” practices within the established normative at a Christian necropolis is usually interpreted as “tradition” or reminiscence of earlier rites used as a custom more than a part of Christian rites (cf. Zotović, 1987; Jeremić, 2013). An even greater issue is that these arguments were often used to treat the whole necropolis as Christian, even though such inferences could not be applied to all the

graves within it. It is hard to imagine that the religious and social tensions of the inhabitants of the Roman Empire vanished so quickly, or that the number of Christian believers was so huge after the Edict of Constantine that no traces of pagan religions could be found (Johnson, 1997, pp. 37–38). The process of adaptation within the late Empire was probably slower and gradual, which means that we have to be very cautious in efforts to relate religious practice to material culture of the 4th century.

Late Roman and/or Early Christian Remesiana

For more than 130 years, scholars have been trying to put together the pieces of evidence of the city of Remesiana, which remains buried beneath the modern-day town of Bela Palanka (Valtrović, 1885; Sabovljević, 1887). Professional excavations began in the second half of the 20th century and, with short interruptions, they are still underway (Mano-Zisi, 1958; Mano-Zisi & Popović, 1959; Gušić, 1987; Pejić, 2015; Prodanović Ranković, 2017). In 2013, the project “Archaeological Research of Bela Palanka (Remesiana)” was launched and lasts to this day. Within the project, one of the oldest detected objects in Remesiana (Jeleničevo site) was explored, but also a part of the Eastern necropolis, outside the Esperanto Hotel in Bela Palanka².

These extensive excavations brought us numerous structures, including a fortification, a forum, basilicas, public baths, but also a number of villae rusticae and necropolises in the vicinity of Remesiana (Gušić, 1987; Pejić, 2015; Ružić & Sladić, 2013; Ružić & Lazić, 2015). These excavated remains date from the 1st to the 6th centuries AD (Gušić 1987), but the 4th century phase of the city is regarded as a synonym for Remesiana, not only because there is not enough valid evidence of preceding phases, or because 4th-century buildings are in the majority, but because that period is historically important on account of the life and work of a renowned Christian episcopo, who lived and worked during the second half of the 4th and the beginning of the 5th century (Jovanović, 2004, 2006; Ozimić, 2006; Popović, 2006)³. His reputation went beyond local contexts, whether in the late Roman period or today (Jovanović, 2006; Soroceanu, 2008). Perceiving Remesiana as a strictly Christian center greatly influences the interpretation of

2 Paper on research results from the Eastern Necropolis (2018–2020) is in preparation.

3 Probably the most obvious example is using the phrase “Nicetass time” as a synonym for the 4th century (Pejić, 2015, p. 142). Further, the same very mention of Nicetas as an episcopo of the city is often used as an argument that “Christianity prevailed in Remesiana which, in any case, represents new spiritual and social equality which will condition further development of the city” (Gušić, 1987, p. 34).

late Roman finds in such a framework. In that context, it is also important to stress the tendency among some academic works to directly connect archaeological finds with the person of St. Nicetas (Gušić, 1987; Pejić, 2015). The most cited argument when discussing the Christian character of the city is found in classical texts which mention city bishops – Diogenianus (*episcopes Remesianensis Daciae*) and especially Nicetas of Remesiana (*civitatis episcopus*). The episcopal status of Remesiana is often used as a clear and definitive proof of its Christian character.

Most of the published results so far are focused on the fact that Remesiana was an important Late Roman and Early Christian centre in the 4th century AD. This is not in itself problematic, but at the same time, other elements that could help us understand the functioning of the city in earlier times are missing. The reasons for such an approach are various – first of all, it is more practical to explore more available elements of the city, still visible in the landscape. This usually means that they are also in a better condition than others, and that they are more numerous than earlier elements, as their construction sometimes simply erased earlier buildings. Still, there are enough traces of the pre-Early Christian and Late Roman life in the city, which we cannot simply neglect.

