

AN EARLY CHRISTIAN FRESCO FROM ŠTRBINCI NEAR ĐAKOVO

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The article describes an early Christian fresco discovered in 1991 at the site of Štrbinci near Đakovo (probably Roman Certissa), analyzes its style and iconographic symbolism, and places it in an archaeological and historical context. The fresco shows two facing peacocks flanking a vase, a Christogram, suns and stars in the interspaces, and is framed with a latticed ribbon. It is interpreted as an allegory of salvation and resurrection, of eternal life. On the basis of style, theme and archaeological context, the fresco is dated to the third quarter of the fourth century, and defined as the work of a local master.

THE SITE OF ŠTRBINCI AND HOW THE FRESCO WAS FOUND

Štrbinci is a rich archaeological site near the village of Budrovci (Đakovo Municipality) where finds of various kinds have been made throughout the last hundred years. More recently earlier chance finds were supplemented by protective archaeological excavations in which were unearthed a wealth of valuable and interesting late-Roman remains.¹ They all uphold the hypothesis that this was the site of Certissa (Cirtissa, Cirtisia, Certis, Certissia, Kertissa), mentioned by classical authors and recorded in the best-known Roman itineraries.²

Newer protective excavation, supplemented by archive research,³ and especially the chance find of the fresco described in this article, confirmed that Štrbinci is one of the potentially richest early Christian sites in the Croatian part of the Roman province of Pannonia. The fresco is certainly a first-class monument, an exception in the as yet rather sparse early Christian heritage of north Croatia. Considering how poorly the locality has been researched, Štrbinci abounds in finds of a truly outstanding nature unique in south-Pannonian early Christian archaeology. These include many marble gravestones with inscriptions, the base of a glass dish decorated with gold foil, and graves with a cruciform ground plan.⁴

When the army dug trenches in 1991 they found a grave with an early Christian fresco on the gable slab of the roof structure. In the upheaval of the war the grave was destroyed without being professionally examined, but the curator of the Đakovo Museum managed to save its most valuable part — this fresco. Although badly damaged, the fresco had everything necessary for a faithful reconstruction of what it showed. In 1994 it was restored in the Zagreb Archaeological Museum.⁵ The grave was photographed before it was destroyed (Fig. 1). It was a rectangular chamber built of large bricks joined by abundant mortar, located in a west-east direction. The sides and the floor were plastered, the roof was made of bricks placed at an angle to

form a pitched roof with two gables, and the fresco was painted on the inside of the east gable. This was a very common type of late Roman early Christian Pannonian grave.⁶ A woman was buried in it and her scattered bones, which were unfortunately not collected, show that the grave had been plundered in antiquity. Nevertheless, some items missed by the looters were found during excavation: a tin



Fig. 1. Grave with fresco at the moment of discovery
(Photo: I. Pavlović)

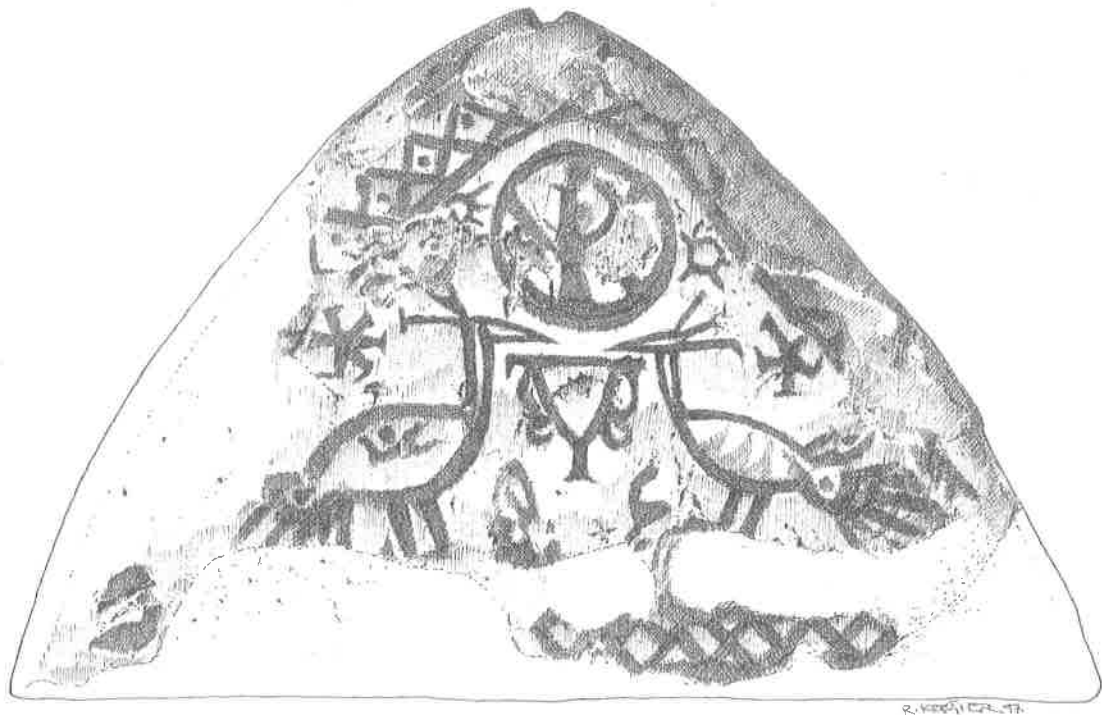


Fig. 3. Drawing of the fresco (drawing: Krešo Rončević)

ring, a bronze bracelet, bronze fittings for a jewel box, and beads of glass paste and gold foil (Figs. 3, 4, 5). All this indicates the wealth of the deceased and serves to date the grave.⁷

DESCRIPTION OF THE FRESCO AND FORMAL ANALYSIS

The fresco was painted on the gable of the roof, on a gently curving triangular surface (Figs. 2, 3). The pale reddish drawing fades into brown, but in places it has retained traces of the original bright red. It was made on the naturally yellow foundation of the top layer of plaster. One of the main impressions is that of *horror vacui*. A latticed ribbon frames the picture, and the upper row of rhombi have a point in the centre. The main accent are two peacocks flanking a vase, under a Christogram in a circle. The peacocks are awkwardly drawn and look more like stags, which were a known motif in this kind of early Christian iconography. Their necks are too long, their pointed heads continue straight into their beaks, and the three feathers on the top of the head look more like horns, especially on the left bird. The luxurious tails are very large and the decorations on the feathers are clumsily drawn.

Because of the inept drawing and the damage the fresco suffered, the shape of the vase between the birds can hardly be made out. The upper part gives the impression of a classical cantharus with two handles and a thin stem on a bell-shaped base, although its body has a very unusual triangular shape. Since the bottom part of the picture is badly damaged the shape of the lower part of the vase between the peacocks cannot be made out. It may have been an elongated two-story vase, or a simple cantharus on a base, altar or column. Both types appear on early Christian pictures in Pannonia and elsewhere.⁸

The remainder of the surface had paintings of astral bodies. There are two stylized Christogram-like six-pointed stars between the peacocks' heads and the framing ribbon, and two suns depicted as circles with wavy rays in the tri-

angular areas above the birds' heads, between the ribbon and the central Christogram.

The scene is simplified, stylized and schematized. The painting is in the linear impressionistic style with some almost expressionistic admixtures characteristic of early Christian frescoes. More will be said about this later.

ICONOGRAPHY AND SYMBOLISM

Experts have not yet managed to reach a consensus about symbolism in sepulchral art, although this has been a subject of intense discussion. In antiquity this art was definitely of a religious nature,⁹ and those who consider that happenstance and mere decoration played a small role in the art of the burial cult are probably nearer the truth, at least in the choice of motifs to decorate graves. Although every detail may not be connected to the symbolism of death, complete scenes in such places certainly were. In pagan graves faith in resurrection is only suggested, in Christian graves it is theologically thought out and celebrated. Images recalling the past life of the deceased are an exception to this rule, but what we said about symbolism in sepulchral art is generally still true.

Late Roman artists usually expressed themselves through allegory and metaphor, and colour had an undoubted emotional value.¹⁰ Before I begin to discuss the symbolic meaning of the fresco from Štrbinci, I would like to discuss the possible symbolical value of the red colour used to paint it.

