

Fish and Gourds: Contribution to the Study of the Cult and Iconography of the Prophet Jonah in the Middle Danube Region

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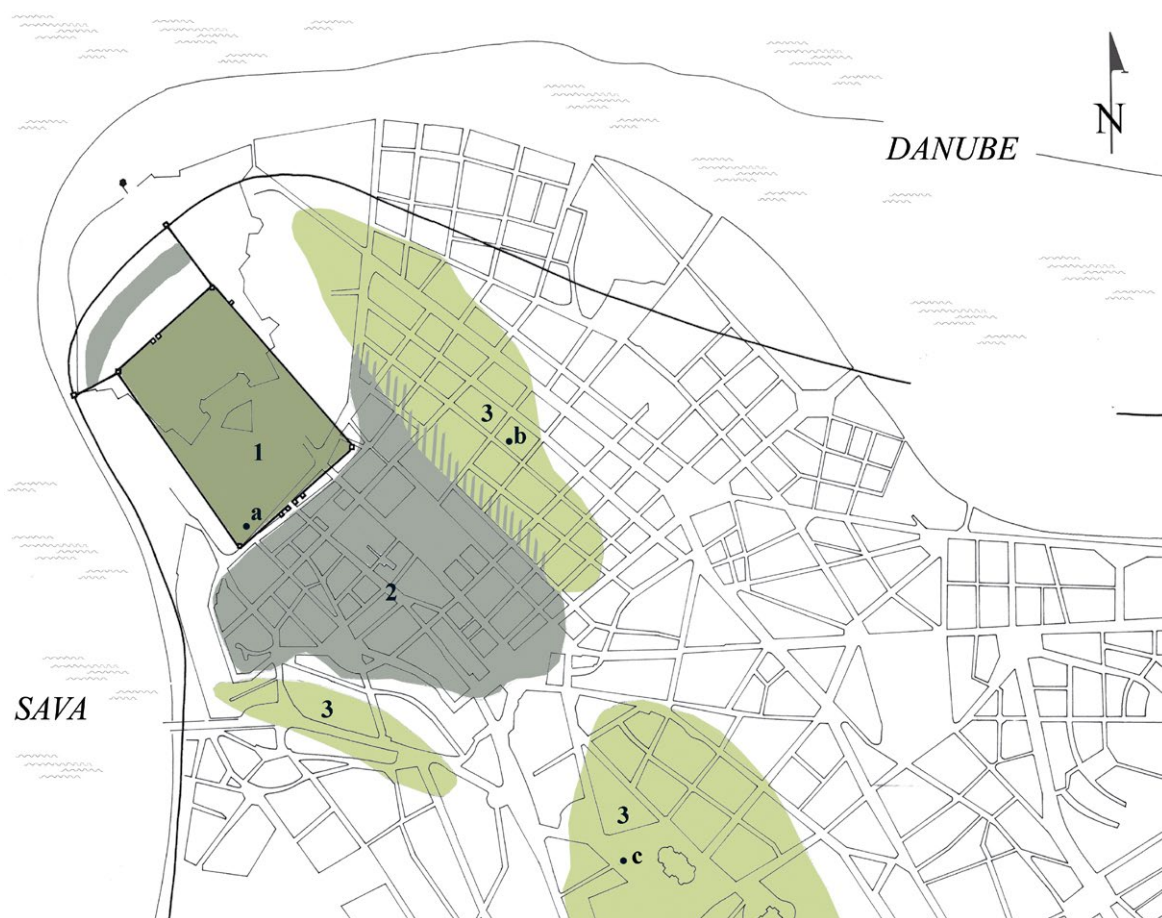
*The paper is dedicated to the interpretation of a relief ornament found on a miniature lead vessel accidentally discovered in the area of the southeast Roman necropolis of the antique Singidunum. In the centre of the dish, whose shape corresponds to that of the ancient metal and ceramic oval plates with two horizontal handles (lanx), there is a representation of a fish and three more oval-shaped details, which have been subject to different interpretations. On this occasion, the author draws attention to the analogue early Christian representations and possibility that they, in fact, represent fruits of a special type of gourd (gr. κολοκύνθη) known as *Lagenaria siceraria*. Together with the representation of a fish, they form a well-known symbolic and associative assemblage found in the Old Testament story of prophet Jonah and his iconographic cycle, which is, besides that, largely widespread in Paleochristian art and present in the area of the Middle Danube.*

Key words: *Jonah, Paleochristian iconography, fish, gourd, *Lagenaria siceraria*, plate, Belgrade, Middle Danube region*

The text on the iconographic representation from the miniature lead plate from Belgrade (Vujović: 2006) is my contribution to the Papers in honour of the esteemed professor dr Mirjana Sanader on her 65th birthday with my due respect for her scientific contribution to archaeology and her valuable research work.

