



The most significant values
of the cultural and natural heritage

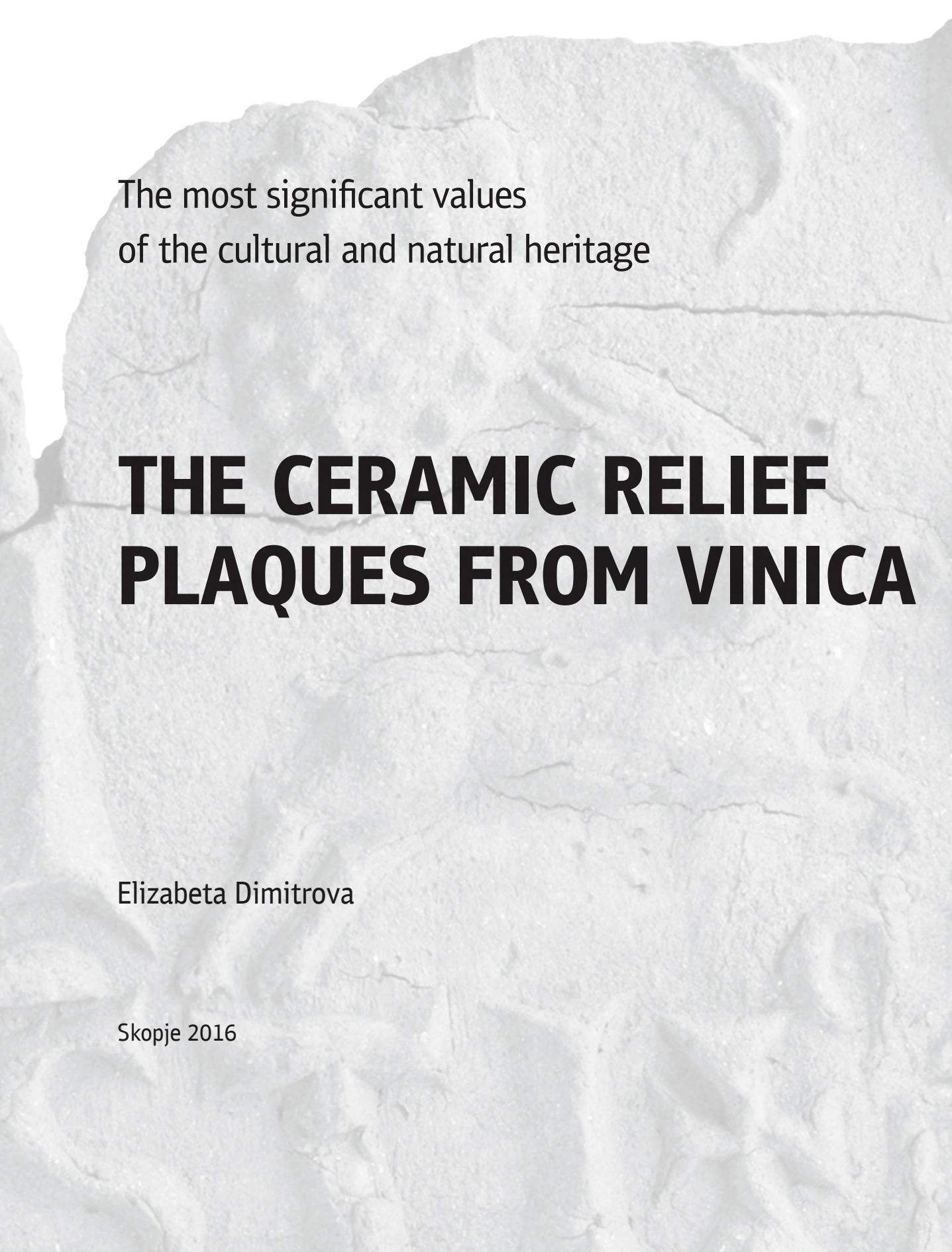
THE CERAMIC RELIEF PLAQUES FROM VINICA



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This work has been published
with the financial support of the
Government of the Republic of Macedonia



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Skopje 2016

FOREWORD

MACEDONIAN CULTURAL AND NATURAL HERITAGE

Over the past 4.5 million years since the creation of Earth, the ancestor of the modern man, “the wise man - Homo sapiens”, appearing on the African continent 150,000 years before this day, quickly settled throughout the territories of the Middle East, Asia and Europe.

