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## INTERLACE SCULPTURE AND MISSIONARY ACTIVITY IN EARLY MEDIEVAL LOWER PANNONIA

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*This paper examines interlace sculpture primarily from Lobar, while also considering pieces from Sisak and Slivnica, placing them in the context of the Christianization of the region south of the Drava River following the Frankish conquests. It highlights the role of Aquileia as a missionary center in this process. The study is based on the material remains of early medieval liturgical stone furnishings discovered at these sites. Analysis of the sculptures reveals stylistic and iconographic parallels with pre-Romanesque monuments from the northern Adriatic and the former Lombard Kingdom, indicating the presence of stonemasons connected to Aquileian missionary circles. Lobar is particularly notable, as archaeological research demonstrates a multi-phase continuity of sacred construction from early Christianity through the Middle Ages. The paper also compares the historical context with Carantania, where interlace sculpture is associated with local Slavic princes Christianized under Salzburg missionary activity. Based*

*on these analogies, it is proposed that the churches in Sisak and Lohor were part of a comparable political-religious strategy by local Slavic elites under the influence of Aquileia during the first half of the 9<sup>th</sup> century.*

**KEY WORDS:** *Lower Pannonia, Sisak, Lohor, Slivnica, Aquileia, early Middle Ages, interlace sculpture*

## Introduction

The fall of the Avar Khaganate and the subsequent Frankish conquest of Pannonia enabled the way for the Christianization of the local population in the region. The first step toward the restoration of church organization in the conquered territory was made by delineating the jurisdiction between the two metropolitan centres – Aquileia and Salzburg – whose missionaries would lead the efforts. The Drava River marked the boundary between these spheres of influence. Literature suggests that Christianization was more intense and successful north of the Drava, in the Salzburg jurisdiction, or at least that more historical sources exist to support such a conclusion.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, a significant number of material traces in that region corroborate written sources. Most of these finds are associated with Carantania in modern-day Austria, with the easternmost discoveries linked to the seat of the Pannonian Prince Pribina in Zalavár, in modern-day Hungary. For the Aquileian jurisdiction, sources on Christianization are scarcer, and material traces are much rarer, leading to the conclusion that Aquileian patriarchs may have been disinterested or insufficiently committed to missionary efforts south of the Drava.<sup>2</sup> However, the idea that missionary activity from Aquileia lagged behind that from Salzburg is questioned and challenged in more recent works which provide a broader contextualization of historical events and interpretations of detected traces of the early medieval cultural landscape south of the Drava.<sup>3</sup>

Material remains from the early Middle Ages are extremely rare in the area, and in what is today continental Croatia they are mostly associated with Sisak and Lohor. The group of stone liturgical fragments from the Sisak area includes two Late Antique capitals and five fragments of an altar screen decorated with shallow relief ornamentation. In earlier literature, these fragments were often compared to reliefs produced after the mid-9<sup>th</sup> century within the medieval Croatian state and were thus linked to the Dalmatian church organization.

Less has been written about Early Medieval sculpture from Lohor, as until the late 20<sup>th</sup> century only a single architrave fragment and a fragment of a gable from an altar screen were known, accidentally discovered in a nearby settlement. Ongoing archaeological research

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<sup>1</sup> SAGADIN, *Early Medieval Art and Craft Creativity in Slovenia*, 76; DOPSCH, *Zwischen Salzburg, Byzanz und Rom. Zur Missionierung Pannoniens im 9. Jahrhundert*, 268; ŠTIH, *The Middle Ages Between the Eastern Alps and the Northern Adriatic*, 211.

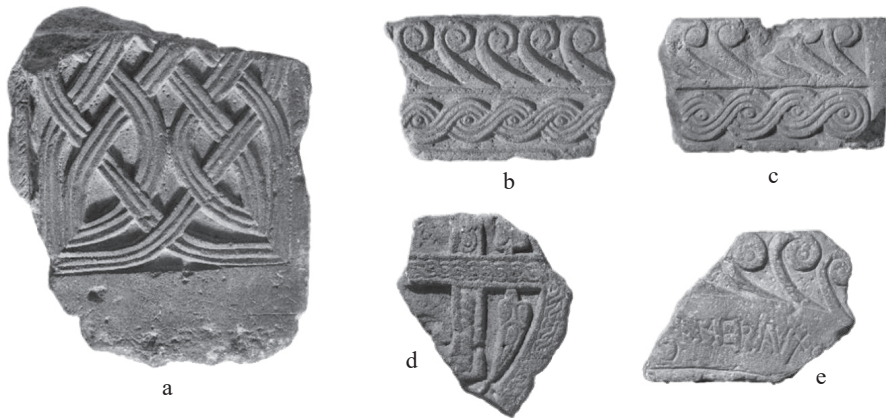
<sup>2</sup> BUDAK, *The Carolingian South-Eastern Frontier*, 280.

<sup>3</sup> SZÓKE, *The Carolingian Age in the Carpathian Basin*, 62; FILIPEC, *Donja Panonija od 9. do 11. stoljeća*, 250; HÖFLER, *O prvih cerkvah in župnijah na Slovenskem*, 21; ŠTIH, *Pokristjanjevanje v karoliški Panoniji med pričakovanji in stvarnostjo*, 352–356.

in Lobar has so far revealed two pre-Romanesque churches and has led to the discovery, publication, and cataloguing of around fifty fragments of associated stone furnishings.<sup>4</sup>

Although comparative analysis has shown that the liturgical sculpture from Lobar and Sisak was produced by different carvers, both groups display formal, technical, and stylistic traits indicating a common source of models or masters trained within the Aquileian cultural sphere at the end of the 8<sup>th</sup> century. Since relief decorations with similar characteristics appear almost simultaneously in Istria and coastal Dalmatian cities, whereas in the territory of the medieval Croatian state they appear only from the mid-9<sup>th</sup> to the 10<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>5</sup> the emergence of pre-Romanesque sculpture in today's continental Croatia is associated with the activity of Aquileian missionaries in Lower Pannonia.

### 1. Pre-Romanesque sculpture from Sisak



**Fig. 1.** – a) fragment of the pilaster from Sisak (photo by N. Belošević), b-e) fragments whose exact provenance has not been determined, but it is assumed that they could have been found in Sisak or the Sisak area (photo © Archaeological Museum in Zagreb)

<sup>4</sup> FILIPEČ et al. (ed.), *Lobar – ranosrednjovjekovno središte moći: 20 godina arheoloških istraživanja*, 160–179.

<sup>5</sup> During the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries, the eastern Adriatic coast was under Byzantine rule, while the continental areas of the former Roman province of Dalmatia were settled by Slavs organized into clan communities (*sklavintiae*). In the late 8<sup>th</sup> century, the Franks began expanding towards the southwest, east, and southeast. By around 788 they had conquered Istria and organized it as a border march. At the end of the same century they subdued the Avars, and several Slavic princes became their vassals. By the early 9<sup>th</sup> century the Franks sought to occupy part of the territory under Byzantine control, which led to the Byzantine–Frankish War, concluded in 812 with the Treaty of Aachen. Under this agreement, Byzantium retained the coastal cities of Dalmatia, while the hinterland of those cities, along with Istria and Pannonia, came under Frankish rule. The Croatian principality emerged precisely in the hinterland of Byzantine Dalmatia. Significant building (or rebuilding) activity within the medieval Croatian principality began only around the middle of the 9<sup>th</sup> century. See: GOLDSTEIN, *Hrvatska povijest*, 42–54; BUDAČ, *Hrvatska povijest od 550. do 1100.*, 48–53, 60–71.

Fragments associated with Sisak have long been known in academic publications (Fig. 1). At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Josip Brunšmid published these fragments after discovering them in what was then the National Museum in Zagreb. Along with brief descriptions of the relief decorations, he provided details on their state of preservation and the material from which they were made. Brunšmid identified two late antique capitals (published as numbers 524 and 525) and part of a wide pilaster<sup>6</sup> (published as number 805) as originating from Sisak. The remaining four fragments (published as numbers 791, 792, 793, and 806) were also associated with the Sisak group, but with the note that their exact provenance was uncertain.<sup>7</sup> Brunšmid did not assign a specific date to the capitals but included them in the section of his publication dedicated to ancient monuments.<sup>8</sup> However, he dated the interlace-decorated sculpture fragments to between the 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>9</sup> Discussing medieval art in Croatia and Slavonia, Ljubo Karaman referenced the fragments published by Brunšmid, comparing them to spolia recently discovered in the walls of rural houses in Lobar.<sup>10</sup> Based on the three-fold interlace decoration with “eyes” in the bends, which appears in both groups of fragments, Karaman concluded that all these reliefs belonged to the later phase of interlace ornamentation, i.e., to the 11<sup>th</sup> century. Due to the similarity of the motifs, he questioned the origin of the previously known fragments from the National Museum, opening the possibility that all of them had been brought to Zagreb from Lobar.<sup>11</sup> Anđela Horvat, however, argued that there were at least two distinct groups of fragments, meaning their original locations were associated with two different sites – Sisak and Lobar. She believed that the known pilaster fragment (thought to have been part of a chancel panel) provided evidence for the existence of a stone-built church in Sisak, constructed with material from the ruins of the ancient city. She concluded that such a large construction project could not have taken place before the end of the 9<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>12</sup> According to her, the likely commissioner was a Slavic secular dignitary associated with the medieval Croatian state and the Dalmatian church organization. In the following decades, early medieval fragments from continental Croatia were only sporadically mentioned in academic publications, with most authors paraphrasing the conclusions of Brunšmid, Karaman, and Horvat.<sup>13</sup> A significant shift in research occurred only at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> BELOŠEVIĆ et al., Reflections of the North Adriatic Stone-Carving Workshops in Early Medieval Sisak, 194.