The concerned object (Figures 1, 2) is preserved in the Collection for Late Antiquity and Byzantium of the National Museum in Belgrade (inv. no. 122/IV) where it has arrived as a chance finding from the surroundings of the former Batal mosque in an area close to the current House of the National Assembly (Map 1). This name used to refer to the remains of the former Ejnehan Bey mosque erected at the southern suburbs of the city of Belgrade along the Tsarigrad Road at the end of the 16th century (Šabanović 1970: 23, 27). The vessel was made of cast lead in the shape of an oval flat plate with two horizontal handles both decorated with two three-dimensional rosettes. The joints between the ends of handles and the rim, on both sides, contain small button-shaped ornaments, which probably imitate the eyes of bird protomes often found on different oval metal or ceramic plates (Chew 1997: Figs. 14, 17).

On the horizontally flared rim, one can recognize a stylized ornament of an oval kyma, but the most prominent adornment is the one at the bottom and it represents a low-relief representation of a fish with clearly emphasized details. The body of the fish is long with highlighted tail fin and pointed head with a clearly visible hypertrophied eye represented by a double circle. Two arched plastic strips indicate gills, while circular incisions represent scales. However, the fish is not represented as a single motive. Above and below the central representation of the fish found at the bottom of the dish, there are also three significantly less highlighted plastic forms, two of which are under and one above the fish. According to their basic aspect, the



Map 1. Singidunum (Belgrade) in the Late Roman period: 1. legionary camp; 2. civil settlements; 3. necropolises; a. possibly location of the Early Christian church; b. the Jonah sarcophagus; c. possibly location of the lead plate find.



Figure 1. Lead plate from Belgrade, National Museum Belgrade, inv. no. 122/IV (Vujović 2006: T. 1: 1).

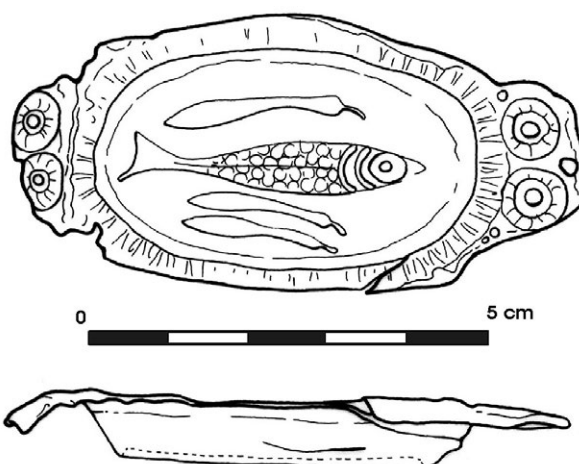


Figure 2. Lead plate from Belgrade, National Museum Belgrade, inv. no. 122/IV (Vujović 2006: T. 1: 1).

complete relief adornment of this metal plate stands in the museum inventory as „representation of four fish”. A quick glance at this representation can really make the observer recognize in the above-mentioned forms, accompanying the central depiction of the fish, long and slightly bent fish-shaped silhouettes with heads turned in the opposite direction from the main representation. Therefore, certain authors who studied the relief representations of this vessel usually paid attention to the central depiction of the fish, which they interpreted within the framework of the Roman or wider Christian symbolism of the cult. They either recognized the three surrounding details as representations of fish or they did not mention them

at all (Milovanović 2017: 143–144, 307, cat. 550; Cvjetičanin 2013: 208–209). The lead plate from Singidunum is also mentioned in a short note within the last paper dedicated to Jonah's sarcophagus from Belgrade (Pilipović & Milanović 2016: 227, note 41) as well as in recently published detailed research on Early Christianity in the middle section of the Roman Danubian Limes (Jeremić & Ilić 2018: 230).

However, on this occasion we would like to emphasize that the shapes of the three mentioned details are significantly different from the central representation of the fish, both by their opposite direction and by omission of characteristic iktiomorphic details. Furthermore, besides the fact that the plate from Singidunum contains a reduced composition, the realization of the above-mentioned accompanying representations largely differs from the dominant and recognizable central motive of a fish. As we have already pointed out, all of the three surrounding relief forms have a completely smooth surface so that eyes, gills or scales are not suggested and cannot be recognized (Vujović 2006: 313). Our completely different interpretation of this composition relies on the role of the line-shaped details (Figure 2), less visible at first glance but still present, which on one side exceed the volume of these shapes and represent **petioles**. It is therefore certain that this is not a representation of animals (fishes) but **plants**, that is, fruits shown above and under the central representation of the fish.