The 4th-century objects discovered in Remesiana (the fort, the basilica) show elements of earlier construction phases, and researchers are inclined to date those elements as early as the beginning of the 2nd century AD, to the time of Emperor Trajan's rule, long before the Remesiana became an episcopal seat. Probably the most emblematic remains in the modern town are parts of the fort's walls, still partially visible in the centre of the modern town of Bela Palanka. The earliest archaeologically documented phase of the fort date back to the 4th century AD. Nevertheless, some scholars argue that this 4th-century stratum is merely another construction phase from the time of Constantine the Great, when older objects were probably destroyed in the process of rebuilding (Gušić 1987). In the vicinity of the fort, part of the forum with the basilica has been discovered. This object also had several phases before it gained its final shape in the 4th century, when the entrance to the basilica was moved from the north to the east side. Excavation results showed that some construction elements could probably be dated to an earlier time, also the beginning of the 2nd century AD.

Another important example of early phases of Remesiana are monuments erected in honor of Septimius Severus, Caracalla, and Iulia Domna, in the year 203 AD when emperor Septimius Severus was travelling through the province. Monuments were found in secondary contexts, probably used as *spolia* in the 4th-century rebuilding of the fort (Petrović, 1979, pp. 101–102). Furthermore, at the site of Jeleničevo, some 300 m

north of the fort, pieces of amphora sherds were discovered, which could be dated to the 2nd century (Pejić, 2015, p. 148). These archaeological evidences could be used as an argument that the settlement had been functioning from at least the 2nd century.

Remesiana is mostly known for its necropolises at each side of the city, excavated and documented more thoroughly than the rest of the city (Gušić, 1987; Pejić, 2015; Ružić & Lazić, 2015). Most of the graves were dated to the 3rd century or later, while earlier burials are documented only in two cases – one discovered in the eastern and the other in the western necropolis. As an argument for earlier dating, researchers used the specific context of finds. Namely, where the remains of the deceased were placed in a ceramic urn, we are dealing with cremation burials (Pejić, 2015, pp. 169–170). Still, we have to be careful, since this kind of burial rite, although rare, is not unknown in the 4th century (eg. Dmitrović & Radičević, 2009). In the relative vicinity of Remesiana, close to the modern-day city of Pirot, two necropolises with dozens of similar burials were discovered (Pejić, 1992; Jovanović, 2000, 2004). So, traces of early Remesiana are not completely absent, although rare and sometimes indirect. The late Roman Remesiana is just one phase of the settlement that was built and had been functioning at least two centuries prior.

The presence of Christians and the episcopal status of Remesiana in the 4th century AD are not questionable. However, these circumstances do not necessarily imply the absence of other religious groups in the city in the same period. There are several records of the Christian community/ies in Remesiana (Gušić, 1987; Pejić, 2015). Still, finds that could be related to other religious groups were also recorded in Remesiana and its close vicinity. The bronze statue of Venus and a partially preserved piece of Mars were found during the building construction within the local household (Vojnić & Pejić, 1983). Both statues were dated loosely to the 3rd–6th century AD (Pejić, 2015, p. 178). Another example is the find of a marble plate representing Hercules, presently still unpublished, also from the territory of the city. In Remesiana's close vicinity, at the sites of Lanište (Jeremić, 2003) and Osmakovo (Vulić, 1948, p. 127), traces of the Mithraistic cult were detected and objects were dated to the 3rd century AD. Moving from Remesiana toward Niš, Pirot, or further, we see that it is not unusual to find pagan objects together with Christian ones (e.g., Jeremić, 2014).

To conclude this section, despite the established presence of Christians we cannot deny the presence of other religious groups, so regardless to its episcopal status, Remesiana was not solely Christian. The other conclusion concerns the fact that Remesiana was developing long before the 4th century, so we can cautiously assume that the Christian community might be older than the 4th century. Such assumptions open the possibil-

ity of exploring a much more interesting world in which the community emerged, developed, and finally institutionalized itself, while leaving and interacting with other (non-Christian) citizens of Remesiana.

