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A NEWLY-DISCOVERED ROMAN ALTAR FROM SURČIN

UDC: 904:726.591"652"(497.11)

930.2:003.071=124'02(497.11)

DOI: 10.2298/STA0959149V

Original research article

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Received: January 27, 2009

Accepted: May 4, 2009

Abstract. – The paper publishes the recent discovery of a Roman altar built into the Church of St Petka at Surčin, Greater Belgrade. From the palaeographic features of the inscription and the dedicant's gentile name, the altar has been dated to the second half of the second century. Examination of the published epigraphic corpuses reveals the existence of yet another, fragmented, altar from Surčin, and the author draws attention to an error in its publication. The paper offers an overview of the portable archaeological finds from Surčin which suggest an early Roman settlement (first century) in the *ager* of Bassianae.

Key words. – Surčin, altar, Pannonia Inferior, Church of St Petka, Aelius Marcianus, epigraphy.

During the restoration works on the Orthodox church of St Petka at Surčin, Greater Belgrade, the removal of plaster from the wall to socle height to prevent capillary action exposed an inscribed Roman stone altar built into the west wall 70 cm left of the portal (figs. 1 and 2).¹ The altar is carved of yellowish sandstone (H. 71.5 cm, W. 37 cm, D. 30 cm). Its upper part is wider and decorated with an elaborately moulded architrave (H. 14.5 cm) surmounted by an ornamental band (H. 8.5 cm) with volutes at the corners and a central pediment with a stylized rosette or wreath in the middle and a triangular motif on either side. The topside of the altar shows a concavity 12 cm wide and 8 cm deep (fig. 4). The altar being embedded in the wall, its lateral sides are not visible, while its 19-cm-high base is also elaborately moulded.

The five-line Latin inscription is executed in capitals within a square inscription field 29 cm x 29 cm (Fig. 5).

Apart from the 4.5-cm-tall first-line letters, the rest are 3.5 cm in height. The inscription reads:

*I(ovi) O(ptimo) M(aximo) | Ael(ivs) Mar | cianvs | pro se
e | t svīs | v(otum) p(osvit) l(ibens) m(erito)*

The form of the altar is that of votive *arae* with plinths decorated in relief combining the *ara* design with corner acroteria and voluted cushions. In that sense, the closest analogy is the altar of the veteran Iulius Ianuarius from Ruma, also dedicated to Jupiter and dated to the second century.²

¹ I want to express my gratitude to Mr. Nebojša Đokić who draw my attention to this find.

² Dautova-Ruševljan 1983, 21 (104), T. 18/ 2.

* The article results from the project: Urbanization and Transformation of the City Centers of Civil, Military and Residential Character in the Region of the Roman Provinces Moesia, Pannonia and Dalmatia (no. 147001) funded by Ministry of Science and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia.



Fig. 1. Roman altar from the Church of St Petka at Surčin

Сл. 1. Римски жртвеник из цркве Св. Петке у Сурчину



Fig. 2. Position of the Roman altar built into the Church of St Petka at Surčin

Сл. 2. Положај римског жртвеника узиданог у цркву Св. Петке у Сурчину

Some clues as to the date of the inscription are offered by its palaeographic features as well. The carefully chiselled letters in evenly arranged lines show emphasized triangular serifs on the upright and oblique strokes. The letter M shows the first and fourth uprights, and the oblique second and third strokes meeting at the baseline. The regular shape of the letter O is typical of the first and second centuries. The oblique lines of the letter A are symmetrical and equal in length, while the letter E has equal crossbars of medium length. The letter S is distinctive inasmuch as its curves end in triangular serifs, which may suggest the first decades of the third century as the date of the inscription.³

The ligature at the beginning of the first line is formed by joining the initial three letters of the gentile name Aelius in such a way that the crossbars added to the second oblique stroke of the letter A produce E within which L is emphasized by extending the lower crossbar. Yet, most clues as to its date come from the presence of the emperor Hadrian's gentile name which suggests the *terminus post quem* for setting up the altar,

while palaeographic features of the inscription favour the second half of the second century.