<sup>7</sup> BRUNŠMID, Kameni spomenici Hrvatskoga narodnoga muzeja u Zagrebu (1910/11), 65; BRUNŠMID, Kameni spomenici Hrvatskoga narodnoga muzeja u Zagrebu (1912), 132–133, 137–138.

<sup>8</sup> BRUNŠMID, Kameni spomenici Hrvatskoga narodnoga muzeja u Zagrebu (1910/11), 65–66.

<sup>9</sup> BRUNŠMID, Kameni spomenici Hrvatskoga narodnoga muzeja u Zagrebu (1912), 132–133, 137–138.

<sup>10</sup> According to Karaman, the fragments were found in 1946 by “an assistant of the Conservation Institute, Prof. T. Stahuljak, in a house in Marija Gorska near Lobar in Croatian Zagorje.” STAHULJAK, Naučno-istraživački rad Konzervatorskog zavoda u Zagrebu od 1945. do 1949., 260; KARAMAN, O umjetnosti srednjeg vijeka u Hrvatskoj i Slavoniji, 109–110.

<sup>11</sup> KARAMAN, O umjetnosti srednjeg vijeka u Hrvatskoj i Slavoniji, 109–110; KARAMAN, O potrebi povezivanja rada arheologa, historičara umjetnosti i historičara, 60.

<sup>12</sup> Although Karaman cautiously pointed out the possibility that foreign stonemasons might have arrived in Pannonia alongside the craftsmen and builders sent by the Patriarch of Grado, Fortunatus, to assist Prince Ljudevit of Lower Pannonia in the first decades of the 9<sup>th</sup> century, Horvat argued that the turbulent period surrounding Ljudevit’s rebellion was not conducive to investing in sacred buildings. HORVAT, O Sisku u starohrvatsko doba na temelju pisanih izvora i arheoloških nalaza, 97–98.

<sup>13</sup> In order to illustrate the historical circumstances of Sisak from the “Old Croatian” period, Zdenko Vinski briefly mentioned the considered fragments (VINSKI, O postojanju radionica nakita starohrvatskog doba u

century when, almost simultaneously, the first archaeological investigations of the Church of Our Lady of Gora in Lobar began,<sup>14</sup> and preparations were underway for a major exhibition on Croatian lands during the Carolingian period. In addition to smaller artifacts from Pannonia, the exhibition catalog featured fragments of an architrave and gable from Lobar, a pilaster from Sisak, and a part of a gable arch from an unknown site.<sup>15</sup> Based on their artistic and epigraphic characteristics, as well as morphological parallels with sculpture from Veneto, Istria, and certain coastal sites of the Croatian principality, these fragments were related to the first three decades of the 9<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>16</sup>

Despite extensive archaeological investigations over the past century, no new sculpture fragments have been discovered in the Sisak area that can be linked to previously known fragments based on technical and iconographic criteria. Additionally, no remains of buildings have been found that can be definitively associated with the known architectural decorations and stone liturgical furnishings.<sup>17</sup> However, two late antique colonnade capitals,<sup>18</sup> typologically and stylistically identical to those from Pula Cathedral, testify the existence of a monumental early Christian church in Siscia. Additionally, the wide pilaster (Fig. 1a) decorated with a complex pre-Romanesque interlace motif,<sup>19</sup> indicates that a sizable stone-built church must have existed in the city or its immediate vicinity in the early Middle Ages. Based on a visual comparison of the stone surface, Brunšmid determined that the Sisak pilaster and one of the two architrave fragments<sup>20</sup> (Fig. 1c) were made of yellow sandstone quarried in Gora near Petrinja.<sup>21</sup> This suggests that these fragments may have belonged to the same construction or restoration project. In the lower zone of the mentioned architrave fragment, an interlace composed of two triple-fold bands can be observed. Small hemispherical beads with tiny drilled holes at their tops are placed in the bends of the interlace. Direct analogies to such ornaments (Fig. 2) are found on fragments dated

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Sisku, 47). Neven Budak cited them as evidence of Frankish Christianization of the peripheral parts of the Pannonian Plain from the beginning of the 9<sup>th</sup> century (BUDAK, *Sisak u ranom srednjem vijeku*, 172), while Marija Buzov touched upon them in the context of the discussion on historical continuity and discontinuity in Siscia (BUZOV, *Problem povijesnog kontinuiteta i diskontinuiteta u Sisečiji*, 465).

<sup>14</sup> The initial trial excavations at Lobar started in 1998, prompted by construction work that threatened the site. Systematic investigations, which continue to this day, commenced in 2002. See: FILIPEC, *Arheološko-povijesni vodič po svetištu Majke Božje Gorske u Loboru*, 29–30.

<sup>15</sup> DELONGA, *Hrvati i Karolinzi – Katalog*, 91–92 (II.13), 115–116 (II.60); FILIPEC, *Hrvati i Karolinzi – Katalog*, 92 (II.14), SIMONI, *Hrvati i Karolinzi – Katalog*, 104 (II.40).

<sup>16</sup> DELONGA, *Hrvati i Karolinzi – Katalog*, 91–92 (II.13); JAKŠIĆ, *Hrvati i Karolinzi – Rasprave i vrela*, 207.

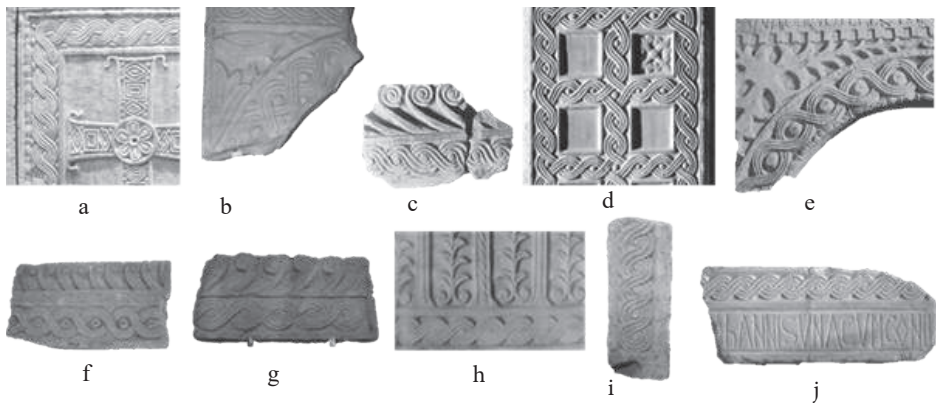
<sup>17</sup> BELOŠEVIĆ et al., *Reflections of the North Adriatic Stone-Carving Workshops in Early Medieval Sisak*, 201–204.

<sup>18</sup> Capitals of this type were widely spread as early as the 5<sup>th</sup> century, and the examples from Sisak are closest to those from the presbytery of the Pula Cathedral. Two capitals are still in situ on the columns in front of the triumphal arch, while the other two were reused as holy water fountains. See: OBAD-VUČINA, *Katedrala Uznesenja Marijina u Puli*, 24, 30–33; MATEJČIĆ et al., *Kiparstvo 1 – Od 4. do 13. stoljeća. Umjetnička baština istarske Crkve 1*, 54–56; BELOŠEVIĆ et al., *Reflections of the North Adriatic Stone-Carving Workshops in Early Medieval Sisak*, 201 (fig.7).

<sup>19</sup> BELOŠEVIĆ et al., *Reflections of the North Adriatic Stone-Carving Workshops in Early Medieval Sisak*, 201–202.

<sup>20</sup> Brunšmid describes them as parts of the same portal frame.