As a rule early Christian frescoes had an underdrawing in red.¹¹ This technical procedure might easily make us think that red drawings resulted from extreme simplification and impoverishment of the medium in a provincial and poor environment where there were no skilled masters or demanding clients. There might be a degree of truth in this, especially since frescoes painted red throughout the Christian world from the third to the sixth century were as a rule schematic, with awkwardly drawn figures on the border of complete geometrical stylization.¹² However, this is



Fig. 2. Photography of the fresco (Photo: Nenad Kobasić)



Fig. 4. Ring (Photo: Nenad Kobasić)

not a general rule because many details on early Christian fresco indicate that red had a symbolical meaning.

Red is not a colour that is among the easiest to acquire and simplest to use, but it is nevertheless predominant on many multicoloured frescoes in Roman catacombs from the third and fourth centuries.¹³ In Byzantine art good angels are shown in red hues, to distinguish them from evil angels.¹⁴ Many epitaphs for the faithful, and especially for martyrs, on tombstones in Roman catacombs were written in red. Already a hundred years ago researches saw red as a symbol of victory acquired through the blood of martyrs.¹⁵

In all religious systems red is the colour of strength and power, of their magical foundation, but in the first place it is the colour of blood as a metaphor of strength and power. In divine symbolism red was connected, among other things, with Dionysus and Sol, and later with Christ, and it developed from an allegory of blood into the symbol of religious flame. From that evolved the symbolism of red as death for a new life, of a way of expressing immortality, and then it was a small step to make red denote the liturgy of martyrs and one of the favourite symbolical colours of Christianity.¹⁶ It is thus difficult to believe that red was generally used in early Christian burial art only for technical simplification, and that it had no symbolical meaning on paintings that were completely infused with death and resurrection.

It is not enough to explain the symbolism of colour. The individual motifs on the fresco must also be interpreted, and so must the whole scene. This is made more difficult because as a rule Christian symbols have different meanings that can only be interpreted in their contextual combination on the whole scene. Since contemporary sources rarely explained the iconography and symbols in early Christian art, we must use the Bible, liturgical and exegetical texts to interpret them.¹⁷

The Štrbinci fresco abounds in figures, it is full of symbolism in every detail and as a whole. The edge ribbon, which might logically be thought of as just a decorative frame for the picture, actually "carries" a complete symbolism indicating the physical setting of events in the *pars pro toto* sense. In the language of early Christian art this ribbon represents a schematized garden wall, it is an allegory of the Garden of Eden. Art historians generally accept this metaphor because it is firmly founded in biblical quotations, and in early Christian literary and epigraphical sources.¹⁸

In pre-Christian mythology the peacock is considered a divine bird and a metaphor of immortality, and this was adopted by Christian allegory. Pairs of facing peacocks appeared in Roman catacomb art in the first or second century, and in the third century the design of two birds of paradise drinking from a vase became common. The scene soon became so characteristic of early Christian art that it was given a Christian meaning regardless of the context in which it appeared, despite the fact that it had no foundation in literary sources or in theology. A double Christian content was recognized in it — the eucharist and the resurrection. In both cases the symbolism emerged from the motif of the cantharus with vines or containing water — the source of life. The eucharistic or soteriological meaning primarily stems from the location of the scene — it was found in churches or in places of burial. Its more precise symbolism was derived from its position in the church — in the presbytery or in the baptistery. St Paul's famous parables about death and resurrection in baptism (Rom. 6,3; Col. 2, 12) justify connecting a pair of animals shown by a well of life, placed in baptisteries, with the symbol of the resurrection. In presbyteries the scene also probably primarily emphasized the soteriological component of the eucharist, as the discovery of this obviously eucharistic metaphor in graves suggests.¹⁹ If we add the popularity of showing two animals drinking from the fountain of life in graves, it is not difficult to conclude that the deepest meaning of that scene lies in the dogma of resurrection and salvation.²⁰

There is no theological foundation in early Christian literature to interpret the symbolism of peacocks in this way. In antiquity Pliny the Elder was the first to write that peacock flesh is incorruptible. This was transmitted by St Augustine, but with no admixtures of eschatological symbolism. St Antony of Padua was the first to identify man with a peacock in connection with contemplation of immortality.²¹ The gap between Pliny's remark and medieval theological thought is filled by a large number of early Christian art scenes showing birds of paradise. They seem to justify the suggested symbolism of resurrection and immortality, which early Christian iconography obviously embraced without second thought.

Since early Christian literature gives no clear theological foundation for interpreting two peacocks and a vase as an allegory of the resurrection, we must consider the motif of a vase with water separately from the complete heraldic scene of various animals with a cantharus.

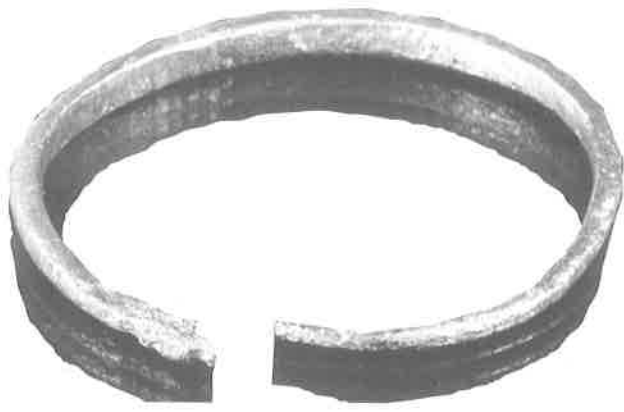


Fig. 5. Bracelet (Photo: Nenad Kobasić)

There are countless biblical allusions to water as the source of life or wisdom equalled to life (Prov. 3, 13-18; 8, 32-36; 20, 5; Sir. 14, 25-27; 15, 3; 24, 25-31; Ex. 35, 6; Isa. 35, 6; 55, 1; 58, 11; Jl. 4, 18; Zach. 14, 8). In New Testament eschatology it acquires the meaning of resurrection and eternal life, emerging from Christ's sacrifice (John 3, 5; 4, 10-14; 7, 37-39; 19, 34; Rev. 7, 17; 21, 6; 22, 1, 14, 17).²² The New Testament motif of the life-saving well climaxes in the words of St Paul (Rom. 6, 3-11) equalling death with baptism, and this with resurrection. This kind of cognitive and artistic allegory is suitable for a grave, and that is where the Štrbinci fresco was found.

The heraldic scene of animals beside a cantharus has its most impressive biblical foundation in Psalm 42 that begins: "As a deer longs for flowing streams..." Early Christian art joined these inspiring verses to the scene of two deer drinking from the fountain of life, and this had a convincing theological interpretation. The symbolism can obviously be applied to any two animals beside a vessel, in the first place birds of paradise, which is indicated by cases where pairs of deer and of peacocks appear together, or one after another in a row.²³

There is thus no doubt that the central motif on the Štrbinci fresco is an allegory of eternal life invoking resurrection for all Christians in the community, in the first place for the deceased in that grave. It is interesting that Pannonia is one of the few places where the scene of peacocks flanking a cantharus has a clear and unbroken development from the first century to the early Christian period. It appears in sculpture, mosaic and painting.²⁴ This is worth thinking about, especially as the motif of facing peacocks is not very common on paintings in Roman catacombs, although it does appear between the first and the fourth century. There the vase, the fountain of life, is usually shown with doves, and the bird of paradise is shown displaying its ornate tail, or together with other birds and animals.²⁵

Sometimes the well of life between two animals is not shown as a vase but with a cross or a Christogram, or that symbol is placed above a vase, like on the Štrbinci fresco.²⁶ That picture shows the essence of Christian soteriology in which the Old-Testament announcement of salvation comes about through the sacrifice on the cross of Him who is the way, the truth, and the life (John 14, 6). The representation of this thought dominates the Štrbinci fresco visually and symbolically through a Christogram in a round frame, placed above the vase and the peacocks.