The Church of St Petka at Surčin is a baroque-style one-nave building with a semicircular apse on the east end and a choir chamber with a three-storey bell-tower on the west (Fig. 6). It was built on an earlier church site in 1770, which is probably when the altar was built into its west wall.⁴ The first known reference to Surčin churches dates from the first half of the eighteenth century. An overview of the churches in the Eparchy of Srem (Syr-mia) states that until 1732 the village of Surčin had a small wattle church with a roof covered with shingles. By order of the ecclesiastical authorities, it was replaced in 1773 with a wooden one which lasted until 1778, which is to say that it was still standing at the time of the construction of the existing church.⁵

³ Petrović 1975, 108–120.

⁴ Vujović 1973, 327–334

⁵ Vujović 1973, 329.



Fig. 3. Relief decoration of the Roman altar

Сл. 3. Деталъ рельефної украса римскої жрївеника

It seems quite certain that the reuse of the Roman altar for the new church was not merely caused by its being a suitable piece of building material. The use of Roman stone *spolia* for Christian churches was not uncommon in Serbia. As a readily available and ready-for-use material, Roman gravestones, altars and frag-

Fig. 4. Topside of the Roman altar

Сл. 4. Деталъ торње површине римскої жрївеника



ments of architectural sculpture were usually built into the church foundations and wall bases, as shown by the monuments built into the church of St Luke at Kupinovo.⁶ In some cases, ancient *spolia* were reused with the obvious intention to take advantage of their decorative effect, as shown by the monastery church of Nimnik near Kurjače⁷ and the Trinity Church at Nova Varoš.⁸ Roman gravestones from Ulpiana were built into the foundations of Gračanica, a fourteenth-century endowment of King Milutin of Serbia.⁹ It is worthy of note that Roman *spolia* were used as supports for the altar tables in Gračanica's side chapels. Thus the base of the altar table in the northern chapel shows two fragments of Roman monuments, one of which still bears a portion of an inscription. The upper slab of the altar table in the southern chapel is supported on a cubic Roman altar mounted upside down, as evidenced by its fragmentarily preserved inscription.¹⁰

Roman *arae*, *stelae* and fragments of sarcophagi in church contexts can also be seen functioning as gravestones, as evidenced by the altar in the nearby Monastery of Fenek.¹¹ Their presence in a churchyard or a monastic enclosure is sometimes an expression of reverence for

⁶ Brunšmid 1900, 198–199.

⁷ Спасић 1998, сл. 2, 3

⁸ Јовановић 2001.

⁹ Ђурчић 1999, 69, сл. 39, 98.

¹⁰ Ђурчић 1999, 51–52.

¹¹ The Roman *ara* reused as a gravestone in the eighteenth century can be seen west of the chapel of St Petka in the Monastery of Fenek; Вујовић 1973, 367, fig. 18.

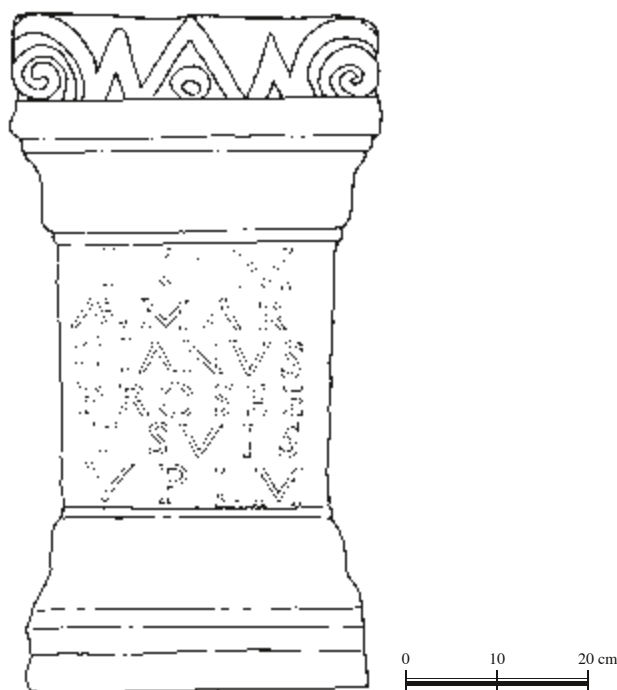


Fig. 5. Votive inscription on the Roman altar from the Church of St Petka at Surčin