His cultural evolution is recorded in the Republic of Macedonia, as well.

While travelling through the prehistoric era of the Stone Age, the Bronze Age and the Iron Age, as well as the historical epochs of the Antiquity and the Middle Ages, man created civilizations on the soil of the Republic of Macedonia by introducing and using the natural resources. He established the magnificent kingdoms of the Agrianians, Paeonia, Pelagonia, Lyncestis, Macedonia, and the principalities of Deuriopus, Dessaretia and the Penestae.

The Roman Empire, Byzantine, the medieval states - all left a powerful civilizational imprint.

The belief in the natural phenomena, followed by the belief in the many gods, to finally worship our only God - all left indelible cultural traces.

All this enormous cultural and natural heritage of the Republic of Macedonia was subject of the capital project of the Government of the Republic of Macedonia, “Publications of the most significant values of the cultural and natural heritage,” carried out by the Cultural Heritage Protection Office.

130 monographs featuring the Archaeological Heritage, Sacral heritage, the Treasures of the churches and monasteries in Macedonia and the Natural heritage were created.

Macedonia - the high forest land in the heart of the Balkan Peninsula, as the name suggests, furrowed by the deep valleys of the Vardar tributaries and the river Drim, adorned with the blue - green waters of Lake Ohrid, Prespa and Dojran, with the proud giants Kozuv, Shar Mountain, Korab and Jablanica, Selecka Mountain and other mountain ranges, today lights 130 torches of its own, as well as the world's, cultural and natural heritage; a legacy to preserve, use wisely and pass on to future generations of the Macedonian road to eternity.

Prof. Viktor Lilchikj Adams, Ph.D.

THE CERAMIC RELIEF PLAQUES FROM VINICA

In the wonderland of Biblical Macedonians, where the Apostle Paul has preached on the wisdom of Christ's parables, the period of Late Antiquity is a suitable chronological reference for the richest volume of artistic works inspired by the passionate devotion to the new faith and marked by the creative zest of numerous talented masters. In the mysterious world of artistic production of the time in question, the aesthetical canons for the following millennia woven from the deepest consonants of the religious thought and ennobled by the subtle nuances of supreme mastership were born, conceived in the spiritual depths of Biblical inspiration and permeated with the esoteric impulses of symbolic iconography. The glamorous beauty of the forms, the sophisticated aesthetic dimension of the artistic expression, as well as the refined spirit of the visual components – these are the most characteristic features of the representative works of art encompassed by the abundant treasury of Early Christian artistic production preserved on the territory of present day Macedonia. The luscious mosaic panoramas virtuously shaped in their allegoric illustrativeness, the impressive fresco ensembles nuanced with the mysterious elusiveness of Evangelic stories, as well as the radiant marble sculpture carved in inventive symbolic forms - these are the components of the authentic contribution of our territory to the grandiose artistic treasury of the Early Christian era.

However, the most exciting representative of the endless horizons of creative imagination from the chronologically distant centuries of the Paleo Christian epoch is the ensemble of ceramic reliefs found at the Late Antique site of the Vinica Fortress which reveals an iconographically spectacular and aesthetically inimitable artistic form of Biblical inspiration, materialized in a sublimed theological and



Saint Archangel Michael the Psychopomp

liturgical concept of visual expression. Fascinating by its thematic and artistic qualities, as well as exclusive by its theological and stylistic features, the arrangement of the Vinica terracotta plaques is a representative of the remarkable creative attainments of artistic production originated on the territory of Macedonia at the zenith of Christian Antiquity. Produced as reliefs executed in terracotta, passionately “agitated” by the impulse of creative spontaneity and marked by the fierce nuances of brutal expression, the ceramic slabs from Vinica are the most authentic guardians of cultural heritage created at the dawn of the Christian era. Unrepeated as works of art in the aesthetic codex of the earliest Christian times, the Vinica reliefs testify to the inventive shapes of reflection of religious Dogma in the medium of representative artistic expression. Representing a synonym for the complex dimension in the construction of the sublimed theological and painterly structures, the Vinica terracottas are exclusive representatives of a certain authentically conceived and genuinely illustrated funerary subject matter, which visualizes the idea of immortality and ever-lasting life. The expressively intoned stories that narrate of: creation and prophecies, passion and sacrifices, bitter oddities through centuries of religious persecutions, Old Testament cavaliers galloping towards their victorious destinies, Psalmodies that glorify the burnt sacrifices laid at the altar of mortal sins, and the wise prophet Isaiah who announces the Incarnation of the One who will suffer for the sins of mankind – in the dramatic artistic resonance of the Vinica terracottas echo as a ceremonial intonation in honour of the supreme creative achievements of the Early Christian era.

