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DOI: 10.17234/9789531759113.2

A Reconsideration of the so-called Jonah Sarcophagus from Singidunum

Abstract: *This paper examines the so-called Jonah sarcophagus from the ancient Singidunum. Its unique relief decoration on the front side places it among the finest examples of Early Christian art, not just on the territory where it was found, but within the wider region of Roman Balkan provinces. The decoration contains two frequently represented Early Christian themes, the story of Jonah and the figure of the Good Shepherd. In order to better understand the sarcophagus and its production, the historical and social context of its making will be examined. The attention will be drawn to the first Christian communities of Singidunum and the development of Christianity in that area. Furthermore, the iconographic program of the sarcophagus and its funeral context will be discussed, in order to indicate several facets of its understanding.*

Keywords: *Singidunum, Jonah sarcophagus, Good Shepherd, sarcophagi, Early Christian art, Belgrade*

As one of the oldest cities in Europe, *Singidunum* was also the main urban centre within the Roman province of Upper Moesia, together with *Viminacium*, *Naissus*, *Scupi* and *Ratiaria*.¹ The name *Singidunum* derives from the word *Singid* (hillock) and *dun* (fort).² The important ancient road *Via Militaris* was once passing through *Sirmium*, *Singidunum* and *Viminacium*, all the way

to Constantinople, connecting the provinces of Pannonia, Moesia, Dacia and Dalmatia.³ Undoubtedly that its importance, in the vicinity of the Empire's frontier, *Singidunum* owed to its strategic place on the confluence of the Sava and the Danube. On this territory the Empire was permanently defended from constant invasions of different barbaric tribes, so the military legions must have been located here very early.

1 Beljan et al. 2014, pp. 86–92. The province of Moesia was divided in 86 AD into two parts, Upper and Lower Moesia, that is Moesia Prima and Secunda.

Popović 1997, p. 1.

2 Beljan, Dijana et al. 2014, p. 86.

3 Ibid.

First reliable information about the military legions that were stationed in *Singidunum*, derive from the time of Domitian.⁴ In his writings, dated to the middle of the second century, Ptolemy mentions the presence of *Legio IV Flavia* in the regions of the Danube, which Domitian moved here from Dalmatia in 86 AD.⁵ It was not until the reign of Trajan that *Legio IV Flavia* was moved to *Singidunum* where it stayed to the end of Antiquity.⁶ The legion camp was situated on the Upper Town of the Belgrade Fortress and it represented the main core of the city.⁷ Sometime in the second century, during the reign of Hadrian, *Singidunum* gained the status of a *municipium* and by the end of the century it became a colony.⁸ The city

was devastated during the fifth century by the Goths, and in the sixth century by the Huns and Avars. During his big project of the restoration of the Empire, emperor Justinian also started rebuilding *Singidunum*. The city was finally captured by the Slavs in the beginning of the seventh century, when it also changed its name, for the first time, into *Velegradon*, that is *Beligrad*, which remained up to the present day.⁹ In comparison to the urban core of the city, which wasn't so big, *Singidunum* had vast necropolis that surrounded it from almost every side. The south-eastern necropolis was the main one, stretching along the *Viminacium*, while the second one was the north-eastern one, covering the area of today's Dorćol.¹⁰ It was precisely on that second necropolis that the Jonah sarcophagus was found.¹¹

In 1885, during the excavation for the house of a merchant Marko Marković, at the corner of today's Captain Mišina and Jovanova streets, an exceptional example of Early Christian sarcophagus emerged.¹²

4 Popović 1997, p. 1.

5 Mirković, 1968, p. 41, According to some opinions it is not certain where *Legio IV Flavia* was firstly stationed, between 86–91, and it was not probable that this was in *Singidunum*, since there is no evidence of any epigraphical data. That's why it is suggested that the first camp was in *Viminacium* and that only later it was moved to *Singidunum*, v. Kondić 1965, p. 18.

6 Mirković 1968, p. 41; Popović 1997, p. 1; Mócsy 1974, p. 91; Beljan et al. 2014, p. 86; It is assumed that in *Singidunum* were also located camps of two other legions, namely *Legio IV Scythica* and *Legio V Macedonica*, v. Mirković 1968, p. 40; Beljan et al. 2014, p. 86.

7 Mirković 1968, p. 41; Popović 1997, p. 5.

8 Mirković 1968, p. 41, p. 44; Popović 1997, p. 1; Beljan et al. 2014, p. 86. The city is mentioned during the third century as one of the cities that was visited by the emperors Septimius Sever in 202 and Diocletian in 295. It is also a birth place of later emperor Jovian, v. Mirković 1968, p. 46; Popović 1995, p. 95.