Сл. 5. Војивни натпис са римској жртвеника из цркве Св. Петке у Сурчину

an earlier place of worship or burial, of sacral continuity, as shown, for example, by a Greek inscription in the churchyard of the Monastery of Tresija on Mt Kosmaj.¹²

As for the Surčin altar, it seems that the original intention was to make it accessible to the eye of the beholder, which is suggested by the fact that it was built into the wall at the church floor level with its front facing outward and so that the inscription was placed in the right position rather than annulled by re-chiselling or inverting. This is additionally corroborated by the presence of a semicircular recess (H. 83 cm, W. 66 cm, D. 30 cm) in the wall immediately above the altar. The top side of the altar with a circular cavity functions as its base (Figs. 2 and 4). What the purpose of the recess or the altar itself in the new context might have been is not quite clear, but there is no doubt that the reused monument was handled with special care.¹³ It should be noted that the Church of St Petka offers yet another example of reuse, but this time of a much later monument dating from a period shortly before the church was built: a funerary slab of white stone built into the floor of the western portal, which bears an inscription containing

the name of Nedeljko Milošev, died 22 October 1732, which is the time the old wattle church was still in place.¹⁴ The slab must have been transferred from the old church or churchyard and built into the existing church in the second half of the eighteenth century.¹⁵ The assumption that the altar of Aelius Marcianus was transferred from the original village church raises the question as to the purpose it had had in a Christian place of worship. What seems most plausible is that the Roman monument had functioned as the base of the altar table (or as the altar table itself?) and was then built into the west wall of the newly-built church in 1770.

Considering that the altar is mentioned neither in the detailed publication devoted to the Surčin church¹⁶, nor in the lists of archaeological sites compiled between the early 1900s and the 1970s¹⁷, it probably was hidden under plaster both at the time the interior was frescoed in 1811 and at the time of interior restorations undertaken in the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.¹⁸

The ancient name of Surčin is unknown, as is its status. It seems likely that it had the rank of village (*vicus*) or agricultural estate (*villa rustica*) which grew in the vicinity of a pre-Roman settlement, as suggested by comparatively plentiful La Tène finds.¹⁹ The modern village of Surčin is situated in south-eastern Srem, 20 km west of Belgrade (Map 1). In Roman times Surčin would have been located between the main road *Taurunum–Bassianae–Sirmium* and the river Sava in the south, in the administrative area of Bassianae. Modern Surčin is about 32 km southeast of Bassianae, whose area was bounded by the Sava and Danube rivers on the south

¹² IMS I, 150, 150.

¹³ It seems significant to mention a similar case of reuse. Brunšmid's notes about the archaeological finds from Kupinovo refer to the church of St Luke and the gravestone of a *decurio* of Bassianae built into the »niche where the fire for censers burns«; see Brunšmid 1900, 198.

¹⁴ Вујовић 1973, 334, сл. 12.

¹⁵ The canonical visitation reports that refer to the construction of the wooden church in the 1730s directly confirm the common practice of transferring church furnishings from an older to a newly-built church, the wooden one in this case. I express my gratitude to Professor Bransilav Todić for his suggestions and information about the construction and appearance of the earlier churches at Surčin.

¹⁶ Вујовић 1973, 327–334

¹⁷ Poturčić 1902, Brunšmid 1909, 232–238; Вулић 1930; Гарашанин 1951, 220.

¹⁸ Вујовић 1973, 331–332.

¹⁹ For the prehistoric finds from Surčin see Poturčić 1902, 232–9; Brunšmid 1902, 71; Hoffiler 1906/7, 194–200, fig. 4; Garasaniin 1951, 78–9.