Archaeological context

The discovery of the ceramic reliefs at the archaeological site of the Late Antique Fortress located on the south-west outskirts of Vinica is one of the most significant components for determination of the historical importance of this settlement, situated on a slightly elevated plateau surrounded by a powerful defensive fortification. The two stages in the erection of the defensive wall reflect the Early Antique and the Late Antique *strata* in the historical development of the town, yet only the latter is preserved enough to testify to the urban structure of the settlement, today visible in the south-eastern portion of the site. The perimeter of the Late Antique town, which, according to the numismatic artifacts which were found, can be precisely dated in the first half of the 4th century, while its reconstruction can be placed at the turn of the 6th century on the ground of the archaeological findings - both point to the period of intensive urban life of this settlement, located near the dynamical road which connected the cities of Astibo and Particopolis, securing a fast transfer of goods through the densely inhabited region along the Bregalnica River. In that regard, the obvious concentration of sacral edifices and representative buildings detected within the urban concept, as well as beyond the defensive walls of the settlement near Vinica, on the other hand, speaks in favour of the prolific ecclesiastical life of the town in the course of the Late Antiquity.

The ceramic reliefs discovered at the site of the Fortress near Vinica by accident or during the process of the long-term and systematically organized archaeological excavations are slabs made of clay, molded in square or rectangular forms, shaped in relief and decorated with

iconographic representations. Executed in identical multiple replicas, the decorative relief motifs are accompanied by signatures and inscriptions taken from the Latin version of the Holy Scripture, which was put in liturgical circulation in the second half of the 5th century. The inventive iconographic concept of the ensemble of terracotta reliefs that encompasses the authentically designed anthropomorphic images, zoomorphic representations, phytomorphic motifs and graphic symbols was executed in a large number of identical specimens, designated for decoration of a certain number of edifices with identical size and function. The layer of mortar with impressions of the stone base to which the reliefs were originally attached, found on their reverse, speaks in favour of their functional utilization as a revetment of the stone walls of certain edifices where they were arranged as decorative ensembles. Their dimensions (31 x 29 cm, 30 x 28 cm, 32 x 20 cm, 33 x 29 cm,) point to the supposed height of the stone constructions to which they were originally attached, while the manner of execution, as well as the iconographic and stylistic features, does not leave any doubt of their simultaneous production. Although the damage caused to certain specimens is heavy in size and scope, their thematic configuration is more than recognizable.

The Motifs

The thematic conception of the ensemble executed on the slabs of the Vinica collection is based upon the choice of symbolically structured motifs that illustrate the mystical messages of the thoughtfully selected Biblical verses and reflect the wise parables of the impressively intoned Evangelic proclamations. The visualization of the dramatic prayers of the Old Testament Psalms, the depiction of the heroic images of Biblical history, the portraiture of the triumphant figures of Christian saints, as well as the representation of the emblems of Christian faith – these are the elements of the symbolically constructed artistic assemblage of the Vinica ceramic treasury. Reduced to the functional elements of the iconographic format and liberated from the narrative ornamentation of details, the motifs of the Vinica terracottas are a representative example of an authentically sublimed theological concept, visualized through the rationally organized exposition of symbolic components. In that regard, the essential message from the textual core of



Saint Archangel Michael the Psychopomp

the theme, written next to the images and the elements of its transposition into an optical unity of symbolical values – these are united in a perfectly functional artistic organism. Marked with specific symbolic amplitude of the eschatological thematic spectrum and nuanced with the expressive qualities of the brutal character of the artistic execution, the Vinica ensemble reflects the enigmatic resonances of funeral iconography in the refinedly conceived program concept of the represented arrangement. With the iconographic selection of Old Testament prefigurations of Christological subject-matter, symbolically shaped Biblical messages, as well as specifically chosen saintly images, all in context of the funerary character of the arrangement, each of the slabs from the Vinica collection denotes an episode of the dramatic path of the deceased believers through the elusive horizons of the afterlife.