<sup>21</sup> Anđela Horvat previously noted that Brunšmid's assessment of the material type was based solely on visual examination and that precise data on the raw material's provenance could only be obtained through chemical analysis of the stone core. HORVAT, *O Sisku u starohrvatsko doba na temelju pisanih izvora i arheoloških nalaza*, 97. To date, such an analysis has not been conducted.



**Fig. 2.** – Examples of interlace with half-spheres in folds: a) Ratchis's altar (detail), Cividale, b) detail of the ciborium arcade, Sta. Maria in Sylvis, Sesto al Reghena, c) fragment of the architrave, Sta. Eufemia, Grado, d) Piltruda's plaque (detail), Cividale, e) arcade of Mauricius's ciborium (detail), ex cathedral, Novigrad, f) part of the architrave, cathedral of St. Marija, Pula, g) part of the architrave, ex cathedral, Osor, h) chancel panel (detail) cathedral of St. Anastasia, Zadar, i) fragment of pilaster, ex cathedral, Biograd na moru, j) fragment of the architrave, St. Maria, Kotor.

to the end of the 8<sup>th</sup> or the beginning of the 9<sup>th</sup> century in Rome, the historical region of Venetia et Histria, and exclusively in the coastal cities of Dalmatia.<sup>22</sup> However, such motifs are absent in the Croatian principality. This suggests that the earliest influences of the pre-Romanesque repertoire in Pannonia may have arrived specifically from the northern Adriatic and not from the Croatian principality. The use of the drill to accentuate details, create rhythmic effects, or enliven the surface is a survival of the antique tradition and occurs very frequently in the sculpture of the North Italian Lombard area centered in Cividale, while it is entirely absent from sculpture in the rest of the Italian Peninsula. Already in the first decades of the 9<sup>th</sup> century, this technique was employed only rarely and to a much lesser extent, appearing mainly at sites associated with the activity of the Aquileian patriarchs or their missionaries.<sup>23</sup> The exceptionally precise and confident execution of the interlace, as well as its regular circular segments measured with a compass, indicate that the relief was carved by a highly skilled craftsman — one experienced both in designing the surface intended to accommodate individual motifs and in transferring a drawing into

<sup>22</sup> Such interlace is very common in the works of Lombard workshops. On the eastern Adriatic coast, they appear on fragments from churches furnished at the end of the 8<sup>th</sup> or beginning of the 9<sup>th</sup> century, such as the Novigrad and Pula cathedrals, as well as at sites associated with the *Zadar Cathedral Screen Workshop*, the *Stone carving Workshop from the time of Bishop Ivan (Kotor)*, and the *Kotor Stone carving Workshop*, all of which were active during the same period. See: JURKOVIĆ, *Hrvati i Karolinzi – Katalog*, 54 (I.41/4); MATEJČIĆ et al., *Kiparstvo 1 – Od 4. do 13. stoljeća. Umjetnička baština istarske Crkve 1*, 165 (Novigrad); BELOŠEVIĆ, *Predromanička kamena liturgijska skulptura na području Pulske biskupije*, 319 (I.34); JOSIPOVIĆ, *Predromanički reljefi na teritoriju Sklavinije Hrvatske između Zrmanje i Krke do kraja 9. stoljeća*, T-6, T-10, T-12; ZORNIJA, *Ranosrednjovjekovna skulptura na tlu Boke kotorske*, T-16, T-18, T-24, T-26, T-27.

<sup>23</sup> For example, on the sculpture from Müstair, produced in the last quarter of the 8<sup>th</sup> century. See: ROTH-RUBI, *Die frühe Marmorskulptur aus dem Kloster St. Johann in Müstair*, 177–183.

a three-dimensional medium. The level of his craftsmanship is further demonstrated in the rendering of the hooks, finely modelled with large, rounded heads set on slender single stems of uniform inclination.

The other architrave fragment, which Brunšmid suggested might originate from Sisak (Fig. 1b) is adorned with the same interlace of regular segments, whose neatly carved parallel folds reveal the confident hand of an experienced master. This fragment closely matches the previous one in terms of dimensions, the selection and arrangement of decorative elements, and execution technique, suggesting that it may have belonged to the same altar screen. However, it is carved from “whitish sandstone”.<sup>24</sup> This material (“whitish sandstone”) was widely available in the ancient ruins of Siscia<sup>25</sup> and was also used for the other two fragments linked to Sisak. The first is fragment of a chancel screen panel featuring a relief of a centric composition with a square inscribed in a circle (Fig. 1d), a motif derived from Byzantine models<sup>26</sup> that became widespread across the former Western Roman Empire during the iconoclast period. The surfaces of the geometric elements on the examined fragment are decorated with a two-fold interlace or parallel diagonal incisions resembling twisted rope, and the interstices are filled with pointed leaves highlighted by shallow incised lines. These decorative elements also originate from the late antique artistic expression and are commonly found in pre-Romanesque sculpture from the Lombard Kingdom (Fig. 3), where Byzantine craftsmen were also active in the mid-8<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>27</sup> The second fragment is a gable of an altar screen, with preserved part of an inscription in rustic capitals: [...De]SAMER AVXS[it... ] (Fig. 1e). Brunšmid also suggested that this fragment might originate from Sisak.<sup>28</sup> According to Vedrana Delonga’s interpretation, the inscription refers to a certain Desimir, who was responsible for enlarging or embellishing the church, implying that the structure already existed and underwent renovation or expansion during the pre-Romanesque period.<sup>29</sup> Notably, characteristic hooks appear in the upper part of this fragment. The large heads and slender single stems of these hooks, along with the soft shaping of the edges and the shallow carved background, resemble those found on the previously described architraves. It is particularly significant that similar hooks – sometimes combined with a wide inscription field or an interlace with beads accentuating the center – appear on sculpture from the beginning of the 9<sup>th</sup> century in Dalmatia and Istria, i.e. in the cathedrals of Dubrovnik, Pula, Krk, and Osor (Fig. 2c-e, h-j).

<sup>24</sup> BRUNŠMID, *Kameni spomenici Hrvatskoga narodnoga muzeja u Zagrebu* (1912), 133.

<sup>25</sup> Krešimir Filipec assumes that the fragments made of whitish sandstone may have been re-carved from ancient spolia. FILIPEC, *Donja Panonija od 9. do 11. stoljeća*, 259.

<sup>26</sup> VICELJA, Utjecaj bizantskog faktora u formiranju kompozicijskih shema na spomenicima ranosrednjovjekovne plastike u Istri, 25; VICELJA, *Centric Compositional Scheme of the Early Medieval Slabs in Istria*, 168.

<sup>27</sup> The presence of Byzantine masters in the Lombard Kingdom in the mid-8<sup>th</sup> century is most clearly evidenced by examples of stucco decorations in the church of San Salvatore in Brescia and in the church of Santa Maria in Valle in Cividale.

<sup>28</sup> Since Brunšmid was not certain that this monument was definitely found in the Sisak area, V. Delonga listed it in the “Hrvati i Karolinzi” exhibition catalog as a fragment from an unknown site, even considering the possibility that it may have originated from Dalmatia or Lika. BRUNŠMID, *Kameni spomenici Hrvatskoga narodnoga muzeja u Zagrebu* (1912), 132–133; DELONGA, *Hrvati i Karolinzi – Katalog*, 115–116 (II.60).

<sup>29</sup> DELONGA, *Hrvati i Karolinzi – Katalog*, 115–116 (II.60).



**Fig. 3.** – North Italian examples of motifs as carved on the Sisak fragment: a) fragment of the chancel panel, Sta. Maria in Sylvis, Sesto al Reghena, b) detail of the chancel panel, St. Benedict, Mals.

Based on information from written sources, which indicate that Patriarch Fortunatus of Grado sent craftsmen and masons (*artifices et murarios*) to Prince Ljudevit of Lower Pannonia to assist in the construction of fortifications, it can be assumed that in Lower Pannonia there were neither builders nor skilled stone carvers capable of executing relief decorations such as those described. In terms of the characteristics of the motifs and their technical execution, these stone carvers can be more closely associated with influences typical of workshops in the northern Adriatic region.

## 2. Pre-Romanesque sculpture from Lobar

Unlike Sisak, recent archaeological investigations of the Church of Our Lady of Gora in Lobar have confirmed that the current church was preceded by several phases of construction, spanning from early Christianity to the Baroque period. The first pre-Romanesque church, dating to the late 8<sup>th</sup> century, was wooden, while in the 9<sup>th</sup> century a stone three-nave, three-apsed basilica with a narthex and an axial bell tower was erected.<sup>30</sup> This church was richly furnished with liturgical furnishings (Fig. 4) made from reused stone material originating from a Late Antique basilica on whose remains the pre-Romanesque structure had been built.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>30</sup> FILIPEC, *Arheološko-povijesni vodič po svetištu Majke Božje Gorske u Loboru*, 68–70; FILIPEC, *Donja Panonija od 9. do 11. stoljeća*, 263–266; FILIPEC et al., ed., *Lobar – ranosrednjovjekovno središte moći: 20 godina arheoloških istraživanja*, 75–80, 85–95.