The protective and victorious meaning of the Christogram is well known. This sign is an allegory of overcoming death, and as a metaphor of the resurrection it is especially suitable for graves.²⁷ The fact that the grave was found in Pannonia brings to mind what Victorinus of Poetovio (+ 304), the most distinguished early Christian church writer of that region, wrote about the resurrection in his eschatological papers; and also the acts of the Pannonian martyrs.²⁸ This theme is often shown in Pannonian early Christian art, primarily by displaying the Christogram on grave frescoes.²⁹

The Christogram on the Štrbinci fresco gets its complete meaning in combination with the stars and disks of the sun, which show Christ's solar aspect. As paganism declined, internally decomposed by mystery cults and the monotheistic inclination of people disappointed in the classical Roman religion, some pagan theologies adopted the idea of a supreme being. This being was all-encompassing and inexpressible, without beginning or end, and most powerfully present in the sky where it shone through the astral bodies, in the first place the sun.³⁰ In the second century this solar theology touched Christian thought, and it enabled Christianity to blend, overcome and finally defeat mystery religions, and then the cult in which it met its most dangerous adversary — the monotheistic celebration of the Invincible Sun (*Sol Invictus*).³¹

This kind of victory idea seems to dominate the Štrbinci fresco. The fact that it was painted in a grave indicates that it expresses victory over death through Christ's resurrection (the Christogram). This resurrection opens the gates of the Garden of Eden (the lattice wall) to the faithful (peacocks) who, drinking from the fountain of life (the vase with water), become participants in victory and universal eternity (suns and stars). Many details suggest that the peacocks should be identified with believers. Let us remember Psalm 42, where the soul (the believer) is compared with a deer; St Antony of Padua's thought about the immortality of the bodies of Christians and birds of paradise; and also the figures of Christians drinking from the well of life with the deer.³²

The Štrbinci picture has some special features within this theological foundation. Although its strong symbolism generally rejects any thought about some of the details being merely decorative, it seems that the person who planned it, or the artist, yielded to some conventions that diverge from the basic message. The rhombi of the upper part of the border (the wall of the Garden of Eden) have points in the centres. Frescoes that show the Garden of Eden more explicitly and naturally have completely recognizable, or more or less stylized, flowers in the lattice. The points shown on the Štrbinci fresco are doubtlessly a geometrical replacement of the original plant motif.³³ Perhaps the artist, although aware that he was drawing the wall of the Garden of Eden, lost from sight that he was replacing the flowers with points. Another explanation is even more interesting. The author of the scene might have purposely condensed the allegory of earthly and heavenly paradise to emphasize God's universal omnipresence. This is suggested by the rarely picturesque epitaph-poem of the priest Hilarion of Arles (449). Abounding in astral symbolism, in the last two verses it conjures up paradise as a place of flower gardens and the starry sky.³⁴

Be that as it may, it is the astral figures that make this fresco stand out from other similar ones. There is no doubt that they reflect the scene's theological background in solar Christology, which was commoner in early Christian

epitaphs than in grave paintings. Stone-carvers inscribed verses showing the thoughts of early Christian theologians on graves, and fresco painters gave them form on the walls of Christian graves.

Third and fourth-century catacomb paintings do sometimes show heavenly paradise — the universe, usually combined with the Christogram, but the allegory of earthly paradise with flowers and birds is much commoner.³⁵ This makes the Štrbinci fresco special because it shows rarer motifs, even more as these motifs allow deeper insight into the theological foundation of the scene. In early Christian art astral symbolism usually shows the sun and moon, moon and star, or all three together.³⁶ The Štrbinci fresco has no moon, in the precise weave of astral Christology a metaphor for the Church, the mediator of Christ's mercy and salvation for the faithful. The combination of sun and star, like on this fresco, is unusual but not unknown.³⁷ Was the moon left out as a deliberate theological message supporting the direct application of Christians (peacocks) to Christ (Christogram) in his universal majesty (astral figures)? This reading conflicts with other examples in Pannonia and elsewhere where the Christogram, the symbol of salvation and eternal life in the Garden of Eden, is held by leading apostles.³⁸ They are representatives of the highest clergy and the founders of churches, and in that guise mediators between Christ and Christians.

The choice of astral figures on the Štrbinci fresco can be interpreted in another way. If we interpret the two Christogram-like stars as symbols of the apostles, we get the opposite overall interpretation to the one first suggested, but similar to examples that include figures of the apostles.³⁹

Christian literature offers yet another possibility for reading the astral symbolism on the Štrbinci fresco, perhaps the most attractive. Describing the drama of Christ's death, an unknown fourth-century author of a resurrection homily said that at that moment the stars fell from the skies and the sun went out (because Christ is the light of the world and the morning star), and after the resurrection everything went back to normal.⁴⁰ Although the world shattered by Christ's death is usually shown with the sun and moon beside the crucifixion,⁴¹ the words of that homily, doubtlessly eschatologically founded, give one of the more convincing possibilities for interpreting the scene on the Štrbinci fresco.

We are still faced with the problem of how to interpret the fact that two stars and two suns are shown. It is easy to suggest various explanations for two stars (*pars pro toto* for Christians, apostles, or the celestial sphere as a whole), but more difficult to interpret the meaning of two suns. Are they a rising and a setting sun, combined with a starry night as a representation of the daily passage of time, a symbol of eternity? Are they just a heraldic motif, or something else that we cannot yet understand? From all that has been said there seems to be no doubt about the main symbolism (victory over death and resurrection) on the Štrbinci fresco, but all the details of early Christian sepulchral symbolism are not yet quite clear. Not only in this case but in general.⁴²

Another problem for which no satisfactory answer has yet been found in early Christian sepulchral art concerns how to recognize iconographic patterns and symbolism. This is the problem of who was the author of the motifs and scenes, and what was the role played by the artist and the client and his advisers, who had to have at least a vestige of knowledge about the theological foundation of art scenes.

There is a degree of general knowledge about this, but contemporary sources (inscriptions, the letters of church

fathers, priests and lay officials, documents of church councils) unfortunately offer only partial insight into the creation and use of iconographic patterns in early Christian art. We know that art workshops existed, and so did a more or less theologically educated clergy. In the first three centuries it seems that artists and Christians enjoyed almost unlimited freedom in that sense, which means that iconographic schemes created then, which continued to live on, mostly reflected personal interpretations of Christian teaching. This freedom seems partly to have continued into the fourth century, until church administration became dominant in all fields, including art.⁴³ However, there is no single rule and knowledge about these questions. A provision from the second church council in Nicea in 787 prescribed that theologians should envision holy scenes and describe them to the tiniest detail.⁴⁴ Bearing in mind the church's devotion to tradition, and also some late-Roman sources that explicitly assign envisioning holy scenes to priests as part of the new constitution of the Constantine church, it follows that what was legalized in the eighth century was unwritten law in earlier periods.⁴⁵

All this refers to early Christian art in general, especially representational art. Sepulchral art was protected to a degree by an atmosphere of privacy, not only in the fourth-century but in all periods. There are two solutions for the problem of how the design for the Štrbinci fresco was reached. The deceased, or her family, might have chosen a ready-made pattern from the artist (a travelling artist or a local workshop), regardless of whether it was created by lay believers, free artists, or was imposed by learned theologians. On the other hand, if the religious environment of early Christian Certissa was sophisticated enough, if it included theologically educated priests or laymen, the fresco might have been designed then and there for the needs of that specific burial. The latter is more convincing because this fresco, although based on the usual iconographic model, has some specific singularities that have no analogy in other places. In other words, a theologically educated person can be felt behind this picture on which motifs of recognizable symbolism are unusually combined but logically connected. We might assume that the early Christian church community in Štrbinci oversaw and guided the activities of an art workshop for the needs of Christian burials, modelled on the organization of Roman graveyards and the crafts and art workshops that served them?⁴⁶

For now it is not possible to do more than guess about these things. Nevertheless, what has to date been found in Štrbinci, especially in the light of how poorly the locality has been researched, makes it reasonable to suppose that early Christian Certissa had an organized church community with a church, graveyard, and possibly local craftsmen and artists.⁴⁷

DATING THE FRESCO AND ITS ENVIRONMENTAL CONTEXT

The Štrbinci fresco is the only early Christian sepulchral painting found in north Croatia, i.e. in the Croatian part of Roman Pannonia. Fragments of frescoes from the basilica in the Roman baths, which was turned into an early Christian church in the second half of the fourth century, were found in Varaždinske Toplice (*Aquae Iasae*). One of the fragments, of high artistic value, shows the wreathed head of a bearded saint in dark colours. Another, which is faded, shows the lattice motif, the allegory of the Garden of Eden, painted in red and green on a yellowish background.⁴⁸

The lack of material for comparison in the nearer environs makes it rather difficult to pinpoint the Štrbinci monument in time and in space. To do so we must rely on the basic features of early Christian fresco painting in general, and especially on finds in neighbouring Hungary, the northern part of Roman Pannonia, which is relatively rich in such material.