The Eastern Necropolis of Remesiana

In order to test these assumptions, concerning the interaction and coexistence of different religious groups in Remesiana, I will refer to the latest findings from the Eastern Necropolis in Remesiana. The excavation began in 2018 and, so far, 29 graves have been discovered in a relatively small area⁴. Among the graves, several types and variants of grave architecture have been documented – simple graves, brick-built graves, a *mensa* type grave, and a grave with drywall *memoria* around it. Most of the deceased were oriented west-east, and a number of small objects were found together with their skeletal remains – ceramic and glass vessels, pieces of footwear, jewelry, and coins. The readable coins suggest that the burials were conducted in the second half of the 4th century, while the burial ground was enclosed by the 5th century stratum.

The preliminary analyses of grave inventories, mostly *fibulae*, further confirm the assumption on the chronology and stratigraphy of the necropolis. This was a necropolis, or rather a part of a necropolis, used in the second half of the 4th century, which chronologically falls within the traditionally labelled period of Late Antiquity and of course Early Christianity. During the research campaigns, some burial forms that seem characteristic for Christian burials have been detected (eg. the *mensa* type grave), while one of the bricks used for the construction of the grave bottom has an incised cross (so we can argue that some of the deceased from the necropolis were indeed Christians). Still, most of the graves gave no clear indication of the Christian character, or any other religion whatsoever. At the same time, small objects are usually not religiously sensitive so we cannot use them to argue for the presence of any particular religious group (see: Elsner, 2003). Some of the researchers who excavated and analyzed other necropolises of the same period argued that there is a strong possibility that pagans and Christians used the same burial places at the same time (Zotović, 1978, p. 48; Johnson, 1997; Rákos-Zichy, 2015, p. 6). Such an assumption must be allowed in the case of the Eastern Necropolis. Furthermore, there is a strong possibility that some pagan practices

4 Two more graves were discovered in the immediate vicinity of the site in 2014, but many more graves and tombs were recorded in previous decades, usually during the building projects in the city (Pejić, 2015).

were simply absorbed by the Christians, in which case designating the burial rites from this era as pagan or Christian is mostly pointless.

Two graves discovered in 2018 and 2019 deviate from the rest mostly with regards to the burial rite. In burial no. 3 (Fig. 1), a female person was discovered. Her body was placed face down and her head was directed to the east (while the others were directed to the west). Right above the skeletal remains, a layer consisting of ashes and charcoal was detected, together with broken vessels, metal objects, and animal bones⁵. The deceased was buried just outside the southern wall of *memoria*, within the simple dugout grave. The only find within the grave inventory were silver earrings. The other case from the Eastern Necropolis is burial no. 2 (Fig. 1), the only one at the necropolis with a completely different orientation – south-north – and placed inside a brick-built cassette. It is relatively removed from other graves, which are mostly concentrated around drywall *memoria*, and no chronologically sensitive finds were detected within the grave.