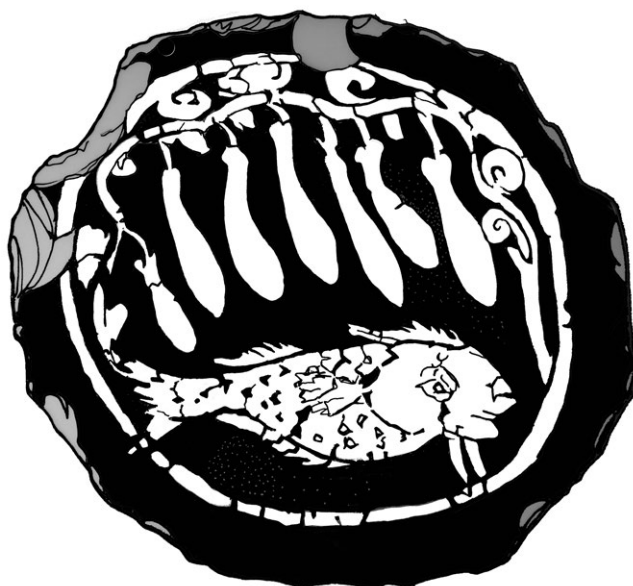


Figure 3. Bottom of the gold-glass cup, Corning Museum of Glass, inv. no. 66.1.205 (drawing by: M. Vujović).

Which plant (fruit) is it? In our previous paper, we identified it as a representative of a large family of Cucurbitaceae or cucumber (*Cucumis sativus*), which was considered to have been widely used during the Roman period, both for nutrition and in medicine (Vujović 2006: 313–314). Here we would like to introduce another possibility, which we consider more probable, especially in the context of the Early Christian past and tradition of Singidunum. The fruits surrounding the fish on the lead plate from Belgrade do belong to the family of Cucurbitaceae, however, they are not cucumbers, but probably a type of gourd from the family of cucurbits (*Cucurbita*), and the whole scene is a symbolic, reduced and concise presentation of the Biblical story of the prophet Jonah. This story belongs to the Paleochristian iconography and it is the most usually represented by three characteristic scenes: 1. Jonah is thrown overboard into the sea or in the jaws of a large fish, that is, a sea monster – Cetus (κῆτος); 2. the sea monster throws Jonah out of its womb on the shore; 3. Jonah is resting in the shade lying under a vine with elongated hanging fruits.

The relief ornament at the bottom of the plate from Singidunum could represent the third scene from the Jonah cycle, except that here, instead of a lying figure of the prophet there is a substitution in the form of a fish surrounded by gourds. Nevertheless, we are more likely to believe that this summarized depiction using only a few symbols (fish, gourds) in an iconographic sense, in fact, completes the story of the prophet Jonah. As a good analogy for such an interpretation we refer to a representation found on a gold glass bowl from the Corning Museum of Glass (Whitehouse 2001: 245, cat. 834). The bottom of this vessel (Figure 3) has a lower part made of dark blue glass and an upper surface made of uncolored, transparent glass. Between these two parts, there is a depiction of a fish scene including a vine with seven elongated fruits realized by application of engraved golden leaves in a field framed by an irregular circular line. The bottoms of similar glass bowls with different scenes from the Old or New Testament in *fondi d'oro* technique, mostly dated to the 4th century, were usually found near the graves within the Paleochristian catacombs in Rome (Whitehouse 2001: 240–241), where they were the most probably manufactured. However, one can also find them in Cologne and other Early Christian centres, including the area of the Middle Danube river basin (Rankov 1983; Popovic 2013: 342, cat. 155). The depictions of scenes from Jonah's cycle are relatively frequent on *fondi d'oro* vessels, which complies with the great popularity of this motive in the Late Antique period (Jansen 2011: 69).