Early-Christian sepulchral frescoes got their basic attributes in the third and fourth centuries, but they continued to develop. They were executed in a linear-impressionistic style that is sometimes combined with the illusionistic style of the preceding period. On polychrome paintings all the basic colours were used but red was often dominant. Some frescoes, as a rule the nonrepresentational ones or those that were completely stylized, were painted only in red. Bucolic and pastoral motifs prevailed as allegories of happiness, and above all scenes or motifs that symbolized victory over death, and resurrection. In spite of exhaustive research throughout several centuries, no final answers have been found for many aspects of the iconography and style, the dating and the artistic evaluation of early Christian sepulchral painting. It is certain, however, that some kind of general early Christian painting *koine* existed, in whose framework provinces, towns and smaller communities, and their workshops, developed their own styles. It is important to emphasize that direct incentives need not have come from Rome, as was usually thought.⁴⁹

The relatively large number of frescoes in early Christian graves in Hungary indicates that the Štrbinci fresco may not be the only one in the Croatian part of Pannonia. In Pécs (*Sopianae*) and at other localities in Hungary a large number of representational paintings were found, most of them polychrome. They were painted in the linear-impressionistic style and show a great variety of motifs, from carefully rendered human figures to stylized shapes and completely geometric linear abstractions. The only fresco painted in red that I know from literature was found in Alsóhetény. The drawing is extremely simplified, a clumsy linear schematization. The predominant theme is resurrection and salvation, emphasized with a Christogram.⁵⁰

Hungarian literature records that early Christian frescoes found there were made in the *al secco* technique, but some descriptions indicate the classical *fresco* technique.⁵¹ The Štrbinci fresco was made in a partial *fresco* technique on a surface layer that was not wet enough before the paint was applied.⁵² This is probably why the original red hue was lost, but all the same the picture did not dry out and peel off.

Although Hungarian experts recognize oriental influence in particulars, they consider that early Christian art in Hungary was directly inspired from Rome, at least in the case of the better frescoes showing the human figure and complex representational compositions. They suggest that local masters worked under the wing and following the instructions of travelling artists.⁵³ However, judging from data in accessible literature, the problem of style and dating has in many cases not yet been satisfactorily solved, i.e. no general solution has been found. Different experts often date the same fresco to different times, mostly to the fourth and exceptionally to the beginning of the fifth century.⁵⁴

Several frescoes in *Moesia*, the province adjoining Pannonia, show similar themes and style. The fresco from Niš (*Naissus*) with the figures of apostles flanking a Christogram, in the Garden of Eden, is dated to the second half of the fourth century.⁵⁵

Everything seems to indicate that it is not right to date the simpler, linear, as a rule low-quality frescoes earlier than those that are stylistically and technically superior and more attractive.⁵⁶ This is evidenced by examples of coin-dated single-layer sites at which excellent, multicoloured representational frescoes were found alongside poorer and extremely simplified ones. Or where the same grave contained a mixture of elements that would indicate chronological difference if excellence of style was used for determination.⁵⁷

How can we date and analyze the style of the Štrbinci fresco in the light of what we know about early Christian fresco painting in general, and in Pannonia and Moesia in particular? The difficulty is that no close analogies exist in the neighbouring areas. The Garden of Eden lattice, the central scene of peacocks flanking a vase, the Christogram, astral symbols — are all common on sepulchral frescoes everywhere, but to the best of my knowledge this is the only composition where they are all united. There are few places like Pannonia, in which the motif of peacocks flanking a vase continued smoothly and naturally, with neither a time break nor major iconographic shifts, from stone-carvings in the first to the third century, to early Christian paintings in the fourth and fifth centuries.⁵⁸ In spite of the guaranteed popularity of that motif in Pannonia, it does not appear as the central scene and the skeleton of compositions in the early Christian period. On the other hand, the scheme realized in Štrbinci is usual in other parts of the Christian world outside Pannonia. What makes the Štrbinci fresco unique in Pannonian and generally in early Christian sepulchral painting is the unusual choice for the allegory of the Garden of Eden. It is shown as the universe inhabited by celestial bodies, not as the usual flower garden. This choice recalls a quotation by Ambrosius, Bishop of Milan and Father of the Church from the fourth century, suggesting that Christian astral theology was much more common in western than in eastern resurrection symbolism.⁵⁹ In this context the resurrection homily, earlier mentioned as the possible liturgical foundation for representing the universe with sun and stars, is shown in a new light and gains in conviction.⁶⁰

In the section about symbolism we already mentioned the use of red in early Christian frescoes, but can we use red to date early Christian frescoes and place them in an environmental context? Red early Christian paintings are much rarer than those in polychromy, as a rule they are simpler, but this cannot be used to date them. They keep appearing between the third and the seventh century.⁶¹ The most impressive fresco in red outlines that I know of, in some thematic details close to the Štrbinci fresco, is that from a grave in Niš dated to the fifth/sixth century. Its seemingly disorderly arrangement of plant motifs (probably a multiplied metaphor of the tree of life), celestial bodies and monogrammatic crosses shows the combined earthly and celestial symbolism of paradise with amazing ingenuity.⁶² In Priscilla's catacombs in Rome the walls of the room called *cubicolo dei bottai*, dated to the end of the third century, have representational scenes predominantly painted in dark red and orange shades. Especially interesting for us is the fresco showing a bird sitting on a cantharus painted in red contours in a linear-geometrical style.⁶³

The walls of a rather late grave in the Salonitan Manastirine graveyard were painted with a geometrically stylized and unrecognizably distorted allegory of the Garden of Eden, but there grey shades were combined with red.⁶⁴

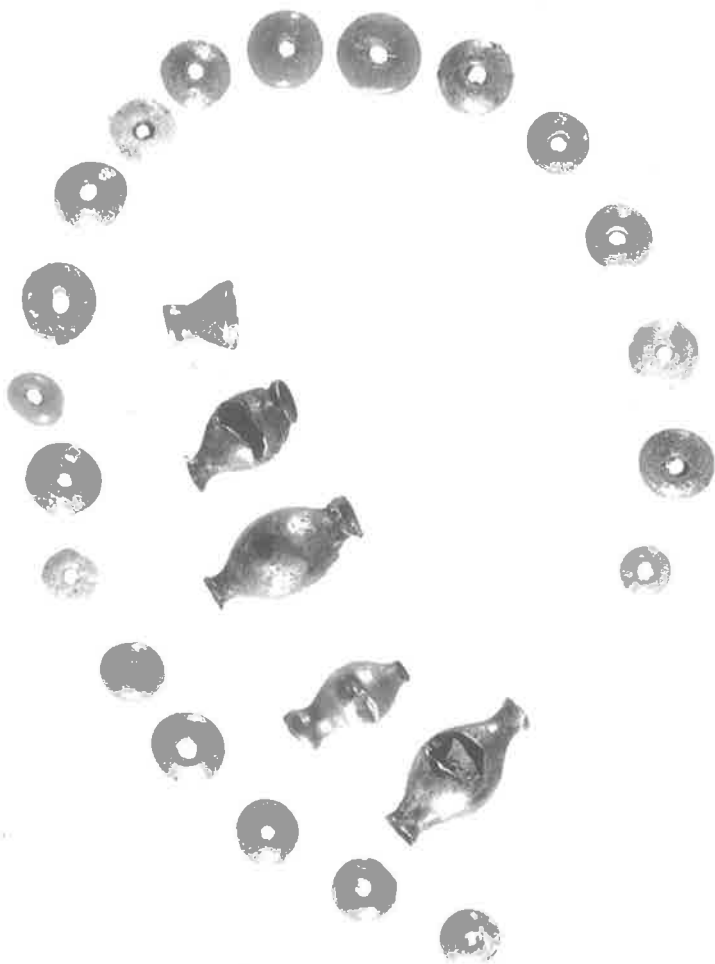


Fig. 6. Beads from a necklace. (Photo: Nenad Kobasić)

There is a grave in a rock near the so-called White Monastery at Sohag in Egypt. It has white walls on which inept and simple red outline drawings of various scenes and figures (lion, orants, crosses, birds and so on) were made, dated to the seventh-eighth century.⁶⁵ The Alsóhetény fresco in Hungary painted in red outlines is an example of an extremely awkward and geometrically stylized picture of a tree of life within the lattice of the Garden of Eden.⁶⁶ Poor in detail and grotesquely disfigured, it cannot be compared with the Štrbinci picture in anything but in basic theme.

A cursory review of frescoes drawn in red from various regions indicates that the red colour of the Štrbinci fresco belongs to the symbolism of sacrifice and resurrection that is shown in the basic scene. This is probably the main reason why it was used, not stylistic or chronological reasons.⁶⁷

What we have said so far indicates that the style and iconography of our fresco, and their comparison with kindred pictures in neighbouring and distant regions, cannot be used for reliable dating. Although the Hungarian frescoes and those in Varaždinske Toplice are all dated to the fourth century, later related examples from distant regions enjoin additional investigation,⁶⁸ not only to confirm dating within the fourth century, but perhaps to narrow the time period down. This investigation might entail analyzing the circumstances of the find, however little we know about them, analyzing the grave finds, and the shape and arrangement of the tomb. The grave in which the fresco was found was looted in ancient times. It

was located in a late Roman graveyard, of which only about ten graves have as yet been excavated.⁶⁹ The looters missed some grave goods: bronze fittings for a chest, which cannot be used for precise dating,⁷⁰ and various items of jewelry which are more reliable.