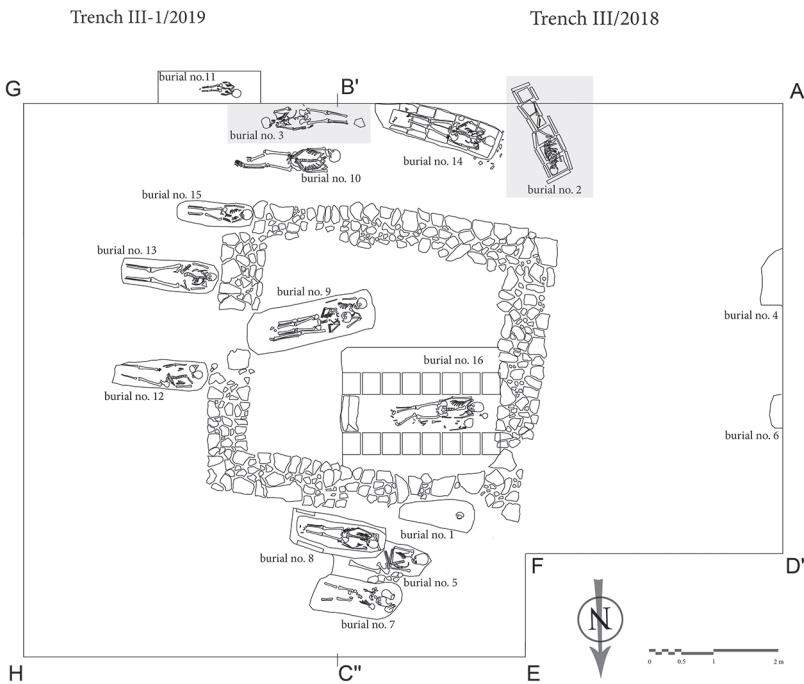


Figure 1. Plan of the Eastern Necropolis, Remesiana, research campaigns 2018–2019.

5 Paper on deviant burial no. 3 is in preparation.

These two cases were the most obvious examples of burials that differ from the rest of the necropolis. Most of the 29 graves were concentrated around the *memoria* or *mensa* type grave, implying that these objects were important landmarks within the necropolis. Also, most of the skeletal remains were discovered with their heads turned to the west, with slight deviations. Grave no. 3 is very unusual and highly inconsistent with the rest from the necropolis. This is not a completely unique case – similar examples of deviant burials (or prone burials) in Late Antiquity have been confirmed in Čačak (Dmitrović & Radičević, 2009) and Niš⁶. Still, the example from Remesiana is the only one where traces of post-burial rites were detected. Reasons for such body treatment could be different and related either to the deceased's way of life or the way she died. In any case, one of the possible assumptions is that her treatment was in connection with her religious identity. The position of the body and the remains of ashes, broken vessels, and iron objects clearly imply that some kind of ritual was performed immediately after the burial of the deceased. Such a ritual was never recorded in any of the Christian necropolises, so we can assume that a practice like this in the case Christian burials is exceptional, required only by extraordinary circumstances and consequently extremely rare. Still, another possibility is that the woman from burial no. 3 was treated in this manner as a result of her association with other religious groups, whose burial rites were not recorded or recognized so far.

The form of burial no. 2 is not extraordinary, but very common in earlier Roman necropolises. The absence of any grave inventory makes precise chronology difficult, but judging by its position (distanced from the rest of the graves concentrated around the *memoria*) and its orientation, we can allow the assumption that this burial is older than the rest of the necropolis. Yet, it is also possible that the deceased from burial no. 2 was not a Christian, and that as such had a different burial rite.

The two mentioned burials from recent excavations in Bela Palanka are probably not the only examples, but they do deviate from other burials, and that is why they are helpful and illustrative in arguing for the hypothesis that not only Christians were buried at “Early Christian” necropolises. Naturally, we cannot exclude a possibility that there is some other reason behind these deviant burials. Extraordinary body treatments could be mirroring the perception of the deceased during their lives – their physical appearance, the nature of their professions, their unusual death, etc. (cf. Murphy, 2008). However, these possible

6 The case from Jagodin mala necropolis in Niš is not published yet. I have acquired the information from the main excavator of the site, Gordana Jeremić, PhD.

reasons for body treatment are not mutually excluded, and according to the data collected during excavations, each of them is equally valid and possible. In that case, we can assume that there is a strong possibility that not all of the deceased from the Eastern Necropolis are Christians, but most likely of different religions, practiced at the same time in Remesiana. The Christian character of some of the burials can be confirmed, but for most of them we do not have direct and clear evidence. Generalizations based on specific examples could be if not completely wrong, then highly misleading, and labeling the entire necropolis as a Christian one, would make the interpretation hard for cases that “do not fit” in the general picture. Resolving such cases would be limited by the strict framework, imposed by the term (Early) Christian, which implies specific sets of scenarios while excluding others from interpretation. The usage of that term in the case of the Remesiana Eastern Necropolis is inadequate, mostly because there is a strong possibility that people from the city who practiced different religions shared a common burial ground.