9 Mirković 1968, pp. 46–48; Popović 1995, pp. 95–96; Popović 1997, p. 1; Beljan et al. 2014, pp. 86–87.

10 Mirković 1968, p. 42; Popović 1997, pp. 12–13; Pop-Lazić 2002, p. 21; Crnobrnja 2013, p. 316.

11 Popović 1997, p. 13.

12 Valtrović 1886, pp. 70–71; Valtrović 1891, p. 130; Pop-Lazić 2012, p. 21; Crnobrnja 2013, p. 316.; Pilipović et al. 2016, p. 220.



Fig. 1. Jonah Sarcophagus, Singidunum, 4th century (photo: T. Miladinović)

Because of its style and relief decoration, it probably dates from the end of the third to the middle of the fourth century.¹³ It was first given to the National Museum of Belgrade, but today it is on display in the Great Gunpowder Magazine (Barutana) at the Lower Town

of Kalemegdan.¹⁴ The sarcophagus is made out of local limestone, which was probably dug out from the quarries in Tašmajdan.¹⁵ The uniqueness of Jonah sarcophagus lies in its carved relief decoration of the front side that contains the Old Testament story of Prophet Jonah and a figure of the Good Shepherd.

13 Although, there are some disagreements when it comes to date. M. Valtrović, who was the first researcher that wrote about Jonah sarcophagus, dates it to the fifth or even sixth century, because of its rough sculptural treatment, v. Valtrović 1891, p. 142; More recent investigations date the sarcophagus from the mid to late fourth century, v. Pilipović et al. 2016, p. 220.

14 Valtrović 1886, p. 70; Valtrović 1891, p. 131; Pop-Lazić 2002, p. 21.

15 Valtrović 1891, p. 139; Kondić 1965, p. 288; Popović 1997, p. 4.

The use of sarcophagi¹⁶ (literally ‘flesh-eaters’)¹⁷ in Upper Moesia, and therefore in *Singidunum*, was linked to wider socio-cultural and political changes that appeared in the Empire during the second century and that have resulted in the emergence of a new way of burial practice, inhumation instead of the earlier cremation.¹⁸ The Jonah sarcophagus in *Singidunum* consists of a central panel that was carved with relief decoration that doesn’t cover the entire surface of the front side, and a lid in a form of a roof.¹⁹ The lid has acroteria in its corners and in the middle, at both front and back side of the sarcophagus. Because of the tripartite division of the front side, Jonah sarcophagus can be placed in the group of Pannonian sarcophagi that in the centre have a field for an inscription, flanked with niches.²⁰ In our case the central field doesn’t have an inscription, but a relief with a

16 There is more than one opinion when it comes to the origin of the sarcophagus. Some of them highlight that they were adopted from the East, via numerous eastern immigrants. Others state that the form of sarcophagi derives from the ash chests v. Dautova-Ruševljan 1983, pp. 95–96; Elsner et al. 2011, pp. 21–22.

17 Esler 2002, p. 756; Elsner 2012, p. 179.

18 Dautova-Ruševljan 1983, p. 95; Mócsy, 1974, p. 338; Morris 1992, pp. 42–46, 52–56; Elsner et al. 2011, pp. 21–22.

19 Valtrović 1891, p. 133.; Dautova-Ruševljan 1983, p. 97; Elsner 2012, p. 180. Because of the lid in the form of a roof, a sarcophagus can be seen as a house for the deceased, in that way we can talk also about the sarcophagi as separate architectural units, a kind of ‘micro-architecture’, v. Thomas „Houses“, 2011.

20 Dautova-Ruševljan 1983, p. 96.

Christian theme. That’s why it is very likely that Jonah sarcophagus has been reworked, as has been noted already by Mihajlo Valtrović, and that the decoration was inserted only later onto the originally pagan monument.²¹ Another fact that supports this is that the relief is framed by the Noric-Pannonian scroll decoration²² which seems to be carved with more skill than the central theme.²³

As we have previously said, Jonah sarcophagus contains two very popular and common Early Christian themes.²⁴ On the right part of the panel we can see a ship, whose masts are very noticeable and form a shape of a cross. There are two or even three sailors on the ship, it cannot be discerned well. One of them holds a paddle and the other one throws Jonah, upside down, from the deck of the ship directly into the mouth of the sea monster – *ketos*. Jonah is represented naked and from the back. The stormy sea is indicated by the waves under the boat, and there are also two fish that additionally emphasize the water environment. On the other side of the *ketos* is represented another fish that spits Jonah out. Here, Jonah is shown naked again with his arms raised

21 Valtrović 1891, p. 142; Mócsy 1974, p. 334.

22 Dautova-Ruševljan 1983, p. 104.

23 Valtrović 1891, p. 142.

24 The figure of Jonah was among the most frequently depicted figures in Early Christian art, v. Jensen 2002, p. 172.

and spread toward the Good Shepherd. From this image we can see that Jonah is represented as youthful and beardless.²⁵ Above him is a gourd plant with large fruits that hang from it. On the right part of the tree is a hardly recognizable bird.²⁶ Between the two *ketos* creatures is another fish, most probably a dolphin, on whose back is a little *putto* that holds some kind of a long whip in his right hand. The figure of a Good Shepherd stands on the left end of the relief. He is represented barefoot, dressed in a tunic and with a sheep on his shoulders that he holds with both hands.