Rings are found in late Roman graves in Pannonia more rarely than other kinds of jewelry, and they are less well documented because they are often so damaged that their shape is difficult to make out. Analogies can be found for the specimen from Štrbinci, mostly dated to the fourth century (Fig. 4).⁷¹ The bronze bracelet represents a snake's body, one end is the head, the other a pointed tail (Fig. 5). It belongs to the broader group of jewelry ending in snake heads that appeared in the third century, was common in the fourth, and after that went out of fashion. The Štrbinci variant with a head and a tail instead of two heads is not so common but this does not seem to have chronological implications.⁷² Lenticular beads were the commonest form of necklace in Pannonian fourth-century graves, while barrel-shaped beads of gold foil, which were more expensive and luxurious specimens, were usually rarer (Fig. 6).⁷³

All these types of jewelry date from the late third to the end of the fourth century, but were most often found in graves dated by coins from 337 to the end of the fourth century. Therefore the time span obtained by analyzing the jewelry found in the grave corresponds with the period to which most of the Hungarian frescoes were dated (second half of the fourth century), but it cannot be used to further narrow down the period. Despite doubts about the accuracy and method of using coins for dating,⁷⁴ coins found in graves excavated in the immediate vicinity of the grave with the fresco should be decisive. Coins of Constantius II (355-361) and Jovian (363-364) were found there,⁷⁵ which indicates that the nearby grave with the fresco should be dated to the third quarter of the fourth century, i.e. to the second half of the century, but not to its end.

The shape of the grave supports this narrowed-down time period, because in Pannonian necropolises and elsewhere the pitched gable roof, characteristic of the whole fourth century, was at the end of that century replaced by a roof made of horizontally-placed slabs or bricks.⁷⁶ Another fact that supports the suggested dating concerns the apocalyptic letters. After the mid-fourth century the letters *alpha* and *omega* appeared beside Christograms on coins, and in the second half of that century they began to appear on various objects of use and decoration.⁷⁷ They were not painted beside the Christogram on the Štrbinci fresco, which indicates that it dates from the middle and not from the end of the fourth century. In short, various details, each of which might not by itself have the necessary "weight" for dating, all together convincingly date the Štrbinci fresco to the third quarter of the fourth century.

* * *

The suggested dating and similar examples we analyzed, or to be more precise, the lack of material for comparison, make the Štrbinci fresco a single and singular example to date in the Croatian part of Pannonia, even in the whole of that Roman province.

Comparison with a fresco that is similar in time, region and content — the fresco from Alsóhetény showing the tree of life in the Garden of Eden — loses in importance and relevance when the sparse awkwardness of the Hungarian picture is matched with the compositionally intricate but

harmonious and symbolically complete scene of the Štrbinci fresco. The latter is of higher quality not only in iconography and symbolism, i.e. in theological foundation, but also in style and execution. Its prevalent early Christian linear impressionism is combined with a special kind of illusionistic quality.⁷⁸ This is seen in the apparently strange blend of cumbersome, almost grotesque details, with the way in which they were composed, which leaves the impression of extraordinary harmony between conception and brush-stroke. Even the crowded surface is not perceived as the usual clutter of *horror vacui*, but as an organized combining of elements in a message that is effective only when all the details are shown.

In basic characteristics of style and iconography the Štrbinci fresco does not stand out from the early Christian painting *koinē*. Paintings in Roman catacombs also sometimes combine second-hand technique and style with a wealth of meaningful, thought-out and attractively presented motifs.⁷⁹ Because of many special features and deviation from other similar material, the Štrbinci fresco is seen as a local work free of direct influence from any other

important Christian art centre. It must be mentioned that the site of Kamenica near Vinkovci, which has to date only been sounded but not researched, probably has an early Christian memorial-graveyard. Frescoes drawn with two lines were found there — a thicker dark-brown line and a thinner red-brown line.⁸⁰ They probably frame a scene that was also drawn in these hues, similarly to the Štrbinci picture. At present this is only guesswork, and so are possible links between the two early Christian towns, Vinkovci (*Cibalae*) and Štrbinci (*Certissa*). Certissa is equidistant from the early Christian bishoprics in Osijek (*Mursa*) and Vinkovci (*Cibalae*), and probably belonged to one of them.

Only systematic archaeological research would answer these questions and show whether this fresco was isolated within its immediate environment. All we know about Štrbinci suggests that it was not. The real question is, on what level of religious knowledge and feelings did the symbolism of the scene it shows communicate with the local Christians. In other words, what was the form and scope of the material and spiritual culture of the early Christian community in Roman Certissa.

Abbreviations

AE	Archaeologiai értesítő, Budapest
AI	Archeologia Jugoslavica, Ljubljana - Beograd
ActaArchHung	Acta Antiqua Scientiarum Hungaricae, Budapest
CahArch	Cahiers Archéologiques, Paris
Corso	Corso di cultura sull'arte ravennate e bizantina, Ravenna
DACL	Dictionnaire d'archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie (ed. F. Cabrol and H. Leclercq), Paris
JPME	Janus Pannonius Muzeum Évkönyve, Pécs
MUAW	Mitteilungen des Archäologischen Instituts der ungarischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Budapest
RAC	Rivista di Archeologia Cristiana, Roma.
VAMZ	Vjesnik Arheološkog muzeja u Zagrebu

¹ J. BRUNŠMID, *Arheološke bilješke iz Dalmacije i Panonije*, IV, in *Vjesnik hrvatskog arheološkog društva*, n.s. vol. V, Zagreb 1901, 137-139; B. RAUNIG, *Dva kasnoantička groba iz okolice Đakova*, in *VAMZ*, 3. ser., sv. XII-XIII (1979-1989), 1980 151-169; Z. GREGL, *Kasnoantička nekropola Štrbinci kod Đakova* (Istraživanja 1993. g.), in *Opuscula archaeologica* 18, Zagreb 1994, 181-190.

² B. RAUNIG, *op. cit.* (1), 166.

³ Comparison of the references from the literature with data from the 19th century books of inventories of the Archeological Museum in Zagreb, the then National Museum, almost certainly confirm that the epigraphic fragments whose place of origin was until not long ago considered to be Osijek (Roman Mursa) were in fact found in Štrbinci. Compare "Od nepobjedivog Sunca do Sunca Pravednosti", *Rano kršćanstvo u kontinentalnoj Hrvatskoj*, Katalog izložbe, Zagreb 1994, 103-104, cat. n. 114-118.

⁴ "Od Nepobjedivog Sunca...", cat. numbers 114-118 and 155-163.

⁵ Reconstruction operations were carried out by the restoration expert Emil Pohl.

⁶ INTERCISA I, 144 (Intercisa II-II, *Geschichte der Stadt in der Römerzeit*. Budapest 1954-1957).

⁷ It is well known that robberies were in ancient times cleverly directed towards the most luxuriously equipped graves, and it is therefore more the rule than a rarity to find remaining examples of relatively less valuable ornaments, golden too. INTERCISA I, *op. cit.* (6), 150; E. B. VAGO - I. BONA, *Die Gräberfelder von Intercisa. Die spätromische Südostfriedenhof*, Budapest 1976, 150.

⁸ Cf. L. BARKÓCZI, *Ein dakischer Dolmetscher in Brigetio*, AE V-VI (1944-1945), 1945, 184-192, Taf. LXXI/1; LXXI/4; F. VAN DER MEER — CHR. MOHRMANN, *Bildatlas der frühchristlichen Welt*, Amsterdam 1959, 94, Abb. 263; H. LECLERCQ, *DACL II* (2) 1925, 3303, Fig. 2374 (s.v. Cerf, 3301-3307), *DACL XIII*, 1937, 1086, Fig. 9609 (s.v. Paon, 1075-1094); J. WISEMAN — Đ. MANO-ZISI, *Excavations at Stobi*, *American Journal of Archaeology* 76/4, 1972, 407-424, Pl. 90, Fig. 42,47; T. VELMANS, *Quelques versions rares du thème de la fontaine de vie dans l'art paléochrétien*, *CahArch* XIX, 1969, 34.