<sup>31</sup> FILIPEC et al., ed. *Lobar – ranosrednjovjekovno središte moći: 20 godina arheoloških istraživanja*, 160–179. In the sculpture catalog from Lobar, all pre-Romanesque fragments are listed as marble, whereas in other locations various types of limestone are indicated as the material of execution. See: DELONGA, *Hrvati i Karolinzi – Katalog*, 91 (II.13); FILIPEC, *Hrvati i Karolinzi – Katalog*, 92 (II.14). Recent archaeological research has



**Fig. 4.** – Comparison of parts of trabeation from Sisak (top row) with examples from northern Adriatic cathedrals: a) Grado, b) Pula, c) Osor, d) Krk.

Fragments of sculpture from the site indicate that the pre-Romanesque basilica at Lobar had a high altar screen, which, at least in one section, extended deeper into the nave and, in addition to the main opening from the nave, included at least one (and most likely two) additional entrances providing access to the sanctuary.<sup>32</sup> About ten of the found trabeation fragments (Fig. 4a-d) do not join along the breaks. Their faces are divided into three zones, with a row of neatly carved hooks with small heads and double stems in the upper zone, an interlace in the lower zone, and, in the central field, preserved parts of inscriptions carved in rustic capital letters. The described decoration extended continuously across the architraves and gable arches. Due to noticeable differences in their dimensions, the appearance of the hooks, letters, and interlace, Krešimir Filipec suggested that parts of the altar screen were replaced over the following centuries. However, it is also possible that they were created simultaneously, as the work of different carvers who followed the same artistic model. If such different architraves were placed in the nave and the aisles, variations in their design would not have disrupted the overall harmony. A similar situation is observed with the remaining fragments of columns, chancel screen panels, and pilasters, where, beyond the basic design and carving style, differences can be seen in the shaping of similar motifs, uneven levels of background carving, the angle at which the edges of prominent elements were set relative to the background, and variations in the use of technical devices (such as the creation of drilled holes, hemispherical beads, or tool mark smoothing) (Compare: Fig. 4e,f,i,j,n). Based on these observations, it can be assumed that several stone carvers were responsible for producing the furnishings of the pre-Romanesque church at Lobar.

shown that Lobar represents the largest known site of ancient marble reused during the Early Middle Ages, compared to other smaller settlements (excluding colonies and municipia). FILIPEC et al., ed., *Lobar – ranosrednjovjekovno središte moći: 20 godina arheoloških istraživanja*, 13–15. Likewise, it is not unusual for marble and limestone to be used simultaneously during the same phase of church furnishing when required.

<sup>32</sup> This is suggested by fragments of small columns and capitals, pilaster fragments with grooves for inserting the chancel screen panels on two adjacent sides, pilaster fragments with decorated adjacent faces, and fragments belonging to different gable arches.

The high technical quality of the reliefs indicates that they were not assembled *ad hoc* or working as lightly trained craftsmen, but were skilled, experienced masters.

Several details point to the region from which these craftsmen originated and provide an approximate timeframe for their activity, that is, the period in which the liturgical furnishings of the pre-Romanesque basilica at Lobar were produced. Primarily, this is indicated by the three-zone division of the front surface of the architrave (Fig. 4a-d), which is characteristic of sculpture produced at the end of the 8<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 9<sup>th</sup> century in areas under the jurisdiction of the Patriarch of Aquileia (or Grado), i.e., the historical region of *Venetia et Histria*. Such an arrangement of the architrave, with the epigraphic component placed in the central rather than the lower zone of the trabeation, is uncommon and is considered typical of a few regional “workshops” and the skilled masters who were closely associated with them. A similar method of composition was identified by Nikola Jakšić in part of the Dalmatian corpus of pre-Romanesque sculpture, produced somewhat later, during the first decades of the 9<sup>th</sup> century, as the work of the so-called *Trogir Stone-Carving Workshop* (Bijaći, Pađene, Kljaci, Šibenik...). He connected its activity with the initiatives of Patriarch Fortunatus of Grado, the same who had sent craftsmen to Lower Pannonia.<sup>33</sup>

Since the findings in Lobar are associated with missionary activities aimed at the Christianization of the Slavs<sup>34</sup> it is possible that the stone carvers working in this area were familiar with the Slavic language, or were Slavs themselves. Considering that Fortunatus’s episcopal seat was temporarily relocated to Pula at the beginning of the 9<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>35</sup> it cannot be ruled out that at least some of the craftsmen in Lobar and Sisak came from Istria.<sup>36</sup>

The connection of the Lobar fragments with the North Adriatic region is also evident in the use of the drill, that is, the employment of *occhi di dado* – small drill-made holes, typical of early medieval stone carving, to accentuate details or enliven the surface of the reliefs. *Occhi di dado*, in fact, appear frequently in Lombard sculpture from the mid-8<sup>th</sup> century onward, especially in works from Cividale, whereas they are entirely absent from the repertoire of carvers in the rest of the Italian Peninsula. At Lobar, they are found on several fragments of chancel screen panels and architraves, in different forms: as decorations along the borders of frames (as seen in examples from Cividale, Poreč, and Novigrad) and in the centers of interlace folds (as in examples from Brescia and Pula) (Fig. 5). Notably, the tips of the hemispherical beads in the folds of the interlace on fragments that Brunšmid suggested might originate from Sisak are also emphasized with *occhi di dado*, indicating that they were likely produced around the same time and by carvers of the same

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<sup>33</sup> JAKŠIĆ, Reljefi Trogirske klesarske radionice iz crkve Sv. Marte u Bijaćima, 1999, 284; JAKŠIĆ, Klesarstvo u službi evangelizacije, 207; JOSIPOVIĆ, *Predromanički reljefi na teritoriju Sklavinije Hrvatske između Zrmanje i Krke do kraja 9. stoljeća*, 85–102; BASIĆ et al., Prilog opusu *Splitske klesarske radionice* kasnog VIII. stoljeća, 170–171.

<sup>34</sup> DELONGA, *Hrvati i Karolinzi – Katalog*, 91. (II.13); FILIPEC et al., ed., *Lobar – ranosrednjovjekovno središte moći: 20 godina arheoloških istraživanja*, 79.

<sup>35</sup> Pula and its surroundings were a region with a long tradition of stone working, where numerous stone-carving workshops were highly active from the last quarter of the 8<sup>th</sup> century to the first decades of the 9<sup>th</sup> century, after which production declined significantly.

<sup>36</sup> BELOŠEVIĆ et al., Reflections of the North Adriatic Stone-Carving Workshops in Early Medieval Sisak, 199, 207.

workshop origin. Moreover, beyond the consistent and confident carving technique, the interlace on most Lobar fragments – as on those from Sisak – are equally neat, with regular circular folds topped with hemispherical beads (Fig. 2 left side).



Fig. 5. – Fragments of the sculpture from the Church of Our Lady of Gorska in Lobar.

A smaller number of trabeation fragments from Lobar are decorated with a two-fold interlace (Fig. 4c,d). In the recent catalog, these fragments are dated to a broad period ranging from the second half of the 9<sup>th</sup> century to the 11<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>37</sup> However, the same group also includes a part of an architrave bearing a preserved fragment of the inscription +SUMME, discovered as early as 1946 (Fig. 4c).<sup>38</sup> Based on the epigraphic features of the preserved inscription and the similarities with the designs of pre-Romanesque architraves from the North Adriatic (Grado, Murano, Torcello, Poreč) and from sites furnished by the *Trogir Stone-Carving Workshop*, Delonga already in 2000 revised the previous dating proposed by Karaman, moving it from the 11<sup>th</sup> century to the first quarter of the 9<sup>th</sup> century. She emphasized its historical importance in the context of “Carolingian propagation of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity,” as well as its evidence of the

<sup>37</sup> FILIPEČ et al., ed., *Lobar – ranosrednjovjekovno središte moći: 20 godina arheoloških istraživanja*, 163.

<sup>38</sup> See note 10.

presence of Frankish missionaries in Lower Pannonia as early as 803.<sup>39</sup> At the left end of this fragment, a remnant of a motif resembling a twisted rope is preserved, which, in combination with the same type of interlace, also appears on a centrally composed chancel screen panel fragment from the Sisak area (Fig. 1d). This provides further support for the hypothesis that carvers trained in the North Adriatic region worked at both sites, and that all this sculpture should be associated with the Aquileian missionary activity during the first decades of the 9<sup>th</sup> century.