During the formative period of Early Christian art, while Christianity was still a persecuted religion, the Old Testament story of Jonah was commonly represented since its moral narrative corresponded very well to some of the main Christian beliefs. The story is told in the Book of Jonah and it talks about a Jewish prophet who refused to obey God's will to go to preach to Nineveh. Instead, he decides to take a ship into opposite direction, to Tharsis. In order to

punish him, God sends a storm to the sea. The sailors from Jonah's ship, on his insistence, cast him overboard in an attempt to rescue themselves. Then God sends a sea monster, *ketos*, that swallows Jonah. After three days and three nights in the belly of the *ketos*, where he was praying all the time, Jonah is disgorged onto the dry land. Now God again orders Jonah to go and preach to the Ninevites, this time Jonah obeys. The people of the city listened to Jonah and he made them repent, so God decides to spare them. That made Jonah very angry so he asked God to take his life rather than spare the Ninevites. Jonah decides to go out of the town to take a rest and he makes himself a booth, but God sends a plant to grow over him and protect him from the Sun. But next morning, unexpectedly, God destroys the plant which was eaten by a worm. Jonah again gets mad with God and asks for death because he couldn't understand God's acts. Then God gives Jonah a moral dilemma: you complain about the death of the plant that you didn't sow, you didn't do anything about it and it lived only one day, so should I not be concerned about the great city of Nineveh and its many inhabitants that I have created? Thus, God wanted to show Jonah that whoever obeys Him will be saved.

In Early Christian art not all the parts from Jonah story were represented, and

25 There are some instances when Jonah is shown as an older and bearded man, and in some examples, the prophet even appears to some researchers as angry, the so-called Jonah *irritatus*, v. Couzin 2013, pp. 192-193.

26 A motif that wasn't noticed by the first researchers of the sarcophagus, like M. Valtrović, but it was pointed out only last year by the detailed study of S. Pilipović and Lj. Milanović, v. Pilipović et al. 2016, p. 221, p. 228.

also some other, that are not included in Biblical narrative, were added creating a kind of an “extra-biblical” narrative.²⁷ For example, the part when Jonah is praying in the belly of the *ketos*, is almost never represented,²⁸ as well as the part when he goes to preach to Ninevites. On the other hand, Jonah is frequently shown naked²⁹ and falling directly into the mouth of the *ketos*, although in the story God sends fish only later when Jonah is already in the sea. This can maybe be explained as an artistic desire to shorten the story.³⁰ The usual way of representation of Jonah’s story is through three main episodes. In the nineteenth century Otto Mitius made this division.³¹ The first episode shows Jonah being cast overboard and being swallowed by the *ketos*, in the second Jonah is shown disgorged by the *ketos*, and in the last scene Jonah is depicted resting under a gourd plant.³² Here we can see that the third scene is also

“extra-biblical”, because it’s not mentioned in the scripture that prophet took a rest under a gourd plant, just that the plant was destroyed the next morning.³³ It should also be noted that none other Old Testament story is being represented by the three episodes.³⁴

The popularity of the Jonah cycle wasn’t restricted only to the sarcophagi, it was also represented, with the same frequency, in other artistic media, by the middle of the fourth century.³⁵ The oldest known Jonah representation is from the third-century *Catacomb of Callixtus* in Rome.³⁶ It was also depicted in the mosaic, as example from fourth-century basilica in Aquileia shows, on gems, ivory, lamps, gold glass and statuettes.³⁷

Maybe it seems odd that one Old Testament story was so frequent in Christian artistic repertoire, but the

27 Even when not being represented with all the details that appear in the Biblical narrative, Jonah story could be recognizable to the beholder since only one episode would be enough to evoke the whole story, v. Couzin 2013, p. 208.

28 The only example of this representation is from the ninth century in Chludov Psalter, v. Couzin 2013, p. 187.

29 There are different explanations concerning Jonah’s nakedness. It is attributed to the naturalism, Jewish precedents or use of the form of pagan Endymion, v. Couzin 2013, p. 189.

30 Jensen 2002, p. 172; Couzin 2013, p. 189.

31 Couzin 2013, p. 170.

32 Valtrović, 1891, p. 136; Grabar 1968, p. 8; Couzin 2013, p. 170.

33 Couzin 2013, pp. 189–194.

34 For example Daniel in the lions’ den, Three Hebrews in the fiery furnace are always represented only by one scene, v. Couzin 2013, p. 165.