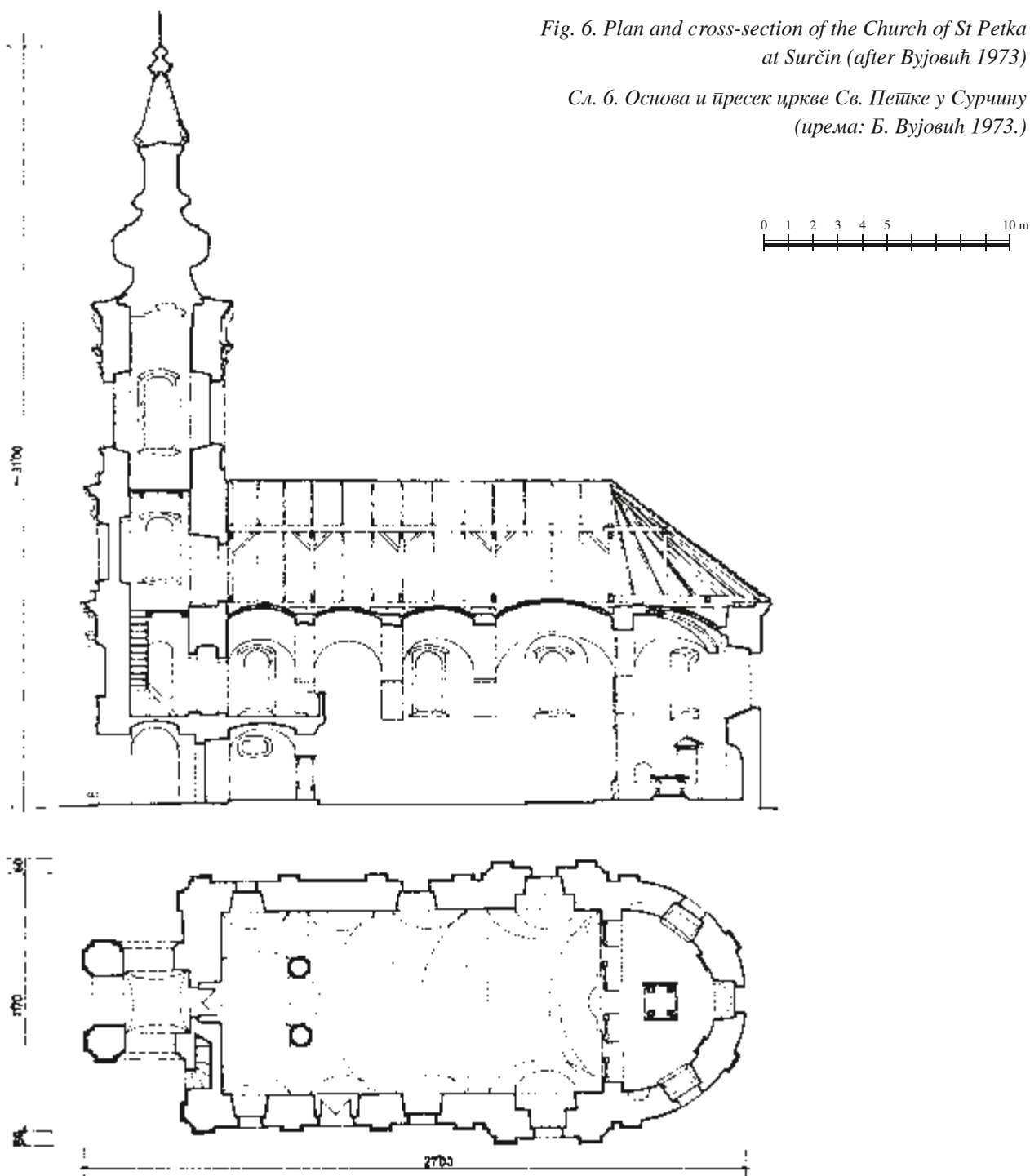
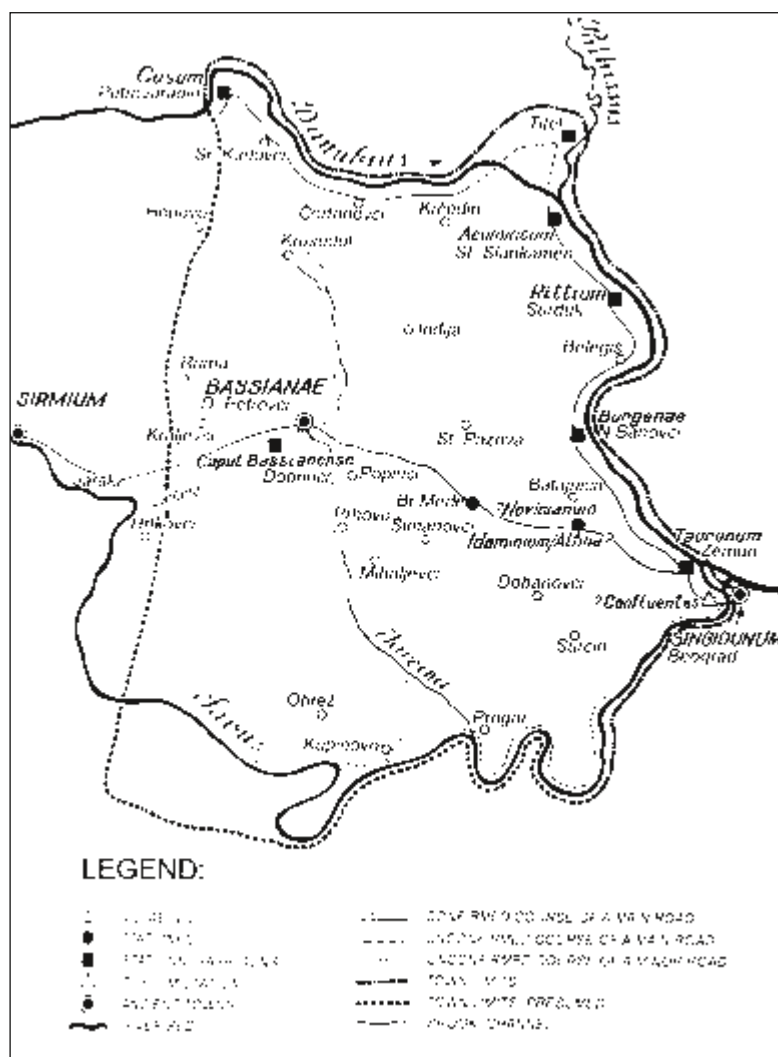