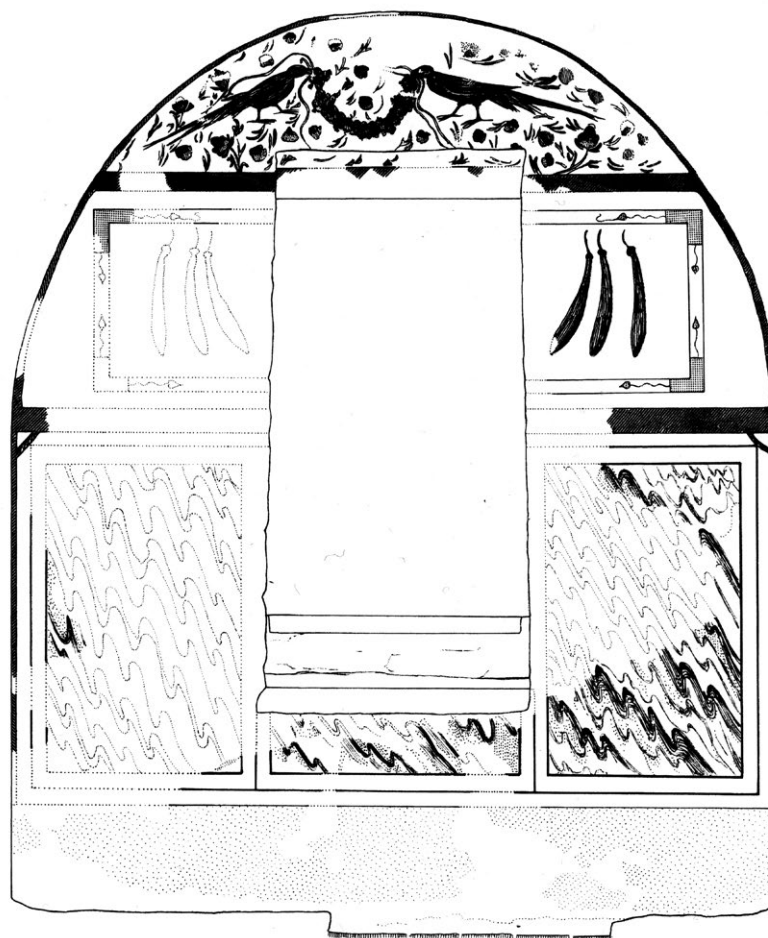


Figure 4. Fresco-painting from Early Christian tomb depicting gourds, Thessaloniki (Μαρκή 2006: 130, Σχέδ. 65).

A similar example of the above-mentioned iconographic-associative depictions of the story of the prophet Jonah, also in the funerary context, exists as well in the early Christian necropolises in Thessaloniki (Μαρκή 2006: 130, Σχέδ. 65, Pin. 1). At the entrance, on the right side of the south wall of the tomb No. 41, there is a preserved wall painting in the middle zone (Figure 4) with three prolate green fruits, similar to certain types of gourds. Those fruits also refer to the story of Jonah representing a sort of paradigm of salvation and eternal peace for the faithful, as well as baptism, death and resurrection of Christ (Ferguson 2011: 346–347).

The scenes from the Jonah's cycle are also very frequent on the relief ornaments of the early Christian sarcophagi from the end of the 3rd to the beginning of the second quarter of the 4th century (Gerke 1940: Taf. 28–30, 38–51, 53; Stommel 1958: 112–115). However, they appear, at the same time, in free standing sculpture (Weitzman 1979: 409–412, Figs. 365–369), as well as on other private or liturgical objects (Weitzman 1979: cat. no. 377, 384–385, 402). This subject was by far the most represented of all the other Old Testament stories in the Christian art of the pre-Constantine period before it slowly gave place to different iconographic contents (Snyder 2003: 84–87). The practice of summarizing of biblical scenes characteristic also for the earliest Christian art, as of the first years of the 3rd century, is clearly visible on the lower frieze of the so-called Murano diptych as well. Jonah is there depicted resting under the gourds and lying on a sea monster and not on the ground, as usual (Weitzman 1979: cat. no. 402, Fig. 59). Furthermore, a marble sarcophagus from the British Museum, dated to the last decades of the 3rd or the very beginning of the 4th century, besides the developed depiction of the story of Jonah at the front side, also contains a separately summarized scenes set aside on the lateral sides – one with a peacock and the other one with Cetus, both under the tree with hanging gourds (Rosenau 1961: 63–65).

However, the opinions do not even closely agree regarding the type of plant mentioned in the Old Testament story of Jonah. We can freely say that this problem is as old as the led plate from Singidunum. Saint Jerome of Stridon, the famous translator of the Old Testament texts and creator of the transcript of