35 According to the style of the sarcophagi, it has been proposed that Jonah theme appeared in the middle of the third century, that has reached its zenith in the first part of the fourth, and that gradually vanished from Christian iconography around 325, v. Couzin 2013, p. 172.

36 Jensen 2002, p. 172.

37 Couzin 2013, p. 168; Among the finest examples of Early Christian art belong four marble sculptures of prophet Jonah from the beginning of the third century, v. Wixom 1967, pp. 75–88; Weitzmann 1979, pp. 409–411; Cormack 2000, p. 14.

explanation is simple, for Christians these stories foretell the coming of Christ and his message of salvation. During the liturgy, in prayers and hymns, theologians held up episodes or characters from the Old Testament as ‘types’ referring to the life of Christ.³⁸ One important characteristic that is especially linked to the story of Jonah, and that justifies his comparison with Jesus, is that Jonah is also mentioned in the New Testament by Jesus himself. In the Gospels of Matthew (12:38–41) and Luke (11:29–32) Jesus was asked by some of the Pharisees, in order to be convinced, for a sign. He answers that this generation will only receive “the sign of Jonah the prophet”. In Matthew’s Gospel (12:40) Christ says: “For as Jonah was in the whale’s belly three days and three nights, so shall the Son of Man be in the heart of the earth three days and three nights”, whereas in Luke (11:30) Jesus refers to conversion of the Ninevites: “For as Jonah was a sign to the Ninevites; so shall the Son of Man also be to this generation”. Ignatius of Antioch and Justin Martyr have already wrote about the “sign of Jonah”, using the Old Testament story to foreshadow Christ’s resurrection.³⁹

Choices regarding whether and how Jonah appeared on Christian sarcophagi may be attributed both to individual

preference, reflecting different communities or personal religious understandings and commitments, as well as developments over the several generations of the theme’s popularity. It is presumed that, according to its popularity, Jonah’s story was generally understandable and recognizable. Patrons, viewers, Christians, or those who have yet to be converted, probably were familiar, to a certain extent, with the scenes and the scriptural narrative. Although biblical texts were available in significant number by the late third century, the majority of the people came to know these stories by hearing them during the liturgical reading.⁴⁰

It is worth saying something about the Christian community in *Singidunum*, whose members in the end were exposed to the decoration of the Jonah sarcophagus, in order to better understand the socio-cultural context of its production. We know for certain that Christianity came to the Balkans already in the first century, since we can find such information in the New Testament. As a ‘religion of the cities’, Christianity in this region firstly developed in the urban centres, and some of them became Episcopal seats. Unfortunately, there is not enough material and written sources to judge about the earliest period of Christian religion in Upper Moesia and therefore in

38 Esler 2000, p. 755.

39 Jensen 2002, p. 173; Couzin 2013, pp. 195–197.

40 Couzin 2013, pp. 181–183.

Singidunum. Archaeological remains date only from the fourth century, so all the researchers on the subject agree that Christian life in central Balkan emerged relatively late, probably at the beginning of the third century.⁴¹ Everything we do know about the earliest Christians comes from the records about their persecutions and the first martyrs from these areas. Considering just *Singidunum*, several martyrs are known. Among the first is presbyter Montanus and his wife Maxima, who were arrested in *Sirmium* by praetorian prefect Probus,⁴² during the persecutions of the emperor Diocletian that took place from 303 until 305. They were beheaded and their bodies were thrown in the Sava river, but reappeared nine miles later.⁴³ The cult of St. Montanus and Maxima in *Sirmium* is today lost, there are no preserved epigraphic monuments as evidence, since their bodies were translated to Rome.⁴⁴

The next known martyrs from *Singidunum* are St. Ermilus and Stratonicus. According to Zeiller, they were probably executed during the reign of Licinius (308–324),⁴⁵ and *terminus post quem* would be 311 when Galerius

announced the Edict of Toleration.⁴⁶ The story about these two martyrs is mentioned in the *Menologium of Symeon Metaphrastes* from the tenth century.⁴⁷ We find out that both of them were killed by the order of emperor Licinius and thrown in the Danube, but their bodies aroused after three days.⁴⁸ According to Metaphrastes, they were buried eighteen miles downstream from *Singidunum*, on place that is denoted as *Aureus Mons*, near present-day village Brestovik.⁴⁹

It is regarded that *Singidunum* didn't have its episcopo before 313.⁵⁰ It is only in the middle of the fourth century that it becomes an episcopal seat, together with *Sirmium*, *Margum*, *Viminacium*, *Horreum Margi*, *Naissus* and *Remesiana*.⁵¹ The first known bishop of *Singidunum* was Ursacius. Together with the bishop of *Mursa*, Ursacius will be the most passionate supporter of Arianism in the Illyricum, for more than forty years.⁵² Ursacius was succeeded by Secundian who also followed the doctrines of Arianism, but was