One of the motifs of the eschatologically conceived thematic selection in the structure of the Vinica repertoire is the representation of the image of **Saint Archangel Michael** (*SCS MIHAEL*) dressed in a long chiton, depicted with luxuriously shaped wings and a characteristic scepter, as distinctions of his role as a heavenly leader of the angelic entourage. Taken over from the older, Judean religious concept in the scripts of which he appears as a guardian of the Israeli people, patron of the righteous and mediator between God and men, Saint Archangel Michael (in Hebrew: “*He, who is Godlike*”) grew into a very significant figure of the Christian cult, as well as religious practice and was highly venerated as a fearless leader of the celestial army, miraculous healer and mystical psychagog who escorted the dead on their journey towards everlasting life. As one of the most distinguished power figures of the Judeo-Christian religious system and according to the Biblical verses, as well as apocryphal texts, he has obtained a complex role



Saint Theodore the Dragonslayer

of an emissary of God among the faithful who took care of the unfortunate and unprotected, mistreated, infirm and those lying on their death beds. However, within the Christian religious sphere, one can recognize a certain transformation of the initial Jewish notion of the Archangel whereas his role of a skillful healer was significantly decreased in favour of the primary importance of the angelic princeps as an *archistrategos* of the celestial army, as well as mysterious *psihopompos*. Nuanced with the triumphant character of the military dimension, the great reverence of Archangel Michael resulted in creation of an iconographic matrix of his militant image dressed in an ornate of a soldier, frequently represented in the painterly production of the Early Christian period. However, the long chiton and the cloak worn by the Archangel depicted on the Vinica slab testifies to the fact that the formidable heavenly warrior from the



Saint Theodore the Dragonslayer

Judeo-Christian religious system in the Vinica repertoire appears marked with the features of his second major role, the one of a psychopomp – leader of the souls of the deceased in their odyssey through the pathways of the afterlife. Having the power to give life to the dead whose souls he was obliged to transfer to the mystical spheres of the heavenly constellation, Archangel Michael safeguarded the deceased on their long journey towards the heavenly heights. According to the legends and myths originated in the times of pre-Christian tradition that kept on living in the earliest centuries of our era, Saint Archangel Michael was particularly venerated as God's missionary, protector of the souls of the dead, as well as an elusive patron of funerary chambers.

The idea of God's support and His protection of the vulnerable souls of the deceased within the Vinica repertoire was illustrated with the depiction of a few other saintly images as well. Among them, the image of **Saint Theodore** (*SCS THEODORUS*), a horseman dressed in militant attire, who carries a victorious trophy of a pierced snake on his lance, represents the saint as a magnificent victor over the defeated demon that symbolizes Evil. This iconographic variant in the depiction of the saintly figure appears in the earliest preserved examples of the cavalry image of Saint Theodore as an illustration of the legend of the brave warrior who slew the dragon. Killed as a martyr and fervent Christian believer at the beginning of the 4th century, the former soldier of the Roman army, the condotiere Theodor, grew into a fearless protector of righteous Christians, as well as tireless fighter against the brutal forces of Evil. The chthonic character of the snake, the representation of which, in the context of the Christian symbolism, is related to the darkness of the Underworld, nuanced the image of the saint with the expressive shades of his role as a guardian



Saints Georges and Christopher



Saints Georges and Christopher

of the faithful against the insidious powers of evil, as well as a victor over the formidable demon of Death. On the account of that, the text, *DEUS PRECIBUS OMNIBUS SANCTORUM TUORUM (EXAUDI ET) MISERERE (NOBIS)*, inscribed around the representation which echoes with the cry of the dead for God's protection gives this Christian saint a role of God's protector of deceased believers. The same goes for the specific iconographic variant of his image that depicts Saint Theodore as a victor over the dragon - the personified demon which symbolizes Hell; therefore the composition executed on the Vinica relief becomes a vision of the triumph of faith and life over the dark abyss of Evil and Death.