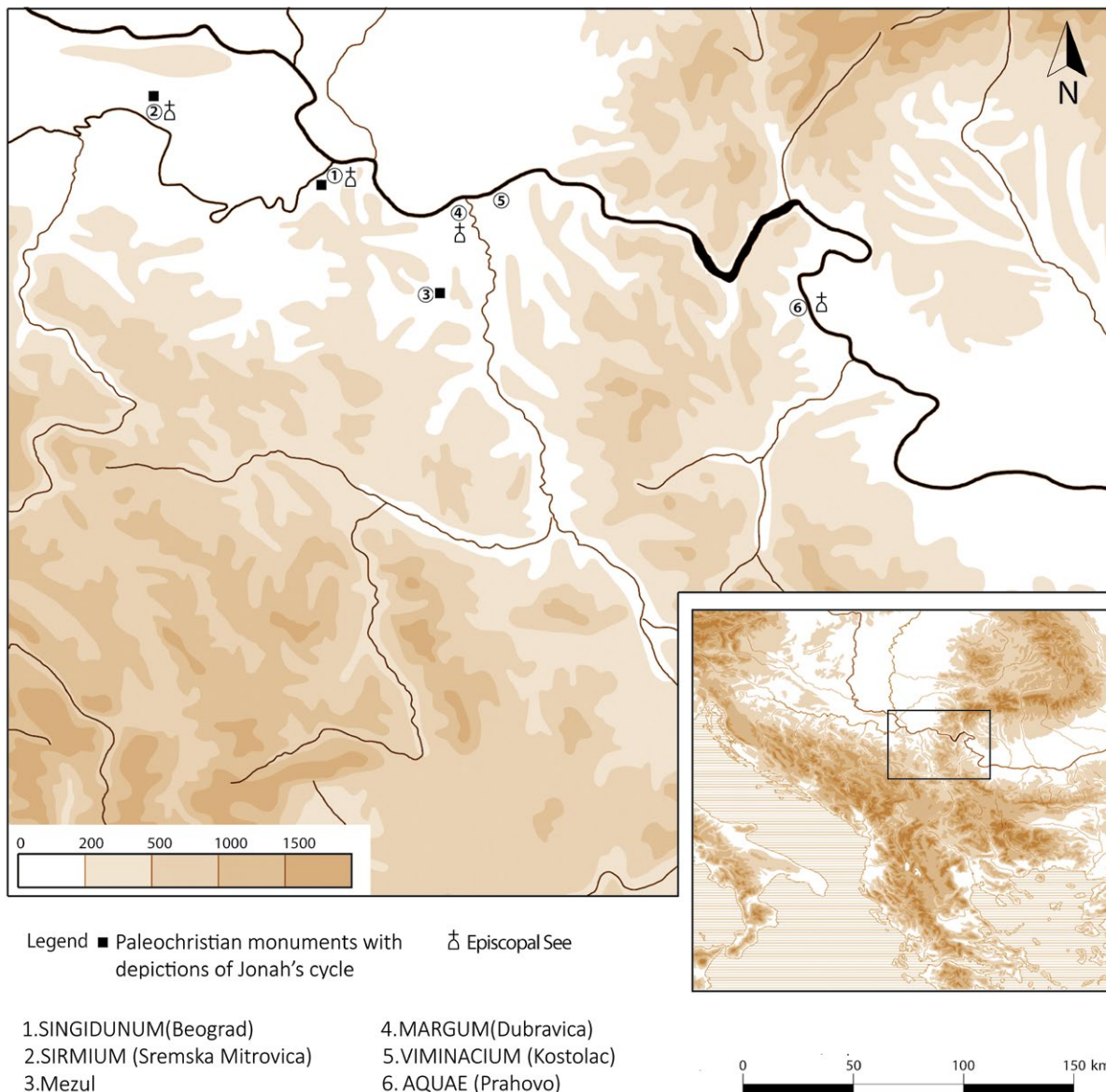
the Vulgate, in one of his letters belonging to indecently bitter and sarcastic correspondence with Saint Augustine of Hippo from 404, explains his translation of the Hebrew word *qiqayon* (קִיקְיֹן) naming the plant under whose God-given shadow prophet Jonah was resting while disapproving the decision of the God to spare Nineveh and its sinful inhabitants. In his translation of the Old Testament from Hebrew, Jerome named the disputable plant in the story of Jonah ivy (κίσσος) instead of gourd (κολοκύνθη) as written in Septuagint – the previous Alexandrian Greek translation of the Old Testament, which was widely used at that time.

Although it is a sort of biblical ἄπαξ λεγόμενον and apparently insignificant detail, such a translation of the name of the plant under which Jonah is resting before Nineveh will cause a storm of indignation among certain communities of North African Christians unprepared to accept changes in sacred texts. In his critique of the Jerome's translation Saint Augustine takes into account their complaints and asks for the disputable changes to be rejected (Bolin 1997: 25–30). Saint Jerome's replies: *I have already given a sufficient answer to this in my commentary on Jonah. At present, I deem it enough to say that in that passage, where the Septuagint has gourd, and Aquila and the others have rendered the word ivy (κίσσος), the Hebrew manuscript has ciceion, which is in the Syriac tongue, as now spoken, ciceia. It is a kind of shrub having large leaves like a vine, and when planted it quickly springs up to the size of a small tree, standing upright by its own stem, without requiring any support of canes or poles, as both gourds and ivy do. If, therefore, in translating word for word, I had put the word ciceia, no one would know what it meant; if I had used the word gourd, I would have said what is not found in the Hebrew. I therefore put down ivy, that I might not differ from all other translators.* (Jerome Ep. 75. VII. 22).