⁹ G. KOCH — H. SICHTERMANN, *Römische Sarkophage*, München 1982, 538-623; L. CASTIGLIONE, *Dualité du style dans l'art sepulcral égyptien à l'époque romaine*, *Acta AntHung* IX (1-2), 1961, 230; P. BARGEBUHR, *The Paintings of the "New Catacomb of the Via Latina and the Struggle of Christianity against Paganism"*, Heidelberg 1991, 35; O. MARUCCHI, *Éléments d'archéologie chrétienne*, Vol. I (Notions générales), Paris - Rome 1906, 269; E. SALIN, *La civilisation mérovingienne*, IV, Paris 1959, 7, passim; R. TURCAN, *Les sarcophages romains et le problème du symbolisme funéraire*, *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* II. 16.2, Berlin - New York 1978, 1700-1735; S. CH. MURRAY, *Rebirth and Afterlife. A Study of the transmutation of some pagan imagery in early Christian funerary art*, *British Archaeological Reports*, Intern. Ser. 100, 1981, 27; F. MÚTERICH, *Book Illumination at the Court of Louis The Pious*, in *Charlemagne's Heir, New perspectives on the Reign of Louis the Pious (814-840)*, Oxford 1990, pp. 593-604.

¹⁰ Cf. W. DORIGO, *Pittura tardoromana*, Milano 1966, 92, 302-305.

¹¹ O. M. DALTON, *Byzantine Art and Archaeology*, Oxford 1911, 257; H. LECLERCQ, *DACL V* (2), 1922, 2590-2591 (Fresques, 2586-2693).

¹² O. M. DALTON, *op. cit.* (10), 286; S. PELEKANIDIS, *Die Malerei der konstantinischen Zeit*, Akten des VII Intern. Congr. Christl. Archäol., Città del Vaticano - Berlin 1969, 2125-229; E. TÓTH, *Vorbericht über die Ausgrabungen der Festung un des Gräberfeldes von Alsóhétenyi*, 1981-1986. Ergebnisse und umstrittene Frage, *AE CXIV-CXV/1* (1987-1988), 1988, 61; P. TESTINI, *Archaeologia cristiana*, Roma 1958, 252; C. CARLETTI, *L'ipogeo anonimo della Via Paisiello sulla Salaria vetus*, *RAC XLVII* (1-2), 1971, 116; A. FERRUJA, *Scoperta di una nuova regione della catacomba di Commodilla (II)*, *RAC XXXIV*, 1958, 5-56; Una nuova regione della catacomba dei ss. Marcellino e Pietro, *RAC XLVI* (1-2), 1970, 7-83; H. LECLERCQ, *op. cit.* (10), 2590-2592; C. PAVIA — C. MOCCHEGIANI CARPANO, *Roma sotterranea e segreta*, Milano 1958, 123-124, Fig. 108-110; C. M. KAUFMANN, *Handbuch der altchristlichen Epigraphik*, Freiburg 1917, 304.

¹³ Cf. the references in the previous note.

¹⁴ P. VERZONE, *Od Teodorihia do Karla Velikog*, Novi Sad 1973, 114.

¹⁵ P. TESTINI, *op. cit.* (11), 258; C. M. KAUFMANN, *op. cit.* (11); H. LECLERCQ, in: *DACL III* (2), 1948, 1966 (s. v. Cinabre, 19665-1671).

¹⁶ E. SALIN, *op. cit.*, (9), 92; J. CHEVALIER — A. GHEERBRANT, *Rječnik simbola* (ed. B. Donat), Zagreb 1994, 79-81 (Crveno); *Leksikon ikonografije, liturgike i simbolike zapadnog kršćanstva* (uredio A. Badurina), Zagreb 1979, 186 (Crveno).

¹⁷ Usp. S. CH. MURRAY, *op. cit.* (9), 8-9.

¹⁸ O. MARUCCHI, *Le catacombe romane*, Roma 1933, 167 Fig. 42; F. FÜLEP, *Early Christian Cemetery at Pécs*, No. 6. Geisler Eta Street, *AE XCVI/1*, 1969, 42; Z. KÁDÁR, *Lineamenti dell'arte della Pannonia nell'epoca dell'antichità tarda e paleocristiana*, Corso XVI/1969, 179-201; D. E. GAMALERO, *La Chiesa Paradiso e l'Inno di ringraziamento*, Atti del Congr. Intern. di Archeol. Cristiana X/2, Città del Vaticano - Thessalonique 1984, 121-132; D. NEIMAN, *Eden, the Garden of God*, *ActaAntHung XVII* (1-2), 1969, 109-124; S. PELEKANIDIS, *op. cit.*, (11), 225-227; L. MIRKOVIĆ, *La nécropole paléochrétienne de Niš*, AI I, 1956, 93-100; F. P. BARGHEBUR, *op. cit.* (9), 89.

¹⁹ This is the matter of the motif of two peacocks (second half of 2nd century), supporting the wreath above the scene of a funerary feast in the catacombs of St Peter and St Marcellinus. A. FERRUJA, *op. cit.* (11 - 1970, 23-25). There is an enormous literature about the motif of the facing peacocks. Cfr. O. M. DALTON, *op. cit.* (10), 185; S. PELEKANIDIS, *op. cit.* (11), 225; F. P. BARGHEBUR, *op. cit.*, (9), 89; D. E. GAMALERO, *op. cit.* (17), 128-129; L. NAGY, *Le lapidi sepolcrali del vecchio cimitero israelitico di Laktanya-utca in Budapest*, *AE V-VI* (1944-1945), 1945, 135; C. F. MAWER, *Evidence for Christianity in Roman Britain. The small finds*, *British Archaeological Reports*, Brit. Ser. 234, 1955, 60 passim; J. JELIČIĆ-RADONIĆ, *Ranokršćanske dvojne crkve u Starom Gradu na Hvaru*, Split 1994, 69-78; F. VAN DER MEER — CHR. MOHRMANN, *op. cit.* (8), 97-133; D. FORSTNER, *Die Welt der christlichen Symbole*, Innsbruck 1982, 230-232; T. VELMANS, *op. cit.* (8); D. DIMITROV, *Le système décoratif et la date des peintures murales du tombeau antique de Silistra*, *Cah Arch XII*, 1962, 40; J. HABERL, *Lebensbaum und Vase auf antiken Denkmälern Oesterreiches*, *Jahreshefte des Oesterreichischen Archäologischen Institutes in Wien XLIII* (1956-1958), 1958, 222-247.

²⁰ Cf the references in the previous note. About the source of life cf also LEKSIKON *op. cit.* (15), 230-231 (Fons vitae); D. NEIMANN, *op. cit.* (17), 118-123.

²¹ H. LECLERCQ, *op. cit.* (8-1837), 1075-1076.

²² Cfr. n. 19.

²³ Cfr. T. VELMANS, *op. cit.*, (8), 38-39; D. RENDIĆ-MIOČEVIĆ, *Salonitana christiana. O solinskom baptisterijalnom kompleksu — cathecumeneum ili consignatorium?* *Zbornik Narodnog muzeja VIII*, Beograd 1975, 258-263, fig. 3; G. CVETKOVIĆ-TOMAŠEVIĆ, *Mosaic Pavement in the Nartex of the large Basilica*, Heraklea III, Bitola 1967, 46-61.

²⁴ L. NAGY, *op. cit.* (18), 135; J. HABERL, *op. cit.* (18), 222-225.

²⁵ H. LECLERCQ, *op. cit.* (100), 2603-2609.

²⁶ F. VAN DER MEER — CHR. MOHRMANN, *op. cit.* (8), 97, Abb. 270; 133, Abb. 421.

²⁷ B. MIGOTTI, *"Sol iustitiae Christus est" (Origenes). Odrzi solarne kristologije na ranokršćanskoj građi iz sjeverne Hrvatske*, *Diadora* 16-17, Zadar 1995, 275-276.

²⁸ R. BRATOŽ, *Kršćanstvo v Ogleju in na vzhodnem vplivnem območju oglejske cerkve od začetkov do nastopa verske svobode*, Ljubljana 1986, 101-102.

²⁹ Z. KÁDÁR, *op. cit.* (170, 187; L. MIRKOVIĆ, *op. cit.* (17), 89-93.

³⁰ F. CUMONT, *Die orientalischen Religionen im römischen Heidentum*, Stuttgart 1959, 188.

³¹ B. MIGOTTI, *op. cit.* (26), 267-269.

³² Cfr. n. 20 and T. VELMANS, *op. cit.* (8), 38-39. Various animal figures on the mosaic floor of the north hall of the cathedral in Aquileia are also interpreted as possible metaphors of the stay in heaven of dead believers of Aquileia. B. BAGATTI, *Note sul contenuto dottrinale dei mosaici di Aquileia*, *RAC XXXIV* (1-4), 1958, 131-133.