The triumphant symbolism which springs from the well of eschatological messages can be also noticed in the motif with a representation of **Saint George** (*SCS GEORGIUS*), the dedicated warrior of Christ, protector and fighter against evil, miraculous resurrector of the deceased, as well as the mysterious **Saint Christopher** (*SCS XROFORUS*), the legendary canine saint connected to the spheres of the Underworld. Although the specific military variant characteristic of the depiction of their images is omitted from the Vinica relief, the triumphant character of the picture is suggested by the central position of Christ's cross, located over the shield, as well as by the pierced snakes, crushed under the feet of the saints in the lower portion of the composition. The dramatically intoned Oriental legends of the canine-head savage, who, after the Baptism, acquired a Christian name and human speech, influenced the early story about the transformation of Saint Christopher into an ambitious Christian missionary, while the news on the martyr death of Saint George in the time of the Roman Emperor Diocletianus, enumerated the Roman soldier among the most distinguished saints who have been tortured and murdered during the most severe persecutions of Christian believers. The comparison of Saint Christopher with the Hellenistic deity Hermanubis who overlooked the departure of deceased souls towards the Underworld, as well as the references of his role of mediator in the process of Christ's protection of the faithful – these are the fundamentals of the saintly cult that symbolizes the virtue of God's mercy with the help of which the monstrous cannibal metamorphosed into a devoted Christian. The cultic veneration of Saint George, on the other hand, which is founded upon his role of mediator for humankind before God, was also supported by the legendary stories of the saint, who, among other virtues, possessed power for deliverance from death and resurrection of the deceased. With the depiction of both saints as victors over the demons through the representation of the defeated man-head snakes, and according to the accompanying text, *DOMINUS DEUS VIRTUTUM EXAUDI NOS (Old Testament Psalm 84: 9)*, Saint Christopher and Saint George, depicted as God's representatives, in the composition executed on the Vinica relief become protectors of the righteous believers in the afterlife. In the context of the role of Saint Christopher as a psychopomp as well as the power of Saint George for resurrection of the dead, the scene with the images of the two saints, as in the case of Saint Theodore, illustrates the desire of the righteous souls of the deceased for God's protection from the demons of death.

The eschatological dimension of the iconographic repertoire visualized within the collection of Vinica terracottas is impressively illuminated by the symbolic explication of the verses of several Old Testament Psalms. As a poetic expression of the deepest desires and most exalted yearnings of believers directed to God, the festive hymns of the Old Testament centuries, composed by



Psalm 80 of Asaph

the wise and highly inspired psalmodies from the times of the Kings, are the most dramatic expression of the fatal cry for help that reflects the burning desire for God's intervention, representing a true sublimite of the profound faith in deliverance. Therefore, the execution of the Old Testament Psalms in the medium of painterly production in the Early Christian times is essentially connected with the notion of devotion of the faithful to God's will, gratitude for His protection, as well as fatal trembling of the righteous souls in the salvational embrace of Heavenly bliss. Thus, the illustration of the **Psalm of Asaph 80***, executed within the Vinica ensemble with the motif of a vine trunk, should remind the deceased of the mystery of Christ's incarnation and its significance for the salvation of all of His followers. Symbolizing the Eucharistic sacrifice of the

Saviour through the allusion of the wine as a phytomorphic substitute of Christ's sacrificial blood shed on the Cross for the ultimate deliverance of sinful mankind, the composition of the Psalm of Asaph 79 sublimates the elements of the resurrectional iconography and the visual features of its soteriological significance. The accompanying verses, *VINEAM EX AEGYPTO TRANSTULISTI* (*Book of Psalms 80: 8*), written next to the representation are an allegory of the dramatic history of Israel through the symbolic image of Jehovah, who, by transferring the vine from Egypt to Israel, announces the incarnation of Christ – His son and Saviour of humankind. In the context of Evangelic verses (*Gospel according to John 15: 1 and 15: 5*), this motif becomes a symbol of the Church



Psalm 80 of Asaph

of Christ in which the martyr blood of the Savior, transformed into Eucharistic wine, bestows immortal eternity to communed believers.

The salvational dimension of the miraculous deeds of the incarnated Christ among the people can also be found in the illustration of the **Miracle of the prophet Elisha**, executed as a representation of galloping cavaliers who rush over holes filled with waves of overflowing water. Although rarely depicted within the specific iconographic matrixes of the Early Christian era, the prophet Elisha was a particularly respected saintly character of the Christian church and became a subject of a widely spread cult that originated as early as the 4th century. The leading theologians of that time have extensively written about the deeds of the prophet Elisha, labeling the Old Testament wise man as a remarkable wonder worker and healer, as well as giving significant attention to his power for resurrection of the righteous deceased. On the account of that, the depictions found in the sculptural decoration of the Early Christian sarcophagi dated in the 4th and 5th century, which illustrated the miracles of the Old Testament prophet, are considered as symbolic prefigurations of New Testament episodes that refer to Christ's miraculous deeds of healing and resurrection of the righteous. Depicting the moment when, with the help of God, Elisha quenched the thirst of the army led by the righteous Jewish Kings during their military campaign against the enemies (*The Fourth Book of the Kings 3: 16-17*), the Vinica scene sublimates the miraculous dimension of the event as an anticipation of Christ's salvational miracles. The archer with a tight bow, depicted in the upper part of the scene, symbolizes the arrow of God's deliverance shot out at the moment of Elisha's death (*The Fourth Book of the Kings 13: 17*), emphasizing the salvation with God's assistance as well as the expressive symbolism of victory over Death.