Based on the appearance of the relief-decorated surface, it is probable that this altar screen ensemble included a part of the pilaster excavated from the foundations of the Church of Our Lady of Gora in Lobar in 2002 (Fig. 4e). Approximately half of the upper part of the pilaster is preserved, with the remains of a round-section column at the top and grooves for fitting the panel feathers on the sides. The relief-decorated surface is framed by two smooth bands reminiscent of late antique models. Between them, a Tree of Life composition, from which a cross emerges, has been executed. The surface of the cross with expanded ends of the arms, devoid of three-fold interlace decoration but with strongly profiled edges, still relies on early Christian models. However, the miniature volutes at the ends of the arms reveal early impulses of pre-Romanesque design. A similar transition is evident in the vegetal motif descending from the patibulum towards the base of the pilaster. While its smooth leaves with profiled edges, and the partially preserved animal head at the bottom of the fragment still reflect the naturalism as a characteristic of 8<sup>th</sup>-century reliefs, the bundle where the stems merge already approximates a three-fold strip. This transformation marks the shift towards interlace, abstraction, and geometrization – stylistic elements that would come to dominate relief surfaces during the 9<sup>th</sup> century.

Although it is not known who built the church at the Lobar site, it can be inferred that it was an important early medieval missionary center. The church was richly equipped with stone liturgical furniture, as evidenced by a fragment of a slightly curved stone slab, which likely formed the parapet of the piscina or the ambo (Fig. 4n). The major portion of the fragment's relief decoration is occupied by the preserved remnant of a Tree of Life motif, flanked by two symmetrically arranged griffins. The scene was set within a rectangular panel framed by a continuous row of astragals. At the bottom, part of the border in the form of a three-fold interlace and a smooth finishing strip is still preserved. The interlace in the right corner is left open and curves upward; due to damage, it can only be assumed that a similar border continued along the vertical edge or that the interlace transformed into a simple three-fold band at that point, as observed on bird-decorated fragments from the same site (Fig. 4l,m). Specific details on these fragments — such as the feather treatment with tiny diamond-shaped incisions, almond-shaped eyes, curved beak tips, and fan-shaped wings with turned-up ends — reveal the same masterly “handwriting”. Although some elements resemble those decorating the previously described architraves, notable differences exist in the carving technique: the carving here is softer, the motif edges are more rounded, and the contrasts of light and shadow are more subdued.

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<sup>39</sup> DELONGA, *Hrvati i Karolinzi – Katalog*, 91 (II.13).



**Fig. 6.** – Comparison of motifs on the fragment of ambo from Lobar (d) with motifs on: a) Teodota's chancel panel from Pavia, b) Sigwald's chancel panel from Cividale, c) Paolino's chancel panel from Cividale.

Due to the observed differences in execution and the unusual heraldic representation, the ambon fragment was dated in the Lobar monograph to the mid- or late 11<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>40</sup> However, it appears that it is actually part of the liturgical furnishings of the pre-Romanesque basilica, currently unique within early medieval art in the territory of today's Croatia. Several fragments that, based on their stylistic “handwriting,” can be associated with the ambon fragment were found incorporated into the lower sections of the walls of the later Romanesque church, indicating that by the 11<sup>th</sup> century they had already been discarded.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, the composition of the Tree of Life with griffins reflects Eastern (Sasanian) influences,<sup>42</sup> which spread through Central Europe via masters (or craftsmen) who migrated to the Italian Peninsula during the Iconoclast period. It is therefore unsurprising that the closest analogies to the Lobar relief, mostly dated to the second half of the 8<sup>th</sup> century, are found in the main centers of the former Lombard Kingdom — Pavia and Cividale (Fig. 6). One of the characteristics of the workshops from this region is the

<sup>40</sup> FILIPEC et al., ed., *Lobar – ranosrednjovjekovno središte moći: 20 godina arheoloških istraživanja*, 85, 92–93.

<sup>41</sup> FILIPEC et al., ed., *Lobar – ranosrednjovjekovno središte moći: 20 godina arheoloških istraživanja*, 115, 173, 178.

<sup>42</sup> BUORA et al., *La scultura in Friuli dall'epoca romana al gotico*, 219–226.

frequent use of classical decorative elements, such as astragals, floral motifs resembling butterfly wings, and bands terminating in animal heads – all of which are present in the considered Lobar fragments under discussion. Finally, despite differences in individual carvers' expression, it is clear that the three-fold interlace on all Lobar fragments were derived from a single common model, which could hardly have been copied onto liturgical furnishings produced two hundred years later.

### 3. Pre-Romanesque sculpture from Slivnica

In the study of early medieval art in present-day Croatia, the significance of these fragments derives primarily from their rarity as interlace-decorated reliefs within the continental region. This group remains small in number, especially when compared to similar fragments from the territories of the historic Croatian principality, as well as from Dalmatia and Istria.<sup>43</sup> Given the overall scarcity of interlace sculpture finds in the Pannonian region, and taking into account their relatively close geographic location and stylistic similarities, this group can also include relief fragments with similar decoration from Slivnica, located south of Maribor in present-day Slovenia. There are two fragments embedded as spolia on the exterior walls of the parish church of St. Mary (Fig. 7). One, positioned at the level of the Gothic windows of the church's polygonal apse, appears to have originally been part of a pre-Romanesque pilaster. This is suggested by its dimensions and the edge strips framing the relief field on three sides (Fig. 7a). The decoration consists of two three-fold bands that intertwine and bend, forming a double row of connected, opposing loops reminiscent of pretzels. Although Janez Höfler dates the founding of the Slivnica parish in the 10<sup>th</sup> or 11<sup>th</sup> century and consequently attributes the interlace sculpture to the early Romanesque period,<sup>44</sup> the motif itself aligns more closely with examples widely found in European early medieval art of the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries. In slightly more elaborate forms, similar patterns also appear on fragments from Sisak and Lobar.<sup>45</sup> However, the Slivnica fragment is particularly distinctive, as one of the interwoven bands terminates in a bird's head at the corner of the relief field. France Stele and Milan Sagadin identified this motif as a survival of ancient or early Byzantine traditions, which continued in the sculpture of this region until the early 9<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>46</sup> In the same manner, the ends of the three-fold bands on some Lobar fragments are decorated with small animal heads (Fig. 8). These fragments, like the Slivnica sculpture, reflect the carver's preference for a more relaxed appearance of the interlace, shallower background carving, and a somewhat less confident carving style, with occasional irregularities in the width and positioning of the bands.

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<sup>43</sup> Compare: MILOŠEVIĆ, ed., *Hrvati i Karolinzi – Katalog*, section "Panonjia" and other sections in the catalog.

<sup>44</sup> HÖFLER, *O prvih cerkvah in župnijah na Slovenskem*, 319.

<sup>45</sup> The fragments of the pluteus from Lobar feature the same intertwined band motif forming a pretzel-like pattern. Since these pieces have not yet been published, we do not provide a detailed analysis of them.

<sup>46</sup> STELE, *Predromanski ornament iz Slivnice*, 3–19; SAGADIN, *Plastika s pletenasto ornamentiko v Sloveniji*, 2 (26).



**Fig. 7.** –Fragments of the sculpture from the parish church of St. Maria in Slivnica near Maribor.

Similar characteristics can be observed on another piece of spolia embedded in the south wall of the same church (Fig. 7b). Although the preserved part of the relief does not allow for a definitive identification of whether it belonged to a screen or a pilaster, the carving technique and detailing suggest that both fragments were part of the same ensemble of stone liturgical furniture. Notably, the decoration includes opposing rows of interwoven “pretzels” whose tops nearly touch. The bands are carved neatly with parallel folds of an almost rounded cross-sections, demonstrating a precise and confident execution. Additionally, one of the interspaces preserves a remnant of a vegetal motif resembling a cross formed by elongated petals or leaves. The same trefoil, inserted among the interlace bands, appears on several Lobar fragments, which may indicate the work of the same carver (Fig. 9). The leaf is softly modeled, without any edge profiling, still reflect ancient artistic traditions. However, its integration within the densely arranged interlace bands signifies the complete embrace of *horror vacui* – the fear of empty space – that became a defining characteristic of artistic expression following the transition from the 8<sup>th</sup> to the 9<sup>th</sup> century.

#### 4. Adoption of interlace sculpture – the context of Carantania

In the context of dating this group of interlace sculpture fragments to the early decades of the 9<sup>th</sup> century and understanding the spread of Aquileian influences through missionary activities south of the Drava, a useful comparison can be drawn with the adoption of interlace sculpture in region north of the Drava, which fell under the jurisdiction of the Salzburg archbishops. Notably, the interlace sculpture has been identified at approximately ten sites within the territory of the early medieval Carantania. The finds are concentrated primarily in two regions: around Karnburg and in the Millstatt-Molzbichl area. Additionally, one site has been recorded in Oberlienz, in eastern Tyrol, as well as in Mariahof.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>47</sup> KARPF, *Kirchen in Karantanien vor und nach Einführungder Grafchaftsvervassung*, 237.