41 Popović 1995, pp. 29–30, p. 36.

42 Mirković 2008, p. 115; Špehar 2014, p. 32.

43 Zeiller 1967, pp. 105–106, p. 121; Špehar 2014, p. 32.

44 Pilipović et al. 2016, p. 225.

45 Mirković 1976, pp. 21–27.

46 Zeiller 1967, p. 106.

47 Ibid., p. 107.

48 Ibid., pp. 88–103; Delehaye 1912, p. 283; Popović 1995, pp. 98–99.

49 Valtrović 1907, pp. 128–138; Popović 1995, p. 100.

50 Popović 1995, p. 97.

51 Popović 1995, p. 85; et al. 2014, p. 86.

52 Popović 1995, p. 97.

condemned at the Council of Aquileia in 381 CE.⁵³

After reconsidering these facts, it becomes clear that Singidunum had developed a Christian community very early. The existence of the early martyrs is the best testimony. *Singidunum* remained important Christian centre during the whole medieval period. Since not much of the earliest Christian material culture has been preserved,⁵⁴ mainly due to the turbulent past of the city which was often destroyed and then again rebuilt, the Jonah sarcophagus is thus even more significant, giving us an insight into the beliefs of *Singidunum's* initial Christians.

Although on first glance simple, the relief decoration of the *Singidunum* sarcophagus actually contains some iconographical motifs that one wouldn't expect together with the Old Testament scene, but that testify about coexisting pagan and Christian traditions. We should first of all examine these motifs separately in order to see how they fit in the funeral context of the monument,

53 Zeiller 1967, p. 150.

54 We know about the Christian bronze lamp excavated in the vicinity of Belgrade. The lamp is in the shape of a ship and on the deck of a ship is a whale with a man who's been spit out of his mouth. So, here too we probably have a story about Jonah, v. Popović 1969, pp. 323–330; Popović, 1995, pp. 100–101. There are also some quotidian objects like vessels, and among the better examples are seven Christian lead sarcophagi, but they are not preserved, v. Pop-Lazić 2002, p. 51; Crnobrnja 2003, pp. 313–330.

and then combined, so we can indicate possible reading(s) of the decoration as a whole.

The most noticeable motif is the Good Shepherd on the left side of the panel. The image of the Good Shepherd belongs to the so called 'non-narrative' images of Early Christian art.⁵⁵ That means that it doesn't derive from a specific written source, but it is submissive to personal interpretation, giving opportunity to different associations and meanings. Similarly to the Jonah cycle, the Good Shepherd has been among the most frequently represented Early Christian images, both in catacomb frescoes and on sarcophagi.⁵⁶ His iconography has its antecedent in the ancient *Kriophoros* ('ram-bearer'), a figure that holds an animal that has to be sacrificed on his shoulders.⁵⁷ This name was an epithet of Hermes who was a *psychopomp*, the guide to the underworld, the one who is responsible for the salvation of the soul, so in that regard appropriate for the funeral context. But the image of the Good Shepherd, in Late Antiquity, also had some other meanings, like being a personification of winter, and some

55 Jensen 2002, p. 32, p. 37.

56 Ibid.

57 Krikken 2012, p. 11.

more general, such as philanthropy and charity.⁵⁸

In this way, it was very suitable for Christians who also appreciated the same values.⁵⁹ A more important fact that enabled Christians to use the Good Shepherd in their iconography are the parallels made in the New Testament. Gospels of Luke (15:4-7) and Matthew (18:12-14) speak about the parable of the lost sheep, whereas John (10:11-16) speaks about Christ, the Good Shepherd, who will lay down His life for the sheep.⁶⁰ In the funeral context, Good Shepherd is the one that guarantees the salvation to the deceased. The representation of Christ as the Good Shepherd has begun slowly to disappear from the Early Christian repertoire in the middle of the fourth century, which is surprising since

by than it was extremely popular.⁶¹ In spite of that, Christian exegete have continued to make comparisons in their writings between Christ and the Good Shepherd until the sixth century.⁶²

Just beneath the Good Shepherd is a representation of a *putto* riding on a dolphin. This is, besides the Good Shepherd, another example of using a motif which came from the pagan tradition together with an explicitly Christian theme, but it was rarely found with Jonah scenes. The dolphins are already known to us from Greco-Roman art, where they weren't depicted just in funeral contexts, but also in profane surroundings (in Hadrian's villa for example).⁶³ The dolphins were associated with the water element and together with a trident were one of the attributes of Poseidon.⁶⁴ More importantly, there was a common pagan belief that dolphins carried the souls of the deceased to the Isles of the

58 Grabar 1968, p. 11; Weitzmann 1979, p. 519; Jensen 2002, p. 37; Cormack 2000, p. 14; Esler 2000, p. 748.

59 In the middle of the twentieth century it was discussed does the pastoral motifs from pagan antiquity have the Christian meaning at all. The shepherds were seen as pastoral allegories or humanitas. It is important to bear in mind that this was a gradual shift and gradual process of transition from the pagan to Christian motifs, so the precise interpretations are not always possible since very frequently motifs could have both meanings, v. Jarak et al. 2016, pp. 329-330; Provoost 2004.