Concluding Remarks

Studies of Late Antiquity and Early Christianity in Serbia underwent little changes in the past few decades, so most of them deal with topics concerning architecture (as an indicator of Christian presence) or art history, while neglecting the people who lived, interacted, and died during that era. Unlike prehistory and even Roman archaeology, these fields have been at the same point for some time now. One of the reasons for this *status quo* may be found in the fact that these fields heavily rely on written sources, which were never critically appraised (cf. Bowes, 2008). It seems like scholars dealing with this period largely neglected the ongoing discussion on written sources within the archaeological community. The use of ancient Greek and Roman texts without proper contextualization or critical reflections has been heavily criticized in the last few decades (Wells, 2001; Hingley, 2005; Revell, 2016). Many scholars insist on the fact that those texts could not be addressed as “direct” data, since they are burdened with many issues. First of all, our pool of preserved texts is probably small comparing to those that have vanished during the centuries. Secondly, they are pretty hermetic, written by and for small groups of people, and very selective when it comes to the topics they cover. Furthermore, the people describing the events and phenomena were often distant from them, both in the chronological and geographi-

cal sense. To conclude, written sources are often subjective, the events they describe are mostly distorted and cannot be used for explaining the past without some serious cross examination and comparison with the results achieved through other sources. From that point of view it is problematic, to say the least, to relate the life of 4th-century bishops with archaeological remains, as it is often the case with Bela Palanka. Another reason for not advancing in a similar pace as some other archaeological fields is probably the very strict, cultural-historical approach concerning the typology of architecture. Buildings are perceived as eligible only for making conclusions about their purpose and thus chronology, while any other issue concerning the people who used them are mostly limited to confirming the presence of Christians. They are also regarded as static and as being indicative of cultural changes instead as an environment in which different identities were maintained (Revell, 2016, p. 3). This kind of approach was also under fire lately, primarily because of its limitations regarding precise chronology. Using only architectural analogies is problematic, since different processes (as turning a Roman basilica into a Christian one, for example) did not occur in the same manner or at the same time within different parts of the Roman Empire. Such an approach excludes any possibility of research on the people who built, rebuilt, and used these objects in different periods and with different agendas.

In previous decades, numerous graves and tombs were discovered near the Eastern Necropolis, but most of them by accident and very rarely as a result of professional survey. Our goal as researchers of the necropolis is to present the image of people who lived (and died) in Remesiana as accurate as possible. For that reason, it is important to define the working framework before we decide on making a final interpretation, and this paper is only a small step in that direction. As we have seen, Remesiana is not just Late Roman or Early Christian. Objects from later periods are more numerous and better documented than those from earlier ones. Intentions to directly relate these pieces of the past with the person of St. Nicetas is also a powerful drive for scholars who had previously done their research in Remesiana. That way, the abstract past would acquire a corporeal, tangible dimension, and the material remains could be used as a link between the contemporary world and the world of St. Nicetas. Declaring a necropolis Christian, eliminates the possibility of raising questions about pagan burials, and it could be problematic for contexts where there are no clear criteria and researchers rely on analogies and relative chronology. In that sense, burials no. 2 and 3 are very important, because there is a strong possibility that they repre-

sent the burials of people practicing religions other than Christianity. Once again, small finds placed as burial gifts could not be treated as Christian nor pagan, and arguments used for pushing the idea of Christian burials based on such finds are ambivalent, to say the least, not exclusive or sensitive in any way.