Fig. 6. Plan and cross-section of the Church of St Petka at Surčin (after Vujović 1973)

Сл. 6. Основа и пресек цркве Св. Петке у Сурчину (према: Б. Вујовић 1973.)

and east sides. Surčin sits on a high loess ridge which extends east to west from the Danube at modern Zemun. The soil there is exceptionally fertile but waterlogged, especially in the lower-lying parts that stretch south of the ridge towards the Sava floodplain. For agriculture in that part of Srem to be successful it was necessary to undertake extensive land drainage works, as evidenced

by the canals Galovica and Jarčina presumably dug as early as Roman times. In Roman times the surroundings of Surčin were covered with dense oak groves, a relic of which is modern Bojčinska Šuma (Bojčin Wood). They were gradually cleared for arable land, good-quality timber and fuel, necessary for the growth of farming estates, crafts and trade.



Map 1. The Bassianae area and the location of modern-day Surčin (after Dušanić 1967)

Карта 1. Територија Басијана и положај данашњеј Сурчина (према: Душанић 1967)

The portable archaeological finds of a Roman date from Surčin are mostly known from the reports that A. Poturčić and other local trustees sent to the then responsible museum in Zagreb, and from the texts of J. Brunšmid and V. Hoffiler who published some artefacts accidentally discovered when ploughing fields.²⁰ Despite the fact that the Surčin area has not been the subject of systematic archaeological survey and that no architectural remains of a Roman settlement have been registered, some finds corroborate the assumption that there may have been an estate with an agriculture-based economy, such as a fragmented sandstone upper millstone, fragmented storage jars, a lead-filled bronze steelyard weight.²¹ A few finds of bronze vessels manufactured in Roman toreutic workshops have been dated to as early as the turn of the Common Era. From the north-Italian bronze workshops comes the fragmented handle of a bronze casserole stamped with the mark of Norbanus and decorated with an ornament in the form of a swan's head.²² The output of this Aquileian

craftsman has been dated to a period between the last decade BCE and the middle of the first decade CE.²³ To the same period belongs the fragmented casserole handle showing the relief of a flying Eros influenced by Alexandrian bronze work.²⁴ Surčin has also yielded a bronze casserole with a circular opening on the flattened handle and the mark of P. Ansius Epaphroditus, a Capuan master of the second half of the first century.²⁵ In addition to the abovementioned bronze vessels, discovered on an

²⁰ Poturčić 1902; Brunšmid 1902; Brunšmid 1910–1911; Hoffiler 1903–1904; Hoffiler 1906–1907, 198–200.