Psalm 80 of Asaph



The Miracle of the Prophet Elisha

This salvational dimension of God's intervention can be also seen in the illustration of the Old Testament narrative of the **Healing of Tobias**, the purpose of which was to remind the deceased of the divine healing power of Christ. Composed of the image of the old, blind Tobias who leans on a cane petting his dog, this scene is supplemented with the episode of the magical fishing of his son, the young Tobias. Seated on the river bank, he brings the miraculously caught fish close to his father's eyes in order to cure his blindness. The warm tonality of the Old Testament verses, picturesquely narrated in the Book of Tobias, tells the story of a Jewish family originating from Israeli prophets. In that context, the key episodes of the tale in which the quest for God's assistance, as well as the efforts to save the hurting and helpless believers is described, suggests the idea of significance of God's intervention and His care of all of His followers. Prefiguring the events described in the New Testament passages, in which the miraculous healings of Christ are narrated, the salvational adventures of the young Tobias become favorite visual symbols for the depiction of Christological deeds in the painterly production, as well as the sculpture of Late Antiquity. The sublimation of the two key episodes of the story – the miraculous fishing of Tobias and the Healing of the old Tobias (*Book of Tobias* 6: 4 and 11: 10) through the mystical presence of Christ – the divine fish turns the young Tobias into an Old Testament prefiguration of

Christ, while the scene becomes a reflection of the soteriological significance of his healing activities. By giving back sight to his father, the young Tobias takes the role of Christ – the salvational healer who, caught in the darkness of his passion, brought immortal light to the whole of humanity.

In the context of the eschatological conception of the selected repertoire, part of the motifs of the Vinica ceramic ensemble evoke the sacrificial connotation of the idea of salvation of believers captured through the illumination of effectively structured iconographic sublimates. As the most appropriate expression of the profound gratitude of the faithful for the precious attention of God, as well as His sincere compassion, the sacrificial offering at the altar of salvation is the most exalted gesture of devotion to the One who watches over His followers. In that context, the motif of the sacrificial bull prepared for a ritual kill as an illustration of **Psalm 66**, symbolically awakes the recollection of Christ's soteriological sacrifice. Accompanied by the text *HOLOCAUSTA MEDULATA OFERAM TIBI CUM INCENSO ET ARIETIBUS*



The Healing of Tobias



Psalm 66

(*The Book of Psalms 66: 15*) that expresses the desire for offering burnt sacrifices as gratitude for God's assistance, the scene depicts the characteristic sacrificial animal of Jewish religion, as well as a symbol of the entire Jewish people. As a source of fertility, dynamic life force and immortality, within Hebrew theological papers the bull became a symbol of the idea of the soteriological dimension of God's presence among the people and grew into an emblematic sign of the salvational patriarch – the Messiah. Devoted to God

in the expressive religious zest of the offering that burns in the faith of believers, the brutally killed animal grew into an allegorical representation of the sacrificial significance of Christ's suffering for the faithful. The depiction of the sacrificial bull as an illustration of the verses of the Old Testament Psalms, sung in the grateful tone for God's concern and salvation of believers, symbolizes the necessary sacrifice of Christ burnt at the altar of primordial sin. Having acquired the symbolism of Christ as an essential sacrificial offering through the sublimation of the theological significance



Psalm 66



Psalm 37 of King David

of the zoomorphic form of the bull, this scene sublimates the salvational dimension of Christ's sacrifice offered for the immortal destiny of His followers.