To make the confusion even bigger, the plant (*qiqayon*) Jerome talks about and which he translates as ivy instead of gourd, according to the opinion of some authors (Bolin 1997: 154–155), does not belong to the family of Cucurbitaceae at all. It is in fact a ricinus tree (*Ricinus communis*), which is today mentioned as such only in some more modern translations and editions of the Bible, but it never appears on the Paleo-Christian monuments with depictions of Jonah's cycle. On the contrary, in the Paleo-Christian iconography, as late as until the 5th century, when it completely disappears and gives place to Christ, saints or other Old Testament characters, the prophet Jonah is almost exclusively depicted lying under a tree or vine with elongated fruits pending. These fruits are characteristic for climbing plants from the family of Cucurbitaceae and they are the most similar to the different types of gourds whose shape also corresponds to the fruits represented on the plate from Singidunum.

The attempts to trace the particular plant, which has served as a model for these representations, have long been unsuccessful due to a great variability of cucurbits, especially gourds, specifically regarding the size and shape of fruits. In a terminology sense, the confusion is even more conspicuous, both in ancient and modern languages, since the same terms often referred to different types of cucurbits (Normann & Haarberg 2017: 13–14). A detailed interpretation of ancient written sources and the appropriate iconographic representations including these fruits have allowed to conclude that they relate to a special type of gourd known as *Lagenaria siceraria* [*Lagenaria Siceraria* (Mol.) Standley; Cucurbitaceae] (Decker-Walters *et al.* 2004; Janick *et al.* 2007). Unlike most cucurbits, the gourds of type *Lagenaria siceraria* are not part of the Columbian botanical exchange, but they originate from the southern part of Africa. They have been long present and used in the Mediterranean surroundings as one of the first domesticated plants used for nutrition, medical treatments and other needs (Decker-Walters *et al.* 2004: 501; Janick *et al.* 2007: 1454).

Young fruits, vines and flowers of this gourd are edible, the same as its seeds, but it is also grown for its typical shape and good characteristics of its shells which allow their use as bottles or pitchers (Berenji 1992; 1999; 2000; Morimoto & Mvere 2004). Dried and treated fruits were also used for manufacture of ladles, funnels, strainers, cups, saltshakers and other vessels, but also for different object of specific purpose such as masks, musical instruments or, more recently, pipes for tobacco smoking (Teppner 2004: 257–258; Rodić 2004: 11–12; Mladenović *et al.* 2012: 581). It is interesting that the shape of the gourd *L. siceraria* varies from long-fruited to bottle-shaped fruits on the same plant depending on the position and surface it is growing on, that is, depending on whether it is formed laid down on the earth or it is pending on the vine in vertical position (Janick *et al.* 2007: 1451). The fruits of this gourd also vary depending on the degree of their maturation or ripening. Elongated unripe fruits of the gourd *L. siceraria* were used for



Map. 2. Early Christian sites with Jonah's cycle representations on the Middle Danube basin.

nutrition, while those of a globular shape and yellow of brown colour, either ripe or dried, were usually grown for manufacture of utensils (Janick *et al.* 2007: 1454). This fact has certainly contributed to the different representations of the motive of gourd fruit in the scenes of Jonah's cycle in the ancient Christian art, including those discovered in the soil of the Danube river basin. Its particular vitality demonstrated by its rapid growth and large leaves and plump fruits full of seeds, determined this plant as a certain symbol of abundance and fertility, but also faith in God's providence, faith in the victory of life against death and faith in salvation and resurrection of the baptized, orthodox and righteous.

The representations of Jonah's cycle are also relatively frequent at the territory of today's Serbia where we usually found them within the most important Late Antiquity urban Christian centres and in their close surroundings (Map 2). One of the earliest presentations of the scenes from Jonah's cycle is found on a large lamp in the shape of a boat (Figure 5) made of copper alloy from Mezul near Smederevo (Pavlović 1969; Popović 1970). The prow is modelled in the shape of a sea monster – Cetus, with Jonah getting out from his mouth, while the body including ten beaks supporting wicks is decorated with representations of dolphins, fish and other sea creatures in relief. Above this scene, on the highly strained prow and stern of the boat there is a testament inscription carved on both sides: DEI IN DOMU/TERMOGENES VOTUM FECIT (Mirković & Dušanić 1976: 89–90, Nr. 83; Petrović 1993: 338, cat. no. 146).