²¹ Poturčić 1902, 235; Brunšmid 1910–1911, 107, sl. 704.

²² Poturčić 1902, 234; Brunšmid 1910–1911, 107, br. 704.

²³ Petrovsky 1993, 160, N. 15.1, Taf. 41.

²⁴ Hoffiler 1903–1904, 112.

²⁵ Hoffiler 1903–1904, 99, sl. 33, Hoffiler 1906–1907, 199–200, sl. 4.

Early Imperial necropolis, an early Romanization of the area is indicated by isolated coin finds, to mention but the large bronzes of the empress Agrippina, one bronze and two silver coins of Hadrian, and silver coins of the empress Sabina.²⁶

An exception in the archaeologically unexplored surroundings of Surčin is the site of *Kaludjerske livade* (Monks' Meadows) situated on the edge of a marsh within the village boundaries of Jakovo and Surčin, where a Roman settlement has been partly explored. The earliest evidence of occupation such as semi-sunken dwellings with kilns and a pottery production based on La Tène traditions suggest that the Roman agricultural estate grew on the site of an earlier native settlement. The agricultural iron tools discovered inside Roman-period structures suggest the agricultural character of the Roman settlement, while the coin finds indicate its continuity from the first to the fourth century.²⁷

The Surčin area has yielded few Roman epigraphic monuments. A fragmented altar (40 cm x 56 cm x 42 cm)

bearing the inscription: –] |*Cornvt(vs) |V(otum) s(olvit) l(ibens) m(erito)* was first recorded by Josip Brunšmid.²⁸ It was discovered in 1909 in front of the house of a Cveja Miljuš of Surčin and transferred to the Archaeological Museum in Zagreb. The inscription has since been published several times, but with an error in citation to which we would like to draw attention.²⁹

The altar from the Church of St Petka at Surčin indicates an intensified Romanization of the local population, which had begun in the early second century, a time when Bassianae was granted the rank of *municipium* confirmed by the emperor Hadrian.³⁰ As the dedicatory inscription contains no reference to the dedicant's occupation or status, whether he was a military or a civilian remains unknown. Since his name contains no pre-Roman onomastic traces, Aelius Marcianus was likely one of the second-generation natives who probably inherited Roman citizenship, which suggests the middle or second half of the second century as the most likely date of the altar.

²⁶ Poturčić 1902, 232, 234.

²⁷ Петровић 1996, 13–32; Црнобрња 1996, 33–36.

²⁸ Brunšmid 1910/11, 336, sl.744.

²⁹ After Brunšmid, the inscription was published in CIL III under no. 15137², and then again by A. Šašel and J. Šašel (1986, no. 3005), but without any reference to CIL III; moreover, their erroneous assignment of the CIL number (15137²) to an altogether different inscription, discovered in Zemun (IIJug. 3003), is a potential source of confusion.

³⁰ Dušanić 1967, 67–81; Milin 2004, 255.

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Резиме:

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НОВИ РИМСКИ ЖРТВЕНИК ИЗ СУРЧИНА*Кључне речи.* – Сурчин, жртвеник, Pannonia Inferior, црква Св. Петке, епиграфика.

Током радова на рестаурацији православног храма Св. Петке у Сурчину откривен је римски жртвеник са натписом (сл. 1, 2) рађен од жућкастог кречњака (димензије: 71,5 x 37 x 30 cm). У горњем делу жртвеник је проширен и украшен вишеструко профилисаним архитравом изнад кога се налази украсна трака на угловима декорисана волутама (сл. 3). На горњој површини видљиво је удубљење ширине 12 cm и дубине 8 cm (сл. 4). Бочне стране жртвеника уграђене су у масу зида тако да није извесно да ли на њима има рељефних представа. База жртвеника, висине 19 cm, такође је вишеструко профилисана.