60 Provoost 2004, p. 30; Krikken 2012, pp. 12-14; Couzin 2013, pp. 250-251; Jarak et al. 2016, p. 328. In order to discern earlier pagan images of shepherds from the Christian image, the Good Shepherd is usually written with initial capital letters, v. Couzin 2013, p. 252.

61 One of the last representations is from the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia in Ravenna. This sudden decline in use was usually explained regarding the new position that Christianity gained in the Empire after 313. The representation of Christ as a Shepherd wasn't suitable more, so other iconographical representations of Jesus started to develop, v. Jensen 2002, p. 40; Provoost 2004, p. 31; Krikken 2012, pp. 15-16.

62 Jensen 2002, p. 38, p. 40.

63 Vasić 1973, pp. 310-311; Jensen 2002, p. 159.

64 Vasić 1973, p. 312.

Blessed.⁶⁵ In the late Roman art, the *putto* became associated with the soul.⁶⁶ In this way, Christian observers of the Jonah sarcophagus could invest this image with new meaning, understanding the dolphin as the carrier of Christian souls to the afterlife. It is probable that the motif of a dolphin came to Upper Moesia across Dalmatia and Pannonia as they were exposed to the influences from Northern Italy.⁶⁷

Besides the dolphin and *ketos*⁶⁸ that swallows Jonah, there is also a representation of two other fish swimming in the sea. The basic level of interpretation would of course be that they are here to indicate water environment, but the fish were also one of the first symbols used by Christians. They represent the souls of the faithful and since they are shown in the water, they indicate a heavenly, blissful place in

which the faithful swim.⁶⁹ Above these fish is a ship. The ship itself symbolizes the Church as a whole. The sea is the world and the Church like a ship navigates through it.⁷⁰ On the Jonah sarcophagus this resemblance is made even more evident, since the masts form the shape of a cross. Therefore, the whole Christian community sails toward salvation.⁷¹ It can be said that the ship in the right panel also sails towards the Good Shepherd, that is, towards the salvation.⁷²

In the centre of the relief panel is an image of the gourd plant that God planted in order to teach Jonah moral values. A barely visible bird on it has been noticed only lately. It was suggested that it probably represents a peacock or a dove, since both motifs had their own symbolical meanings for which they were used in Early Christian art.⁷³ Peacocks were especially popular as decorative motifs, so one can find their depictions in catacomb paintings, floor mosaics and sarcophagi reliefs.⁷⁴ St. Augustin stated that the peacocks' meat is incorruptible, and that it has the ability to renew its feathers in spring.⁷⁵ In this

65 Valtrović 1891, pp. 136–137; Lawrence 1962, p. 294; Vasić 1973, p. 313; Jensen 2002, p. 159; Pilipović 2003; Pilipović et al. 2016, p. 229.

66 Pilipović et al. 2016, p. 229.

67 Vasić 1973, p. 311.

68 Although in the Old Testament it is said that Jonah was three days in a belly of a great fish, and in New Testament in a belly of a whale, it is evident that fish that is represented with Jonah, in most of the cases, doesn't look like a whale at all but more like some sea monster with head of a dragon. Jonah's *ketos* derives from the Greco-Roman tradition where it was depicted in the battle with some mythical characters, such as Herakles or Perseus, v. Lawrence 1962, pp. 294–295.

69 Bleiberg 2006, pp. 27–30; Vranešević 2014, pp. 148–149.

70 Jensen 2002, pp. 138–140.

71 Pilipović et al. 2016, pp. 229–230.

72 Ibid., p. 230.

73 Pilipović et al. 2016, p. 229.

74 Anđelković–Grašar et al. 2010, pp. 241–242.

75 Maguire 1987, p. 39 ; Jensen 2002, pp. 158–159 ; Vranešević 2014, p. 147.



*Fig. 2. Jonah Sarcophagus, Singidunum, 4th century, front panel
(photo: T. Miladinović)*

way peacocks' immortality can easily refer to the renewal and resurrection of the deceased and Christians in it saw the hope for the eternal life.⁷⁶ On the other hand, a dove could also signify resurrection and paradise, but it is also a symbol of the Holy Spirit.⁷⁷ If we do not take into account its kind, another, more general, interpretation of the bird can be proposed, that the bird is a symbol of the deceased soul.⁷⁸ Shown in a funerary

context, the bird is appropriate to represent the ascending soul or the one that has already reached the paradise.⁷⁹

When all of these motifs that form the relief decoration of the Jonah sarcophagus are taken together into account it becomes evident that, both individually and as a whole, they refer to the salvation and resurrection of the deceased. It can be noted that different kind of elements are employed in order to visualize this message. The salvation

⁷⁶ Bleiberg 2006, p. 38; Anđelković-Grašar et al. 2010, p. 240.; Pilipović et al. 2016, p. 229.