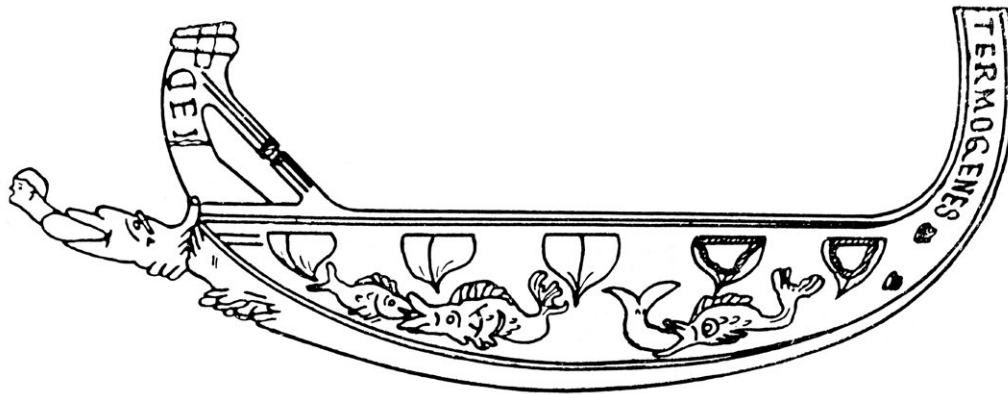


Figure 5. Copper alloy lamp in a shape of a boat from Mezul, Museum in Smederevo, inv. no. A 145 (Pavlović 1969).

Two rim fragments belonging to a marble semi-circular table, which probably used to be a part of the inventory of a sacral building (Figure 6), originate from Sremska Mitrovica, from the area surrounding the city forum of Sirmium (site 30). The relief representation preserved on some parts of this sigma type mensa contains a depiction of Jonah inside the jaws of the sea monster. We consider that, in this case, it is not a representation of the scene of Jonah swallowed by Cetus (Jeremić 2004: 71–72, Fig. 25; Popović 2013: 148, Fig. 69; Pilipović & Milanović 2016: 232), but the later one when, after ardent prayers for salvation addressed to the God (Jona: 2: 2), he is thrown out of the monster's mouth. First of all, it shows the position *expansis manibus* characteristic for figures representing the suppliant – *orans* in the Paleochristian iconography. In support of this, another fragment of this table, discovered in 1852 in Sremska Mitrovica, which is today preserved in Kunsthistorisches Museum of Vienna (Kitzinger 1960: 22), contains the next scene in the narration sequence – Jonah resting under the gourd fruits.



Figure 6. Two fragments of marble mensa with Jonah's cycle relief scenes from Sirmium: a. Museum of Srem, Sremska Mitrovica, inv. no. A 1000; b. Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna (Popović 2013: 147–148, Fig. 69).

Another representation, which was at a certain time classified in the same iconographic cycle, also originates from Sremska Mitrovica. The lateral walls of the Paleochristian tomb made of bricks from Mike Antića street (Figure 7) contain wall paintings among which we also recognize scenes from the story of Jonah (Popović 2011: 228–234, Figs. 10–15; Popović 2013: 147–148, 152, Fig. 68). On the preserved



Figure 7. Fresco-painted tomb from Sirmium, Mike Antića Street, Sremska Mitrovica (Museum of Srem Archives).



Figure 8. Relief decoration of sarcophagus depicting the Good Shepherd and Jonah, Belgrade, (National Museum in Belgrade, inv. no. 1564/IV).

wall paintings from the south longitudinal wall of this tomb, dated to the middle, that is, second half of the 4th century, I. Popović has identified a depiction of a boat with a sail, paddles and even a human figure with extended arms. Although we do not completely agree with this interpretation, the double pitched ceiling of this tomb was certainly painted with vegetal representation of green petioles and climbers with globular and oval gourd fruits in ochre colour (Figure 7), which can also refer to the story of Jonah.¹ The painted motives of the same Old Testament story were already known from the Pannonian area and from the Late Antiquity necropolis in Pecs (Hudak & Nagy 2009: 39–48, Pic. 23; Heidl 2014; Hudak 2009). Here, in the old Christian memorial crypt – the so called Tomb of Peter and Paul (Tomb I), on the eastern wall, there are two partly preserved summarized scenes from Jonah's cycle dated to the second half, that is, to the end of the 4th century (Hudak & Nagy 2009: 48).

Finally, on the soil of Belgrade, there was also found a subsequently used stone antique sarcophagus (Figure 8) with a Paleochristian representation, which was afterwards carved on its front side (Valtrović 1886: 70–71; Valtrović 1891: 130–142, T. 11–12; Pilipović & Milanović 2016). It was accidentally discovered at the end of the 19th century during construction works in the area of the northeast necropolis of the ancient Singidunum (Pop-Lazić 2002: 50–51, 86). The relief representation is composed of the depiction of the Good Shepherd on the left side of the front field bordered by Pannonian vaults and depictions of Jonah's suffering and salvation in the central part and on the right side. On this sarcophagus, we recognize two depictions belonging to Jonah's cycle – the scene when sailors are throwing the prophet overboard from the boat into the sea and the scene when Cetus is throwing Jonah out on the shore. The last scene is dominated by a depiction of a tree with long gourd fruits and one bird in the treetop (Pilipović & Milanović 2016: 221, Fig. 6). According to the characteristics of its style, the sarcophagus was the most probably created at the end of the 2nd or in the 3rd century, while the above-mentioned relief ornament with the old Christian scene was added later, the most probably around the middle of the 4th century, during its secondary use.