The symbolic evocation of Christ's passion is also encompassed in the illustration of the **37th Psalm of King David**, visualized through the expressive depiction of the prophet Daniel (*SCS DANIEL*) in the lions' den. Accompanied by the text, *AD DOMINUM GRESUS HOMINI DIRIGIGUMTUR* (*The Book of Psalms 37: 23*), that celebrates God's protection of believers, the illustration of King David's festive hymn united the soteriological connotation



Psalm 42 of King David

of the verse dedicated to God's concern for the righteous, as well as the idea of the resolution of the faithful, told in the salvationally intoned passages of the Biblical tales. The picture of the Old Testament prophet, resolute in his own faith and devotion to God, saved from the ferocious beasts in the obscurity of the underground den, symbolizes the idea of God's assistance to the righteous and alludes to the salvational destiny of the faithful, exalted in the heroism of the martyrs. Depicting the

deliverance of the saint, who with the help of his persistent prayer to God managed to escape from the lions' den that symbolizes Hell, Daniel (in Hebrew: "God, who is my Judge") becomes a prefiguration of Christ descending in the deep and ferocious jaws of the Limbo. Symbolizing Christ's suffering and His post-resurrectional Golgotha, the scene acquires a visual significance of an illustrated prayer of those descending in the Underworld and seeking a salvational rescue. The illustration of the tale of the prophet Daniel between the lions, as an evocation of God's salvation of the righteous, incarnates the symbol of Christ's resurrection as a prerequisite for the salvation of mankind. Representing an iconographic prefiguration of Christ's image thrown into the dark abyss of the Limbo and being accompanied with the verses of the Psalm that speaks of God's salvation of the righteous, the scene depicting Daniel with the lions represents a symbolic picture of the resurrection of the dead.

The desire for the salvational source of everlasting life is also illustrated by the scene of the **42nd Psalm of King David**, depicted with the figure of a deer drinking water from the cantharos – represented as a symbolic Well of Life. Shaped as a sublimed symbolic picture of the urge for the baptismal immersion of believers, the illustration of Psalm 42 of King David is based on the allusion of the regenerative power of the baptismal initiation that the souls of God's followers yearn for. The baptismal symbolism of this scene is also accentuated by the text, *SICUT CERVUS DESIDERAT AD FONTES AQUARUM* (*The Book of Psalms 42: 2*), which celebrates the zestful thirst of the catechumens for the adoption of God's parables, as well as the immortal rebirth acquired by the baptismal waters. Expressing the profound desire of believers for God and His temple, the verses of the 42nd Psalm embody the craving of those searching for



Psalm 42 of King David

salvation in the comfortable safety of God's sanctuary. The subtle allusions of the expressive textual synopsis of King David's hymn that refer to the quest for God's mercy, as well as the restless yearning of believers for the salvational source of faith, depict the wish of the faithful to yield their souls to God, drinking from the salvational water that springs from the Lord's well. Representing a symbolic picture of the Baptism of believers, the scene also depicts the souls, which, plunged into the baptismal waters, have reached Heavenly bliss. On the account of that, it also illustrates the prayer which, during the burial rituals, calls the deceased to come and benefit from the well of everlasting life.

The afterlife destiny of believers is a subject of another representation from the Vinica repertoire – the scene in which **Joshua stops the sun above Gibeon** (*The Book of Joshua 10: 12-13*), depicted with the military dressed figures of the famous heroes of the Israeli people (*HIESU FILIUS NAVE* and *KALEEB*). Jesus of Nun, the celebrated inheritor of Moses - the prophet and one of the most renowned characters of the dramatic Jewish history, as well as his comrade Caleb, the bold son of Jephunneh – descendent of the tribe of Judas, are the main protagonists of the illustration of the heroic triumph of the righteous in what is the most dramatic battle of the Hebrew Biblical past. The military victories of Jesus of Nun and his heroic spirit during the triumph over the Amorean Kings near the Palestinian town of Gavaon, which, on the pages of the Old Testament

are described as a true realization of his alliance with God, are celebrated within the theological scripts of Late Antiquity. In that line, one can notice that God, immortal and everlasting, has appeared in the image of Jesus, the son of Nun, who borrowed His name. Therefore, the great hero of Jewish history, the leader of the chosen people, as well as a magnificent victor and savior, becomes a prefiguration of Christ and symbolic forerunner of the Biblical story of salvation. As God's protégé, who is expected to bring the long awaited salvation to his people, Jesus of Nun grew into a herald of Christ, who will save humankind. In that context, the scene which illustrates the episode of Jesus, the son of Nun - the Old Testament prefiguration of Christ, as a hero who, with God's assistance, stops the sun and the moon before winning the fateful battle for the Jews, becomes a pre-image of Christ, who delays Judgment Day in order to save sinful mankind.