⁷⁷ Pilipović et al. 2016, p. 229.

⁷⁸ Maguire 1987, p. 29; Vranešević 2014, p. 149.

⁷⁹ Maguire 1987, p. 82.

of the soul is indicated through the motifs that came from the pagan tradition, such as the dolphin, bird (peacock/dove), fish, ship, while the resurrection of the body is indicated through the Christian narrative about the prophet Jonah.⁸⁰ The decoration is made acceptable for both the pagan and Christian community who observed the decoration. The spectator could interpret the shepherd as Hermes or Christ, depending to what cultural context he or she belonged.⁸¹ Jonah's representation as nude, while overcoming the death from the sea monster, resembles Roman mythical heroes, who were frequently represented the same.⁸² At the same time, a Christian beholder would have a possibility to associate Jonah's nakedness with the catechumens during the baptism. Similarly to Jonah who escaped death from the *ketos* and was born again, the catechumens after baptism were reborn in Christ. Basil of

Caesarea compared three days and nights that Jonah has spent in the belly of the fish with the triple immersion during the baptism.⁸³ Also, the sacrament of baptism was a guarantee for the salvation and paradise.⁸⁴ On the Jonah sarcophagus from *Singidunum*, the baptism could also be indicated in the more subtle way, by the presence of the water and a bird, if we interpret it as the Holy Spirit.⁸⁵ The decorative program of Jonah sarcophagus testifies the coexistence of pagan and Christian community in fourth-century *Singidunum*, as well as the uninterrupted use of pagan decorative motifs in Early Christian monuments.⁸⁶

The characteristic of the Jonah sarcophagus in *Singidunum* is the prominent, almost dominant position of the Good Shepherd and the omission of the third scene, of the reclining prophet, from the Jonah cycle. Pastoral motifs are among the rarest themes from everyday life that have survived from the pagan tradition to be used in later

80 Pilipović et al. 2016, p. 230.

81 During the formative period of Early Christian Art the image of shepherd could have likewise been identified with the gods Orpheus, Dionysus, Hercules and Apollo, who also had the same youthful features, v. Jensen 2005, pp. 148–150.

82 Couzin 2013, pp. 278–279. Jonah's nakedness was usually compared with the representation of Endymion because there is some resemblance in their iconography. When Jonah is represented under the gourd plant while taking rest, his posture resembles the pose of Endymion, though it can also be argued that the iconography was borrowed from the depiction of Ariadne or Dionys, v. Jensen 2002, p. 173; Elsner et al. 2011, p. 11; Couzin 2013, pp. 230–243.

83 Jensen 2002, p. 173.

84 As the best example for displaying the scene of Jonah and the baptism Jensen cites the Santa Maria Antiqua sarcophagus, that has juxtaposed scenes of Jonah under the gourd plant and Christ's baptism, v. Jensen 2002, p. 174.

85 Pilipović et al. 2016, p. 231.

86 J. Elsner highlights that it is important not to separate pagan from Early Christian sarcophagi, it would be artificial divide, since the majority of the sarcophagi were produced in the same workshops and by the same artists, v. Elsner et al. 2011, p. 8.

Christian iconography of the sarcophagi, and most of them are found together with Jonah scenes.⁸⁷ The total number of the sarcophagi that combine the story of Jonah and the Good Shepherd is not very high, and as it is noted by Couzin, when these two motifs are joined together the formal connection between them is minimal, without any interconnection, as they have nothing to do with each other.⁸⁸ In this respect, the Jonah sarcophagus from *Singidunum* represents one of the rare examples that is an exception to this rule, since its relief very clearly confronts the Good Shepherd and Jonah, who raises his hands directly to the *Pastor Bonus* in hope of the salvation. In a certain way, the Good Shepherd replaces the omitted scene of Jonah at rest under a gourd plant, indicating that it is the Good Shepherd who will bring him eternal peace in paradise. Jonah's salvation is additionally stressed by the bird on the gourd plant.⁸⁹ Juxtaposing the Good Shepherd with Jonah reinforces the possibility of his salvation and emphasizes the soteriological character of the iconography.