* * *

Due to the lack of specific data, the original context related to the finding of the lead vessel with a relief ornament cannot be reliably determined, which therefore makes its more precise dating rather difficult.

¹ Admittedly, I. Popović sees a representation of a rich vegetal ornament with fruits of gourd also on the vertical sides of the north longitudinal wall (Popović 2011: 231, Fig. 15a). We consider that this motive was in fact a part of an ornament on the inner side of the vault which allowed for the deceased to be laid in a surrounding similar to the pergola under which Jonah is usually represented. This is clearly indicated by the fact that the depiction of vines and gourds is in fact preserved on one of the tegulas on which the double pitched roof of the grave is formed, while longitudinal vertical walls were made of horizontally laid bricks.

According to the museum documentation from the time of its purchase, the miniature lead vessel was discovered near the former Batal mosque, where findings of one lead and one stone antique sarcophagus were identified, without any specific data on the conditions of their discovery (Valtrović 1885: 45; Pop-Lazić 2002: 20–21, G–110, G–111). At the site of origin of these findings, but also in some wider surroundings, a great number of antique graves was identified, with both cremated remains and different skeleton burials, either freely buried or laid down in sarcophagi or graves built of bricks or stone (Pop-Lazić 2002: 20–21).

Therefore, the most probably, the lead plate originated from one of the antique graves devastated during later construction or other works in this area (Simić 1997). They were all found in a zone occupied by a south-eastern antique necropolis outside the borders of the Roman Singidunum erected in the extension of the main city communications and the route of the road of Singidunum – Viminacium. Most of the burials which could be dated belong to the first half of the 3rd century, while a smaller number of them was dated to the end of this century (Pop-Lazić 2002: 85–86).

According to the shape of the plate and characteristics of style of the relief representations, several hypotheses have been made. Larger oval plates, similar to the finding from Belgrade, were mostly made of silver and bronze as parts of precious tableware for serving meals at the tables of the wealthy people. They will later become a prototype for manufacture of similar dishes made of other materials, mostly ceramic and glass. In pottery manufacture, this shape of plate was usually reserved for more luxurious dishware of special purpose. The shape of flat oval or rectangular plates with horizontal, the most usually wavy handles, is known under the Latin name of *lanx*, or *lancicula*, *lancula*, that is, *langula* for smaller examples. It was used as tableware, the most often for serving meat, fish, crustaceans and fruit, but also sweets, different sauces and spices. The plates of such a shape used to be offered as gifts during Saturnalia or other holidays, but they were also often used as cult or worship utensils. They were also used during funerals and funeral feasts or they were left next to the deceased as grave goods. In the Christian iconography they were even related to the cult of the different saints, especially to Saint John the Baptist (Hilgers 1969: 206–208).

Simple manufacture and similarity to ceramic shapes of oval plates (Drag. 39), which are believed to have been manufactured in local provincial workshops, possibly even in the neighbouring Viminacium (Cvjetičanin 1996: 179), lead to the conclusion that the miniature lead vessel from the National Museum in Belgrade the most probably originated from one of the metallurgical workshops for manufacture of various lead objects which operated starting from the late 2nd and during the 3rd century and later, in the largest urban centres of the Upper Moesia – Singidunum and Viminacium (Popović 1992: 43; Spasić 1996: 41–42).

The compliance of the relief representation of the fish and gourds with the depiction found at the bottom of the above-mentioned *fondi d' oro* glass from the Museum of Corning, gives however a basis for a later dating. These products were probably manufactured by specialized glass workshops in Rome and around, the most probably between 360 and 390, which is indicated by the names of well-known historical persons and high church dignitaries (Howells 2015: 60–66).

Extremely small dimensions of the lead vessel from Singidunum and its relief ornament with the cult representation thus lead us to the conclusion that it was not used for food or as a children's toy (Vujović 2006: 315–316). According to the suggested new interpretation of the relief representation, we consider that, as in the case of glass *fondi d' oro* cups, this was the most probably an intimate grave good or a certain, although tiny mark, whose role was not only to designate Christian commitment of the deceased, but also to emphasise the faith in salvation, resurrection and eternal life of the dead by the depicted symbols originating from the Old Testament story of the prophet Jonah.

Abbreviations

Drag.	H. Dragendorf, "Terra Sigillata, Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der griechischen und römischen Keramik". <i>Bonner Jahrbücher</i> 96–97, 1895, 18–155.
IMS	<i>Inscriptions de la Mésie Supérieure</i> , Belgrade.

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