Hopefully, I have illustrated the situation in the Eastern Necropolis where we can argue for the presence of both Christian or pagan burials at the same time. Most of the graves possess no characteristic features that could be linked to any religious groups, so it would be simply wrong and misleading to label the Eastern Necropolis as Christian. However, the field is currently in such a state that the framework within which it operates is limited and highly polarized – researchers are choosing between Christian and non-Christian (or pagan, or Roman) features of the site. There is a strong possibility that when such a decision is made, there is no further examination of singular contexts within the sites, which could lead the scholars to partially (or sometimes, completely) distort the image of the past. However, I believe that such a framework is misleading, and that we should try and find a better one which would include all particularities of the contexts we are dealing with. First of all, when doing research of the period of Late Antiquity, it is necessary to approach it with no presumptions. It is vital to observe the characteristics of each specific context in order to define the intentions of people whose activity left them to us. The use of written sources and analogies with other similar sites could be of great value, but only if previously put in the right context and with awareness of their limitations and subjectivity. Only then will we be able to approach all the complex issues that the research of the 4th-century necropolis has set before us, concerning not only the way people were buried but also how they lived in the period of constant crisis and turmoil.

Abandoning the polarized framework, as it is now, would allow us to greatly expand our knowledge of the past. So, instead of a world where Christianity became dominant immediately after (almost overnight) the 313 Edict of Milan (or any other year), thus wiping out all record of other cults, we should try and explore the world of intense interactions between different religious groups (cf. Cvjetičanin, 2013). Research conceived this way would allow us to delve into completely different issues concerning the social life of Remesiana inhabitants, but also the emergence of possible social crises that such religious tensions could have brought about.

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РЕМЕЗИЈАНА У 4. ВЕКУ: КАСНОАНТИЧКИ И/ИЛИ РАНОХРИШЋАНСКИ ЛОКАЛИТЕТ?

Апстракт: Слично ситуацији у остатку Европе, поља истраживања касне антике и раног хришћанства, још увек нису претпела већа методолошка и теоријска преиспитивања. Ослањајући се од самог почетка на друге дисциплине, пре свега историју уметности и историје, оба поља истраживања налазе се у непромењеној ситуацији већ деценијама. Термини “касноантички” и “ранохришћански” нису увек коришћени као искључиво хронолошка од-

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реднице. Напротив, често се користе да се у појаву коју описујемо учитају и различита културна значења. Ипак слојеви значења нису увек ни видљиви, а најчешће ни подразумевиви, па се употребом ових термина нужно мења и коначна интерпретација појаве, објекта или догађаја којим се бавимо. У овом тексту адекватност употребе ових термина тестирана је на локалитету који се често третира као ранохришћански и касноантички центар – Ремезијани. Правилном контекстуализацијом резултата истраживања, испоставља се да поред тога што је Ремезијана важна као хришћанско седиште епископа у 4. веку, она свакако баштини и објекте који говоре о дужој историји града. Фокусирањем на њене касне фазе (раног хришћанства и касне антике), затвара се приступ свим оним проблемима који излазе из тог оквира – нпр. проблемима друштвених и религијских тензија између хришћана и припадника других религија, присуства хришћана у периоду пре миланског едикта или преузимања и коришћења ранијих “паганских” пракси у новом хришћанском контексту.

Кључне речи: Касна антика, рано Хришћанство, Ремезијана, трансфер знања, терминологија.

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While writing the texts collected in this volume, the authors have been living through an extraordinary experience, coping with everyday tasks made more complex by the crisis we have been facing, and creating new habits necessary to navigate the new environment. Although exceptional from our point of view, our present experience is far from unique, and the human history is replete with turbulent periods of crisis, profoundly disrupting the habitual order.

The aim of this collection is therefore to investigate some of the situations of crisis in the past from the archaeological perspective, in a search for insights that may help us to better understand and cope with the present one. At the same time, the papers demonstrate some of the vast possibilities of archaeological investigation to contribute to our understanding of the world we live in, as well as of the past societies whose material traces we study.