³³ Cfr. n. 17.

³⁴ "GRAMINA ET HALANTES DIVINIS FLORIBUS HORTOS SVBIECTASQVE VIDET NVBES ET SIDERA CAELI." Cfr. C. M. KAUFMANN, *op. cit.* (11), 202.

³⁵ O. MARUCCHI, *op. cit.* (9), 286; T. VELMANS, *op. cit.* (8), 40, n. 27.

³⁶ H. LECLERCQ, *DACL I* (I), 1924 (Astres, 3005-3033).

³⁷ H. RAHNER, *Symbole der Kirche*, Salzburg 1964, 104 passim. Combined sun and star motifs are found on a jug from *Pontes* dated the end of the 3rd or beginning of the 4th century AD and linked with agricultural rituals. S. PETKOVIĆ, *A Jug from Pontes Decorated with Solar and Lunar Symbols*, *Starinar XLII* (1991), Beograd 1993, 105. A version of this scene can be seen on one type of lead votive plate of a syncretist religious content found in the Danube provinces, including Pannonia. There, on each side of the Sun god, is a single star with eight points. I. ISKRA-JANOŠIĆ, *Rimske votivne pločice od olova u Jugoslaviji*, *Opuscula archaeologica VI*, Zagreb 1968, 50, T. II/1.

³⁸ Cfr. L. MIRKOVIĆ, *op. cit.* (17), 89; Z. KÁDÁR, *op. cit.* (17), 187.

³⁹ Cfr. the references in the previous note. For stars as symbols of the apostles see H. RAHNER, *op. cit.* (37), 107.

⁴⁰ F. VAN DER MEER — CHR. MOHRMANN, *op. cit.* (8), 143.

⁴¹ G. FERGUSON, *Signs and Symbols in Christian Art*, New York 1954, 60.

⁴² Cfr. n. 9.

⁴³ Cfr. H. LECLERCQ, in *DACL IV* (I), 1920, 340-341 (s. v. Décoration des églises, 339-363); *op. cit.* (10), 2592; S. CH MURRAY, *op. cit.* (9), 113; O. M. DALTON, *op. cit.* (10), 250-259; C. CARLETTI, *op. cit.* (11), 117.

⁴⁴ O. M. DALTON, *op. cit.* (10), 250. Where can one search for an iconographic model for the unusual astral symbols on the fresco of Štrbinci? From the sources it is known that in 266 in the vicinity of Sopiana (Pécs) a group of the barbarian Carpi were settled, and it is assumed that there were several

such resettlements. (J. FITZ, *Population, in The Archaeology of Roman Pannonia*, Budapest 1980, 154). It is known that Carpi and nations similar to them on the eastern frontiers of the Roman empire were devotees of astral cults, linked with the agricultural rite calendar and, accordingly, of astral symbols in art. (S. PETKOVIĆ, *op. cit.* /37/, 100). Anthropological analysis of ten skeletons from graves found in the immediate vicinity of the grave with the fresco, done by Dr. M. Šlaus from the Archaeology Section of HAZU in Zagreb, showed that it was a matter of a reproductively enclosed community. (Z. GREGL, *op. cit.* /1/, 183.) The question arises whether the particular astral symbolism on the Štrbinci fresco might be a reflection of the religious and artistic views of a group of people similar or kindred to the Carpi from Sopianae.

⁴⁵ Cf n. 43.

⁴⁶ For artistic and craft workshops alongside Roman graves cfr. P. TESTINI, *op. cit.* (11), 112-122, 153.

⁴⁷ Cfr. the references in the note 3.

⁴⁸ "Od nepobjedivog Sunca...", *op. cit.* (3), 51, 100.

⁴⁹ S. PELEKANIDIS, *op. cit.* (11); L. REEKMANS, *La chronologie de la peinture paléochrétienne. Notes et réflexions*, RAC XLIX, 1973, 272-291; *Zur Problematik der römischen Katakombenforschung*, Boreas 7, München 1984, 242-260; A. PROVOOST, *Das Zeugnis der Fresken und Grabplatten in der Katakombe S. Pietro e Marcellino im Vergleich mit dem Zeugnis der Lampen und Gläser aus Rom*, Boreas 9, 1986, 152-172; M. A. ALEXANDER, *Mosaic Ateliers at Tabarka*, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 41, 1987, 1; O. M. DALTON, *op. cit.* (10), 243-316; H. LECLERCQ, *op. cit.* (10).

⁵⁰ F. FÜLEP, *op. cit.* (17); *Scavi archeologici a Sopianae*, Corso XVI, 1969, 151-163; *Nuove indicazioni per la storia del cristianesimo in Pannonia*, Corso XVI, 1969, 165-178; *The Excavations of the Late Roman - Old Christian mausoleum in Pécs*, JPMÉ XXXII (1987), 1988, 61; GY. GOSZTONYI, *Die Bemalte altchristliche Grabkammer und Grabkapelle No. II.*, AE III, 1942, 202-206; E. TÓTH, *op. cit.* (11), 61; Z. KÁDÁR, *op. cit.* (17); A. Sz. BURGER, *The Roman Villa and Mausoleum at Kovágószolos near Pécs (Sopianae). Excavations 1977-1982*, JPMÉ XXX-XXXI (1985-1986), 1987, 165-179; F. FÜLEP — A. FETTER, *Neuere Forschungen in der ausgemalten frühchristlichen Grabkammer NR. II von Pécs*, JPMÉ XVI (1971), 1972, 91-103.

⁵¹ E. B. THOMAS, *Religion*, in: *The Archaeology of Roman Pannonia*, Budapest 1980, 198; F. FÜLEP, *op. cit.* (17), 42; A. Sz. BURGER, *op. cit.* (50), 171.

⁵² I am grateful to the restorer, Mr E. Pohl, for these data.

⁵³ E. B. THOMAS, *op. cit.* (51), 198; Z. KÁDÁR, *op. cit.* (17), 186-200; F. FÜLEP, *op. cit.* (50-1988), 43.

⁵⁴ F. FÜLEP, *op. cit.* (50-1969a, 1969b, 1988,43); E. TÓTH, *op. cit.* (11), 61; GY. GOSZTONYI, *op. cit.* (50), 205-206; F. FÜLEP — A. FETTER, *op. cit.* (50), 103; A. Sz. BURGER, *op. cit.* (50), 178; S. PELEKANIDIS, *op. cit.* (11), 227-228. cfr. C. CARLETTI, *op. cit.* (11), 116; L. REEKMANS, *op. cit.* (49-1973, 287-291; 1984, 248).

⁵⁵ L. MIRKOVIĆ, *op. cit.* (17) 96-98.

⁵⁶ E. B. THOMAS, *Das frühe Christentum in Pannonien im lichte der archäologischen Funde*, in: *Severin zwischen Römerzeit und Völkerwanderung*, Catalogue of the exhibition, Linz 1982, 269.

⁵⁷ Cfr. data from the literature in note 54 above.

⁵⁸ Cfr. note 23.

⁵⁹ H. RAHNER, *op. cit.* (37), 132.

⁶⁰ Cfr. note 40

⁶¹ Cfr. note 11 and 12.

⁶² A. ORŠIĆ-SLAVETIĆ, *Arheološka istraživanja u Nišu i okolici*, *Starinar* VIII-IX (1933-1934), 1934, 304, f.6

⁶³ C. PAVIA — C. MOCCHEGIANI CARPANO, *op. cit.* (11), 108-110; P. TESTINI, *op. cit.* (11), 258-259.

⁶⁴ D. RENDIĆ-MIOČEVIĆ, *Neue Funde un der Nekropole Manastirine in Salona, Al I*, 1954/56-57, Abb. 1,2. 65 O. M. DALTON, *op. cit.* (10), 286.

⁶⁵ E. TÓTH, *op. cit.* (11), 61, Abb. 12.

⁶⁶ Cfr. Notes 13, 14, 15.

⁶⁷ For example frescoes from Niš, Solin and Sohag (cf notes 62, 64 and 65).

⁶⁸ Z. GREGL, *op. cit.* (1).

⁶⁹ They were parts of a jewellery chest, regularly put in richer women's graves in Pannonia in the 4th century.