Karnburg, near present-day Klagenfurt, and Millstatt, near Spittal an der Drau, were significant centers of early medieval authority in Carantania. Their historical importance is reflected in the contemporary administrative division of the Austrian province of Carinthia, which remains split into Lower Carinthia, centered in Klagenfurt, and Upper Carinthia with its administrative hub in Spittal an der Drau.<sup>48</sup>

Carantania, the earliest formed Slavic principality, began to take shape during the 7<sup>th</sup> century. By the mid-8<sup>th</sup> century, the first records of Christianization appear after Prince Borut was forced to submit to the Bavarian duke due to the threat of Avar attacks.<sup>49</sup> The Salzburg bishop Virgil appointed Modestus as the provincial bishop of Carantania and sent him as a missionary among the local Slavs. He consecrated the first churches there between 757 and 763.<sup>50</sup> However, Christianization met with resistance, sparking several uprisings that Borut's successors, Princes Gorazd and Hotimir, attempted to quell. Ultimately, the resistance definitively suppressed in 772 by Prince Valtunk with the support of the Bavarian duke Tassilo III. In these circumstances, two monasteries were founded near the Carantanian border – Innichen in 769, and Kremsmünster in 777.<sup>51</sup> The first monastery in Carantania itself, Molzbichl, is also believed to have been established at this time.<sup>52</sup> Despite its subordination to Bavaria, Carantania remained under the rule of local princes until 828, when Frankish administrators replaced them, incorporating Carantania as a distinct county within the Frankish administrative system.<sup>53</sup>

Interlace sculpture from the Carantania region is dated to the period of Slavic princely rule between 772 and 828, following a pattern of occurrence near local princely seats, particularly around Klagenfurt and Spittal an der Drau. A fragment of an altar screen architrave discovered in St. Peter am Bichl near Karnburg bears the names *Otker* and *Radoslav*, which, by analogy of parallels in Italy and Croatia, are interpreted as donor names.<sup>54</sup> It is assumed that these names may refer to Etgar (Otokar), the last Carantanian Slavic prince, who ruled until 828. He may have had two names – the Slavic name Radoslav and the Germanic baptismal name Otokar.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> ŠTIH, Konfrontacija, akulturacija in integracija na stičišču romanskega, germanskega in slovanskega sveta, 31; ŽIVKOVIČ, Früher Kirchenbau in Kärnten – Geschichte archäologisch freigelegt und interdisziplinär neu geschrieben. Eine Zusammenschau, 254.

<sup>49</sup> KARPF, Kirchen in Karantaniien vor und nach Einführung der Grafschaftsverfassung, 234; ŠTIH, *The Middle Ages Between the Eastern Alps and the Northern Adriatic*, 115–120.

<sup>50</sup> KARPF, Kirchen in Karantaniien vor und nach Einführung der Grafschaftsverfassung, 234; ŠTIH, O je cerkev začela govoriti slovansko. K ozadjem pokristjanjevanja v Karantaniiji in Panoniji, 16; ŽIVKOVIČ, Früher Kirchenbau in Kärnten – Geschichte archäologisch freigelegt und interdisziplinär neu geschrieben, 251.

<sup>51</sup> ŠTIH, Ko je cerkev začela govoriti slovansko. K ozadjem pokristjanjevanja v Karantaniiji in Panoniji, 23; HÖFLER, *O prvih cerkvah in župnijah na Slovenskem*, 18–19.

<sup>52</sup> ŠTIH, *The Middle Ages Between the Eastern Alps and the Northern Adriatic*, 117; ŠTIH, Ko je cerkev začela govoriti slovansko. K ozadjem pokristjanjevanja v Karantaniiji in Panoniji, 12–13; HÖFLER, *O prvih cerkvah in župnijah na Slovenskem*, 18–19.

<sup>53</sup> ŠTIH, *The Middle Ages Between the Eastern Alps and the Northern Adriatic*, 120.

<sup>54</sup> KARPF, Kirchen in Karantaniien vor und nach Einführung der Grafschaftsverfassung, 236; EIHERT, Kirchen des 8. bis 10. Jahrhunderts in Kärnten und ihre Bedeutung für die Archäologie der Karantane, 224–225; GLEIRSCHER, PONTA-ZITTERER, Vogeldarstellungen auf karolingischen Flechtwerksteinen in Karantaniien, 438.

<sup>55</sup> ŠTIH, *The Middle Ages Between the Eastern Alps and the Northern Adriatic*, 120; ŠTIH, Ko je cerkev začela govoriti slovansko. K ozadjem pokristjanjevanja v Karantaniiji in Panoniji, 26; ŽIVKOVIČ, Früher Kirchen-

Molzbichl monastery, one of the most significant sites of early medieval interlace sculpture in the region, is considered the first monastery in Carantania, founded shortly after the suppression of anti-Christian uprisings around 772.<sup>56</sup> The area is also linked to the legend of Prince Domitian, who is said to have Christianized pagans during Charlemagne's reign. The discovery of an epitaph fragment in Millstatt monastery mentioning Domitian's name confirmed his historical existence. This led scholars to suggest that his seat of power was nearby, that he built one of the churches around Millstatt, and that he may have founded Molzbichl monastery.<sup>57</sup>

Interlace sculpture in Carantania is closely associated with local Slavic princes who had recently converted to Christianity and actively promoted Christianization of their territories. By constructing churches and commissioning stone furnishings adorned with interlace motifs, reflecting artistic trends in neighbouring Bavaria, they expressed their new Christian identity and alignment with the Bavarian (or Frankish) social elite. This artistic and architectural investments signified their full integration into the cultural sphere of their western neighbours. These churches not only served religious functions but also acted as status symbols within emerging political relations.<sup>58</sup> In a similar context, interlace sculpture appears somewhat later in the eastern, Lower Pannonian region. Here, Prince Pribina builds the first churches in Zalavar around 850 with the help of Bavarian masters sent by the Salzburg archbishop.<sup>59</sup> Notably, the churches in Carantania, whose construction can be dated after 828, do not exhibit any traces of stone equipment decorated with interlace motifs. The explanation for this shift lies in the fact that during this period, the land passed into royal ownership and was divided among church institutions or Bavarian and Frankish nobility who did not reside on these estates. Under these conditions, churches were built in greater numbers out of necessity for pastoral need of the population, but they no longer served as prestigious symbols of power. As a result, the demand for lavishly decorated church furnishings diminished.<sup>60</sup>

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bau in Kärnten – Geschichte archäologisch freigelegt und interdisziplinär neu geschrieben. Eine Zusammenfassung, 255; GLEIRSCHER, PONTA-ZITTERER, Vogeldarstellungen auf karolingischen Flechtwerksteinen in Karantanien, 441.

<sup>56</sup> ŠTIH, Konfrontacija, akulturacija in integracija na stičišču romanskega, germanskega in slovanskega sveta, 29–30.

<sup>57</sup> KARPf, Kirchen in Karantanien vor und nach Einführung der Grafschaftsverfassung, 237; ŠTIH, Ko je cerkev začela govoriti slovansko. K ozadjem pokristjanjevanja v Karantaniji in Panoniji, 13, 26–27; HÖFLER, *O prvih cerkvah in župnijah na Slovenskem*, 19; ŠTIH, Religious Transition and Social Changes among the Carantanians, 133.

<sup>58</sup> KARPf, Kirchen in Karantanien vor und nach Einführung der Grafschaftsverfassung, 235; EIHERT, Kirchen des 8. bis 10. Jahrhunderts in Kärnten und ihre Bedeutung für die Archäologie der Karantane, 221; ŠTIH, *The Middle Ages Between the Eastern Alps and the Northern Adriatic*, 119; ŠTIH, Ko je cerkev začela govoriti slovansko. K ozadjem pokristjanjevanja v Karantaniji in Panoniji, 26.

<sup>59</sup> DOPfSCH, Zwischen Salzburg, Byzanz und Rom. Zur Missionierung Pannoniens im 9. Jahrhundert, 272; KARPf, Kirchen in Karantanien vor und nach Einführung der Grafschaftsverfassung, 238; SZÖKE, *The Carolingian Age in the Carpathian Basin*, 79–90; ŠTIH, Pokristjanjevanje v karolinški Panoniji med pričakovanji in stvarnostjo, 353.