Натпис је изведен латинском капиталом у пет редова (сл. 5). Висина слова у првом реду износи 4.5 cm, док су слова у осталим редовима висока 3.5 cm. Текст гласи:

I(ovi) O(optimo) M(aximo) | Ael(ivs) Mar | cianvs | pro se e|t sviv | v(otum) p(osuit) l(ibens) m(erito)

Палеографске карактеристике натписа дају извесне елементе за датовање жртвеника. Слова су клесана у правилно постављеним редовима, прецизно и са наглашеним троугаоном серифима на вертикалним и косим цртама. Слово М изведено је са вертикалном првом и четвртм цртом док се коса друга и трећа црта сустичу на доњој линији реда. Код слова О уочава се правилан кужни облик карактеристичан за натписе 1. и 2. века. Косе црте слова А постављене су симетрично и подједнаке дужине а слово Е поседује једнаке попречне црте умерене дужине. Специфичан је облик слова С са лучним цртама завршеним троугаоним серифима који би могли да определе натпис и у прве деценије 3. века.

Лигатура на почетку другог реда састављена је спајањем три почетна слова генитилног имена Aelius. Изведена је додавањем хоризонталних црта на другој косој црти слова А чиме је добијено слово Е у коме је, продужавањем доње хоризонтале, наглашено и слово L. Највише индиција за датовање даје појава генитилног имена цара Хадријана која указује на *terminus post quem* за подизање жртвеника из Сурчина. Према палеографским одликама текста он би се најпре могао определити у другу поповину 2. века.

Црква Св. Петке у Сурчину изграђена је у барокном стилу као једнобродна грађевина са полукружном апсидом на источној страни и припратом са хором и звоником на западу (сл. 6). Подигнута је 1770. године на месту старијих цркава, а то је и време када је узидан и сам жртвеник. Чини

се да је римски жртвеник није искоришћен само као погодан грађевински материјал већ да је имао посебну намену. Уграђен је са лица и у нивоу пода цркве тако да није негигантски преклесивањем или обртањем, већ постављен правилно са очигледном намером да буде видљив. Ово додатно поткрепљује постојање полукружне нише остављене у зиду непосредно изнад жртвеника (сл. 2, 4). Најизвеснијом се чини могућношћу да је римски споменик секундарно био искоришћен у првобитној цркви од плетера као база часне трпезе која је при изградњи нове цркве узидана у њен западни зид.

Антички назив евентуалног насеља на месту данашњег Сурчина није познат, као ни његов статус. Оно је вероватно имало статус села (*vicus*) или пољопривредног добра (*villa rustica*) које се развило у близини неког предримског насеља о чему сведоче релативно бројни налази из латенске епохе. Село Сурчин смештено је у југоисточном Срему, 20 km западно од Београда (карта 1). У време римске доминације он се налазио између римског пута *Taurunum–Bassianae–Sirmium* и реке Саве. У административном погледу ово подручје припадало је територији Басијана (*Bassianae*) од којих је Сурчин удаљен око 32 km ка југоистоку.

Римски епиграфски споменици на територији Сурчина су веома ретки. Забележен је само још један фрагментовани жртвеник са натписом: –] | *Cornvt(vs) | v(otum) s(olvit) l(ibens) m(erito)* који први публикује Јосип Бруншмид а убрзо потом бива заведен и у CIL III под бројем 15137². Исти жртвеник касније објављују А. и Ј. Шашел (IJug, 3005.) не наводећи, међутим, помен овог споменика у поменутом корпусу латинских натписа. Напротив, његов редни број (CIL III, 15137²) они ће приложити уз други натпис из Земуна (IJug, 3003), што не одговара истини и може довести у забуну.

Жртвеник из цркве Св. Петке у Сурчину сведочи о интензивнијем процесу романизовања локалног становништва који је започео у првим деценијама 2. века а то је и време када Басијане добијају статус муниципијума потврђен од цара Хадријана. Како у натпису посвете није забележена професија нити статус дедиканта, не можемо бити сигурни да ли се радило о војнику или цивилном лицу. Будући да у његовом имену нема трагова преримске ономастике, можемо предпоставити да је Елије Марцијан припадао другој генерацији становника аутохтоног порекла која је статус римског грађанина добила наследним путем, те се и сам жртвеник најпре може датovati у средину или другу половину 2. века.