⁷⁰ K. MIHOVIĆ, *Prstenje i naušnice rimskog doba Slovenije*, *Arheološki vestnik* XXX, Ljubljana 1979, 136-137, T. 2/47, 51; I. MARIJANOVIĆ, *Prilog problemu datiranja nekih starokršćanskih crkava u Bosni i Hercegovini*, *Glasnik Zemaljskog muzeja Bosne i Hercegovine* (A), N. S. 45, Sarajevo 1990 115-116, f. 6; V. LÁNYI, *Die spätantiken Gräberfelder von Pannonien*, *ActaArchHung* XXIV (1-3), 1971, 86-87, Abb. 62/34; INTERCISA I, *op. cit.* (6), Taf. 10/179 (4); M. SCHULTZE-DÖRRLAMM, *Die Spätromischen und frühmittelalterlichen Gräberfelder von Gondorf, Germanische Denkmäler der Völkerwanderungszeit*, Ser. B, Band 14, Stuttgart 1990, 82, Taf. 69/5; H. GUIRAUD, *Bagues et anneaux a l'époque romaine en Gaule*, *Gallia* 46, Paris 1989, 188, Fig. 16,4e.

⁷¹ K. MIHOVIĆ, *op. cit.* (71), 245, T. 3/1-4; R. KOŠČEVIĆ, *Antička bronca iz Siska; umjetničko-obrtna metalna produkcija iz razdoblja Rimskog carstva*, Zagreb, 1991, 32-33, T. VII/8; Á. SALAMON — L. BARKÓCZI, *Archäologische Angaben zur spätromischen Geschichte des pannonischen Limes - Gräberfelder von Intercisa I*, *MUAW* 4, 1973, 78, Taf. 23/32 (20); A. Sz. BURGER, *op. cit.* (50), 119, Fig. 107/185 (1,2); V. LÁNYI, *op. cit.* (71), 83-86; INTERCISA I, *op. cit.* (6), Taf. 8/133(3,4), 137(2); Taf. 11/446(5); D. SCHULZE-DÖRRLAMM, *op. cit.* (71), 324, Taf. 1/6; 17/2.

⁷² INTERCISA I, *op. cit.* (6), 191, Taf. 4/36/(8); 9/167/1; 20/1134(4); INTERCISA II, *op. cit.* (6), 443, Abb. 94/59,60; Taf. LXXXI/5; Á. SALAMON - L. BARKÓCZI, *Bestattungen von Csákvár aus dem Ende des 4. und dem Anfang des 5. Jahrhunderts*, *Alba Regia* XI, Székesfehérvár 1971, 40-41, Abb. 6/2,6,7; 7/25 id.; A. Sz. BURGER, *The Late Roman Cemetery at Ságvár*, *ActaArchHung* XVIII (1-4), 1966, 103, 131, Fig. 96/32 (2); 97/402(2); 101/113(1); 119/306(4); V. LÁNYI, *op. cit.* (71), 87-88, Fig. 63/1,5,15,16.

⁷³ Cfr. E. B. VÁGÓ — I. BÓNA, *op. cit.* (7), 131-134.

⁷⁴ Z. GREGL, *op. cit.* (1), 183.

⁷⁵ L. BARKÓCZI — Á. SALAMON, *Das Gräberfeld von Szbadbattyán aus dem 5. Jahrhundert*, *MUAW* 5 (1975-1975), 1975, 95; F. FÜLEP, *Sopianae*, Budapest 1984, 163, 171; E. SALIN, *op. cit.* (9), II, Paris 1952, 93, 104.

⁷⁶ "Od nepobjedivog Sunca..." *op. cit.* (3), 61.

⁷⁷ O. M. DALTON, *op. cit.* (10), 247; S. PELEKANIDIS, *op. cit.* (11), 219.

⁷⁸ C. CARLETTI, *op. cit.* (11), 117; A. FERRUA, *op. cit.* (11-1958), 28.

⁷⁹ V. SARANOVIĆ-SVETEK, *Vinkovci, Kamenica — antičko nalazište*, *Arheološki pregled* 9, Beograd (1967), 1968, 107.

Lokalitet Štrbinci kod Đakova (vjerojatno rimska *Certisa*) u novije se vrijeme iskazuje kao izrazito obećavajuće ranokršćansko nalazište. Ondje je prigodom kopanja vojničkih rovova u ratu 1991. g. otkrivena i grobnica s ranokršćanskom freskom na unutrašnjoj zabatnoj plohi krovne konstrukcije. Grobnica, sagrađena od opeka povezanih obilnim malterom, potpuno je uništena, dok je freska, premda teško oštećena, zadržala sve pojedinosti neophodne za vjernu rekonstrukciju figuralnog prizora. Restauracija je načinjena 1994. g. u Arheološkom muzeju u Zagrebu, gdje je spomenik i danas privremeno pohranjen.

Freskom je oslikana trokutasta površina blago zaobljenih rubova, načinjena kao zabatna ploha krova grobnice. Na podlozi površinskog sloja žbuke crtež je naslikan izbljedjelim crvenkastim tonovima koji se pretapaju u smeđu nijansu, ali se na mjestima razabiru tragovi izvorne tamno-crvene boje. Rub slike omeđen je vrpcom ispunjenom rešetkastim uzorkom, odnosno rombovima, mjestimično ukrašenima po sredini točkom. Središnji prostor zapremaju dva pauna uz posudu, natkriljenu kristogramom u kružnom okviru. Paunovi su naslikani nezgrapno, upravo groteskno, tako da pri površnom promatranju podsjećaju na likove jelena, poznate u istovjetnoj ranokršćanskoj ikonografskoj shemi. Vratovi su im nesrazmjerno dugački, zašiljene glave pretopljene u kljunove, a tri pera, konvencionalna naznaka paunove krete, prije su nalik rogovima. Pokušaji dočaravanja "očiju" i šara na repovima pomoću točaka i zareza podjednako su neuspjeli. Oblik posude nije posve razabirljiv, pa nije jasno je li autor kanio predočiti inačicu visokog "dvokatnog" kantarosa, ili pak jednostavne vaze na postolju, odnosno oltaru. Između glava paunova i rubne vrpce naslikane su dvije kristogramski stilizirane šesterokrake zvijezde, dok je u trokutima između ptičjih glava i središnjeg kristograma smješten po jedan sunčev kolot, prikazan u obliću kruga s valovito izvijenim obodnim zracima.

Prizor na freski iz Štrbinaca ne samo da vrvi likovima u maniri "horror vacui", već je svaka njegova pojedinost, a potom i sadržajna cjelina, prožeta simbolikom, podcrtanom i znakovitim crvenilom slike. Rubna je vrpca shematizirana ograda vrta, odnosno alegorija raja. Prizor sučeljenih paunova predočuje dvostruki kršćanski sadržaj — euharistiju i uskrsnuće, a oslanja se na motiv kantarosa ispunjenog vodom, izvorom života. Općenito, a osobito u primjerima grobnih okruženja poput onog u Štrbincima, prevladava soteriološka sastavnica naznačenih sadržaja.

Izvor života između dviju ptica ili drugih životinja ponekad se, umjesto posudom, predočuje križem ili kristogramom, ili je pak Kristov monogram postavljen iznad vaze. Na našoj freski kristogram u krugu uistinu gospodari prizorom, naznačujući srž kršćanske soteriologije u kojoj je starozavjetni nagovještaj spasenja ostvaren žrtvom na križu onoga koji je "put i istina, ali i život sam" (Iv. 14, 6). Riječ je, dakle, o alegoriji vječnog života, temeljenoj na pobjedi nad smrću zaslugom Kristove žrtve i uskrsnuća (kristogram). To uskrsnuće otvara vrata raja (rešetkasta ograda) vjernicima (paunovi) koji, napajajući se s izvora života (kantaros), postaju dionicima vječnosti u svemiru (sunca i zvijezde).

Motiv kristograma na freski iz Štrbinaca zadobiva potpuni smisao sagledan tek u združenosti s likovima zvijezda i sunčevih krugova, na kojima počiva solarni sadržaj teološke pozadine prizora. Odras je to solarne kristologije, inače znatno zastupljenije u ranokršćanskoj grobnoj epigrafici (epitafima), negoli u slikarstvu.

Fresku je, na temelju stilsko-sadržajnih odrednica i arheološkog konteksta, moguće datirati u treću četvrtinu 4. st. Ona se po temeljnim odlikama stila i ikonografije ne izdvaja iz ranokršćanske slikarske *koine*, ali je zasad osamljen primjerak na području hrvatskog dijela rimske provincije Panonije, a posve osebujan u usporedbi s približno srodnim panonskim spomenicima u cjelini. Stoga je najvjerojatnije riječ o ostvarenju domaće sredine, odnosno majstora ili radionice na području rimske Certisse.