<sup>60</sup> KARPf, Kirchen in Karantanien vor und nach Einführung der Grafschaftsverfassung, 238; EIHERT, Kirchen des 8. bis 10. Jahrhunderts in Kärnten und ihre Bedeutung für die Archäologie der Karantane, 221, 231; ŠTIH, Konfrontacija, akulturacija in integracija na stičišču romanskega, germanskega in slovanskega sveta, 31.

A comparable situation is observed in medieval Carniola, located along the upper course of the Sava River in present-day Slovenia, where no representative churches with interlace sculpture have been identified. It is believed that Carniola also developed as a Slavic principality under a local ruling dynasty. However, due to prolonged Avar domination, the formation of this principality occurred somewhat later than in Carantania.<sup>61</sup> Consequently, the process of Christianization in Carniola also began later than in Carantania. Shortly after the formation of the principality, Carniola joined the rebellion of Prince Ljudevit of Lower Pannonia. Following the suppression of the uprising, it was integrated into the Frankish administrative system as a county, similar to Carantania. By 830, historical records mention the Frankish count Salach as the administrator of Carniola.<sup>62</sup> The absence of interlace sculpture in Carniola is explained by the historical course. Due to its later Christianization and the brief rule of local princes, a representative layer of Christian architecture adorned with lavish equipment did not develop. Nevertheless, a certain number of churches can be identified whose foundations may date back to the 9<sup>th</sup> or even the late 8<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>63</sup>

In all examples of early medieval interlace sculpture from the historical area of Carantania, influences from northern Italy, particularly Aquileia, are evident in both form and motifs.<sup>64</sup> These influences likely reached Carantania indirectly via Bavaria, which had already adopted Lombard artistic models and trends. The Bavarian dukes from the Agilolfing dynasty maintained close and intense relations with the Lombard rulers, reinforced by multiple marital ties between the ruling families. Duke Tassilo III himself was married to Liutperga, the daughter of the last Lombard king, Desiderius. This close connection facilitated the transmission of artistic influences from Italy to Bavaria, which subsequently introduced into Carantania.<sup>65</sup> However, there is also the opinion that northern Italian influence on the Carantanian area came directly from Aquileia.<sup>66</sup> This view is supported by the thesis that the monastery in Molzbichl may have been founded by the Aquileian patriarchs Paulinus or Ursus at the end of the 8<sup>th</sup> or beginning of the 9<sup>th</sup> century, during their claims of territorial jurisdiction over the region, before the final delineation with the Salzburg archbishopric on the Drava in 811.<sup>67</sup> Additionally, it is possible that northern Italian craftsmen operated directly in Carantania, seeking new markets after the fall of the

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<sup>61</sup> ŠTIH, *The Middle Ages Between the Eastern Alps and the Northern Adriatic*, 132–133, 156.

<sup>62</sup> ŠTIH, *The Middle Ages Between the Eastern Alps and the Northern Adriatic*, 133–134; SZÓKE, *The Carolingian Age in the Carpathian Basin*, 46.

<sup>63</sup> PLETERSKI, BELAK, Zbiva. Cerkve v vzhodnih Alpah od 8. do 19. stoletja, 33; SAGADIN, Early Medieval Art and Craft Creativity in Slovenia, 73–74; KARPF, Kirchen in Karantanien vor und nach Einführung der Grafschaftsverfassung, 238; ŠTIH, *The Middle Ages Between the Eastern Alps and the Northern Adriatic*, 53; FILIPEC, *Donja Panonija od 9. do 11. stoljeća*, 251–253; HÖFLER, *O prvih cerkvah in župnijah na Slovenskem*, 22; ŠTIH, Pokristjanjevanje v karolinški Panoniji med pričakovanji in stvarnostjo, 355.

<sup>64</sup> SAGADIN, Early Medieval Art and Craft Creativity in Slovenia, 74, 76; KARPF, Kirchen in Karantanien vor und nach Einführung der Grafschaftsverfassung, 235; GLEIRSCHER, PONTA-ZITTERER, Vogeldarstellungen auf karolingischen Flechtwerksteinen in Karantanien, 455.

<sup>65</sup> KARPF, Kirchen in Karantanien vor und nach Einführung der Grafschaftsverfassung, 235.

<sup>66</sup> HÖFLER, *O prvih cerkvah in župnijah na Slovenskem*, 22; HÖFLER, Zu den Anfängen der Pfarrorganisation im Gailtal, 97.

<sup>67</sup> GLEIRSCHER, PONTA-ZITTERER, Vogeldarstellungen auf karolingischen Flechtwerksteinen in Karantanien, 440.

Lombard Kingdom in 774.<sup>68</sup> A certain connection with Aquileia has been suggested regarding the seat of power of the Lower Pannonian Prince Pribina in Zalavar.<sup>69</sup> In Zalavar, a fragment of interlace-decorated stone sculpture was also discovered, which was probably part of the church of St. Hadrian's furnishings. While it is generally linked to northern Italian artistic traditions, written sources explicitly state that Pribina built his churches with the assistance of craftsmen sent by the Salzburg archbishop.<sup>70</sup>

## 5. Adoption of interlace sculpture – the context of Sisak and Lohor

The early medieval sculpture finds from the continental part of present-day Croatia can be interpreted similarly to those from Carantania. Written sources from the first half of the 9<sup>th</sup> century confirm that Sisak was a center of princely power, particularly in connection with the activities and rebellion of Prince Ljudevit of Lower Pannonia. This historical mention aligns with the record of master builders sent to Ljudevit by the Patriarch of Grado, Fortunatus. Additionally, a fragment of an architrave with the name of a Slavic donor provides evidence of a baptized Slavic elite in the region. While early medieval written sources do not explicitly reference Lohor, recent archaeological research led by Krešimir Filipec and his team has uncovered enough material evidence to approximate the historical development of the site. These findings contribute to the broader understanding of the Christianization process and the role of interlace sculpture in expressing the cultural and political affiliation of the early medieval Slavic elite in continental part of present-day Croatia. The presence of an ancient settlement in Lohor, featuring a temple dedicated to the goddess Diana, suggests a long-standing religious significance for the site. By the 5<sup>th</sup> century, after Poetovio had first been devastated by the Huns, Lohor might have served as a refuge for the bishop of Poetovio.<sup>71</sup> This period saw the construction of an early Christian church with an axial octagonal baptistery and a hexagonal piscina, architectural features reflecting the influence of early Christian Aquileia.<sup>72</sup> At that time, the Bishopric of Poetovio, along with the entire province of Noricum, fell under the metropolitan jurisdiction of the Aquileian patriarch. While there is no definitive evidence regarding the extent of the Poetovian ager, theoretical reconstructions and archaeological finds with inscriptions which can be linked with the centre in Poetovio, suggest that its southern border likely followed the Macelj – Klenovnik – Križovljan – Varaždinske Toplice line, encompassing the entire Ivanščica Mountain.<sup>73</sup> This further supports the idea that Lohor held strategic and ecclesiastical importance as a seat of the Poetovian

<sup>68</sup> GLEIRSCHER, PONTA-ZITTERER, *Vogelstellungen auf karolingischen Flechtwerksteinen in Karantaneen*, 455.

<sup>69</sup> DOPSCH, *Zwischen Salzburg, Byzanz und Rom. Zur Missionierung Pannoniens im 9. Jahrhundert*, 270; SZÖKE, *The Carolingian Age in the Carpathian Basin*, 61–62.

<sup>70</sup> DOPSCH, *Zwischen Salzburg, Byzanz und Rom. Zur Missionierung Pannoniens im 9. Jahrhundert*, 272; SZÖKE, *The Carolingian Age in the Carpathian Basin*, 85; FILIPEC, *Donja Panonija od 9. do 11. stoljeća*, 289.

<sup>71</sup> FILIPEC, *Ranokršćanska crkva u Lohoru – Majka Božja Gorska, ortodokсна ili arijanska?*, 299; FILIPEC, et al., ed., *Lohor – ranosrednjovjekovno središte moći: 20 godina arheoloških istraživanja*, 59.

<sup>72</sup> BRATOŽ, *Vpliv oglejske cerkve na vzhodnoalpski in predalpski prostor od 4. do 8. stoletja*, 342; JURKOVIĆ, *Karolingische Renovatio Architektur und Bauausstattung im Alpen-Adria-Raum*, 460.