87 Couzin 2013, p. 247.

88 Couzin 2013, p. 253 The *kriophoros* may be on the chest with Jonah, on the lid, or on the sides, but never in the direct connection with Jonah cycle. As the examples author suggests Jonah sarcophagus from Pisa, today in Campo Santo, Berlin sarcophagus, Child's sarcophagus from Copenhagen, St. Maria Antiqua sarcophagus, London sarcophagus, and one in the Museo Pio Cristiano, v. Couzin 2013, p. 217, pp. 429–431.

89 Pilipović et al. 2016, p. 228.

Funeral decoration was, among other things, important and very favourable way of self-representation. The patron could ask for a specific imagery that would reflect his own values and strivings. In the context of Christian population, choices of different Biblical themes would highlight someone's affiliation to this community. In the *Singidunum* sarcophagus, the deceased has chosen to identify himself with Jonah, who then becomes kind of a role model. Jonah was very suitable since his endurance in faith brought him salvation. In this way, by applying Jonah's imagery, deceased hopes for the same destiny for himself and the members of his family. In context of Christian position in wider society, the Jonah theme had another more general meaning. It encouraged the faithful to stay persistent in their faith, despite severe persecutions they were exposed to in that time. Like Jonah who became *exempla resurrectionis*,⁹⁰ although he disobeyed God in the first place, all Christians should expect salvation based on their faith. The decoration of the *Singidunum* sarcophagus, which puts emphasize on the swallowing of Jonah and his disgorgement, should evoke in the mind of viewers that God has spared not just Jonah, but also the Ninevites, after they have repented, although at first they disobeyed God. As such, the story was particularly convenient for the

90 Huskinson 2008, p. 296.

pagan part of the spectators, who had yet to be converted, telling them that God is merciful to all of those who choose to obey Him.

The *Singidunum* sarcophagus offers some other possibilities when approaching the interpretation of Jonah's story. In the beginning of the twentieth century the Jonah cycle started to be observed from the view of cross-cultural mythological traditions and other elements of human psychology and sacred belief systems.⁹¹ The similarity exists between some Greek legends and parts of the Jonah story. For example, Andromeda was saved from a *ketos* by Perseus at Joppa, the same port city from which Jonah left for Tharsis. Also, Jonah's story has a parallel with the legend of Heracles and Hesione, since the hero killed the *ketos* from the inside, after he has spent three days in his belly.⁹² Except ethnological perspectives, the parallels with Jonah are even made in the field of psychoanalysis. Sigmund Freud has compared Jonah's symbolical rebirth from the belly of the *ketos* with actual birth of a baby from mother's womb.⁹³ The modern-day psychology is familiar with the term 'Jonah syndrome' or 'Jonah complex' which was proposed by Abraham Maslow in the twentieth

century. The term refers to the psychological condition, mainly caused by fear, which sabotages person's achievement of dreams and fulfilling his or her potentials. As Jonah has tried to run away from his fate, people often try to escape their responsibilities and destiny, preventing themselves from greatness.⁹⁴

At first glance simple, the decoration of Jonah sarcophagus offers, as we have tried to show, several alternative experiences, mostly depending on the viewer and his or hers social and religious background. These experiences could be achieved by different viewers, or by a single viewer at different times, or even simultaneously. As Jensen has noted, viewers may fill in the rest of the plot, focus only on the episodes presented or use the image as a pointer to a completely different idea or concept.⁹⁵ Depending on religious and social provenance, as well as on familiarity with the Biblical narrative, viewer could evoke the traditional interpretation of imagery that refers to the salvation and resurrection, connecting it to several facets, namely to destinies of Jonah and Ninevites, but also to Christ and eventually to its own fate. Less instructed in Biblical narrative still have an opportunity to recognize certain iconographical motifs. Different sets of images combined make the

91 Couzin 2013, pp. 66–267.

92 Couzin 2013, p. 265.

93 Ibid., pp. 267–270.

94 Ibid., p. 270.

95 Ibid., p. 212.

decoration understandable and acceptable to both communities that lived together in fourth-century Singidunum. Similar examples of sarcophagi with Jonah iconography are not found in the nearby provinces, thus making Jonah sarcophagus in Singidunum unique, not just in the territory of Upper Moesia, but within the wider region of the Roman Balkan provinces.⁹⁶ The existing examples of the story of the Hebrew prophet from surrounding areas are preserved in fresco painting and on one marble mensa.⁹⁷ This fact underlines even more the significance of the Jonah sarcophagus that allowed us with an insight into the belief system of the earliest Christians from the fourth-century Singidunum, who at that time shared with their pagan neighbours not just the iconography, but also some of the main human concerns about the afterlife.

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⁹⁶ Mócsy, Panonnia, 334; Pilipović and Milanović “Jonah Sarcophagus”, 231.

⁹⁷ In the tombs from *Sirmium* and *Sopianae* we have a depiction of Jonah, and on the small fragment of a marble mensa also from *Sirmium*, v. Pilipović and al. 2016, pp. 231-232.

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