<sup>73</sup> RAGOLIĆ, *Upravno območje Petovione in meja med Norikom in Panonijo*, 323–338.

bishop who sought safety in uncertain times away from the main traffic routes.<sup>74</sup> Archaeological evidence from Lobar reveals a fascinating sequence of settlement and religious transformation. After being abandoned in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, the site remained uninhabited for about two hundred years. In the 8<sup>th</sup> century, Slavic settlers arrived there, and started to bury their dead around the remains of the early Christian church. Initially, they followed pagan customs, cremating the deceased, which suggests that the site held cultural or spiritual significance before formal Christianization. In the early 9<sup>th</sup> century, a smaller wooden church with a rectangular sanctuary was constructed, positioned parallel to the southern wall and apse of the early Christian church. This suggests that the remains of the early Christian church were still visible to the builders of the early medieval church. Inside the sanctuary of the wooden church, the grave of a woman was discovered, accompanied by jewellery, indicating that she belonged to the Slavic elite. At some point during the 9<sup>th</sup> century, a larger pre-Romanesque church with an axial tower and prominent buttresses along the outer side walls was built on the foundations of the early Christian church. This church existed alongside the smaller wooden one for some time, and a cemetery of baptized inhabitants formed around it. The stone relief sculpture found in Lobar was certainly part of the altar screen, most likely located in the larger, stone-built church.<sup>75</sup>

By drawing an analogy with the Carantanian area, it can be concluded that the interlace stone sculpture in Sisak and Lobar is connected to the activities of the local Slavic ruling class during the Christianization period, which was influenced by missionary efforts from Aquileia. Similar to Carantania and Zalavar, this would involve representative architecture serving as a status symbol, expressing the identity and affiliation of the local Slavic elite to the new political framework and cultural circle.<sup>76</sup> This Slavic ruling class can be more closely associated with the first decades of the 9<sup>th</sup> century, before the collapse of Prince Ljudevit's rebellion. Filipec suggests that after Prince Ljudevit's defeat, the territory of Lower Pannonia, which Ljudevit ruled until the rebellion's failure, fell under the jurisdiction of Frankish count Salach and was integrated into the Frankish administrative system, along with Carniola. It is also possible that part of this area was under Bulgarian rule at that time.<sup>77</sup>

There is no information about Slivnica that could reconstruct the context of the development of this place or provide any conclusions about its contents and functions in the early Middle Ages, except for the fact that a church existed there. Traces of a Slavic settlement have been discovered nearby, but no further evidence links the site to a seat of power or similar function, as is the case with Sisak and Lobar.<sup>78</sup> Nevertheless, Slivnica is considered one of the proto-parishes identified in the area of present-day Slovenia, although its founding is dated relatively late – only in the second half of the 10<sup>th</sup> century or even the 11<sup>th</sup> century.

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<sup>74</sup> FILIPEC et al., ed., *Lobar – ranosrednjovjekovno središte moći: 20 godina arheoloških istraživanja*, 59.

<sup>75</sup> FILIPEC, *Donja Panonija od 9. do 11. stoljeća*, 263–267; JURKOVIĆ, Karolingische Renovatio Architektur und Bauausstattung im Alpen-Adria-Raum., 461; FILIPEC, Groblje, grobovi i dvije crkve – neki problemi i rješenja, 397–409.

<sup>76</sup> FILIPEC, *Donja Panonija od 9. do 11. stoljeća*, 173, 267.

<sup>77</sup> FILIPEC, *Donja Panonija od 9. do 11. stoljeća*, 144–145.

<sup>78</sup> GUŠTIN, Rani srednji vijek od alpskih obronaka do Panonije, 292; BEKIĆ, *Rani srednji vijek između Panonije i Jadrana*, 38; MAGDIĆ, New Archaeological Research into the Middle Ages in the Slovenian Regions of Pomurje and Podravje, 451, 454; KRAMBERGER, *Slivnica 2b*, 12; MURKO, *Začetki srednjeveškega mesta Maribor*, 198.

Janez Höfler incorporates the existence of embedded fragments of interlace sculpture into this dating, concluding that the sculpture can be attributed to the early Romanesque period.<sup>79</sup> However, within the context presented in this paper and based on the formal characteristics of the sculpture itself, we believe that it represents early medieval material from the first decades of the 9<sup>th</sup> century, providing evidence of missionary activity from Aquileia in the area of present-day eastern Slovenia under the auspices of a local Slavic dignitary.

## Conclusion

Since historical sources explicitly attest to a clearly defined boundary between the jurisdiction of the Patriarch of Aquileia and the Archbishop of Salzburg following the fall of the Avar Khaganate, the territory of the continental part of present-day Croatia and eastern Slovenia can be associated with the activity of Aquileian missionaries with a considerable degree of certainty. In this context, the emergence of the pre-Romanesque interlace sculpture from Sisak, Lobar, and Slivnica can be understood. This sculpture, dated to the first decades of the 9<sup>th</sup> century, reflects the use of traditional techniques and tools, as well as elements referencing late-antique compositions and naturalistic representation typical of 8<sup>th</sup>-century production. At the same time, it exhibits abstract geometrization of the three-fold interlace, a stylistic development of the 9<sup>th</sup> century that gradually supplanted classical motifs and traces of mimetic representation. The high technical quality and distinctive morphological features of these works indicate their affinity with examples from the North Adriatic region. On this basis, it can be assumed that Aquileian missionaries played a significant role in the Pannonian region south of the Drava River, carrying out tasks related to the Christianization of the local population. Although written evidence is limited, the material remains, however scarce, nonetheless testify to their activity.

It is difficult to determine with certainty whether this sculpture can be explicitly linked to a specific North Adriatic workshop or whether it represents the adoption and application of motifs within a local workshop's production. However, the quality of execution of individual pieces, as well as analogies with North Adriatic, Istrian, and Dalmatian examples, point to the presence of skilled stone carvers familiar with contemporary trends and models from workshop centers in the historical region of *Venetia et Histria*. Considering that Patriarch Fortunatus sent craftsmen to Prince Ljudevit of Lower Pannonia around 820, it is reasonable to conclude that this sculpture may also be associated with the presence of stone carvers who had arrived from the North Adriatic area.

Based on the described process of Christianization and cultural assimilation of the Slavic ruling class in Carantania, we have presented an analogous example in which the adoption of interlace sculpture in the furnishing of newly established churches expresses a shift in the local elite's identity and their affiliation with a new cultural sphere. Since Sisak and Lobar have also been identified as significant early medieval centers of the local Slavic elite – evidenced, among other things, by the epigraphic components of certain stone fragments – it can be argued that the presence of interlace sculpture at these sites reflects the cultural and political process of their Christianization and the adoption of a new identity,

<sup>79</sup> HÖFLER, *O prvih cerkvah in župnijah na Slovenskem*, 319.

in a manner similar to that observed in Carantania. Although the precise context of the interlace sculpture in Slivnica has not been established, the finds there nonetheless provide an important stimulus for further research.

Based on the above, it can be concluded that the main contribution of this study is to establish a firmer connection between the sculpture under consideration and the activities and influences of North Adriatic stone-carving workshops. Accordingly, the creation of this sculpture can be more precisely dated to the first decades of the 9<sup>th</sup> century.

#### SAŽETAK

#### PLETERNA SKULPTURA I MISIONARSKO DJELOVANJE U RANOSREDNJOVJEKOVNOJ DONJOJ PANONIJI

*Ovaj rad govori o pleternoj skulpturi ponajprije iz Lobora, no uzima u obzir i primjere iz Siska i Slivnice, te ih smješta u kontekst pokrštavanja područja koje se nalazi južno od rijeke Drave nakon franačkih osvajanja. Istaknuta je uloga Akvileje kao ishodišta misijskog djelovanja u tom procesu. Istraživanje se temelji na materijalnim ostacima ranosrednjovjekovnog kamenog liturgijskog namještaja otkrivenog na navedenim lokalitetima. Analiza skulpture otkriva stilske i ikonografske paralele s predromaničkim spomenicima s područja sjevernog Jadrana i nekadašnjeg Langobardskog Kraljevstva, što upućuje na prisutnost klesara povezanih s akvilejskim kulturnim utjecajima. Lobor je posebno značajan jer arheološka istraživanja potvrđuju višeslojnost lokaliteta i kontinuitet sakralne gradnje od ranog kršćanstva do srednjeg vijeka. Rad također donosi usporedbu povijesnog konteksta s Karantanijom, gdje se pojava pleterne skulpture povezuje s djelovanjem lokalnih slavenskih kneževa u razdoblju kada su prihvaćali kršćanstvo pod utjecajem misionarskog djelovanja s ishodištem u Salzburgu. Na temelju tih analogija predlaže se da je pleterna skulptura u Sisku i Loboru nastajala u sličnom političko-religijskom kontekstu u kojem je lokalna slavenska elita prihvaćala kršćanstvo pod utjecajem misionarskog djelovanja iz Akvileje tijekom prve polovice 9. stoljeća.*

*KLJUČNE RIJEČI: Donja Panonija, Sisak, Lobor, Slivnica, Akvileja, rani srednji vijek, pleterna skulptura*

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