The soteriological dimension which refers to the salvational deliverance of humankind is also a symbolic connotation of the relief with the depiction of God's Incarnation, configured in the equestrian image of the **Incarnated Christ**. He is accompanied with the iconographic metaphors of the sun and the moon as a visual reflection of His chronological markings - A and W. Adopted from the ancient symbolic systems from the pre-Christian era, the depiction of the horseman on the Vinica relief appears as a visual sublimite of the old - pagan and new - Christian meaning, uniting the triumphant aspects of the iconographic constitution of this motif. Representing a symbolic picture of the victorious glory - timeless and everlasting, given by the gods and won by great heroes, the pagan depiction of a triumphant horseman in Christian times came to be



Joshua Stopping the Sun Over Gibeon



The Lion from the Tribe of Judas

associated with the notion of the ritual transition from earthly life to the divine dimension of Heavenly horizons. On the grounds of the allusion to the “white horseman” from the Revelation of Saint John the Divine (6: 2), as well as the mystical quotations by the theologian Origen, in the period of the 3rd – 6th century, the depiction of a cavalier grew into a powerful visual metaphor of Christ as a salvational victor over death. The soteriological connotation of the equestrian image of Christ from Vinica is also substantiated by the inscribed text, EMANUEL (QUOD EST INTERPRETATUM) NOBISCUM DEUS SALVU(M ME FAC ET SALVUS ER)O HR(ISTO)F(OR)O, taken from the Evangelic quotations of Mathew (1: 23), which refer to the realization of prophetic announcements of Christ’s incarnation, as well as the inspiring Old Testament verses of the prophet Jeremiah (17: 14) that seek salvational intervention from God through expressive prayers. Illuminating the Old Testament prophecies of the messianic incarnation of Christ and their New Testament realization, the Vinica depiction of the embodied Saviour who triumphs over death is associated with the elements of the sun and the moon as symbolic marks of the celestial aspect of the eternal God.

The salvational power of Christ’s role for believers can be also acknowledged in the depiction of the **Lion from the tribe of Judas**, a mighty animal in slow motion, framed with the text, *LEO DE TRIBU IUDA* (*The Book of Revelation 5: 5*) *ET FLOS DE RADICE IESE* (*The Book of the prophet Isaiah 11: 1*), that refers to Christ who comes as the savior of humanity. Referring to Christ’s origin from the tribe of the Old Testament righteous men and his power as a victor over death, as well as alluding to the coming of the Saviour from the Tree of Jesse within the apocalyptic vision of the prophet Isaiah and the dramatic verses of the Revelation, the eschatological dimension of the inscribed text accompanies the depiction of the most recognizable zoomorphic symbol of the Resurrection. Celebrated within Biblical verses as a protector of great righteous men and praised in the legendary

tales due to the luxurious beauty, the figure of the lion is one of the most representative symbolic images in the funereal art of the Early Christian monuments. Based on the ancient legends of still born lion cubs which come to life three days after their birth, as well as in the context of specific Biblical quotations, the lion became a symbol of Christ who resurrects three days after the crucifixion and becomes the Lord of immortal life. Symbolizing Christ, the offshoot of Old Testament righteous men, foretold in Biblical prophecies and victoriously celebrated in the apocalyptic verses of the Revelation, the depiction of the lion from the Vinica ensemble embodies the triumphant dimension of resurrected life and represents an image of the resurrected Lord of immortality.

The resurrectional gift for the righteous souls is also symbolized by the representation of the **Cross Triumphant**, depicted as a Latin cross, with arms decorated with pearls. The triumphant symbol of Christian belief, the victorious emblem of the sacrificial mission of the Saviour, as well as an instrument of His triumphant resurrection in the painterly ensembles of the Early Christian epoch represented the dominant mark of the Christian church and was depicted as an expression of the essence of Christian salvation. Therefore, even in the earliest times of the new era, the cross became the basic element of funereal art appearing as a sign of the triumph over death and a diagram of the resurrection, bestowed upon all of Christ's followers. With the power of resurrectional victory, in the name of which Christ triumphs on the cross, He saved the people from mortal fear and gave them hope in everlasting life. Thus the cross becomes a token for the faithful and an essential marking of Christ's soteriological mission that transformed the tragic death of the Saviour into a glorious epopee of salvation and immortal life. As a symbol of the resurrection of Christ and his triumph over death through resurrection, in the context of the inscribed text, *CRUX CRISTI VINCE ET VINCERE PRESTA OMNIBUS SPERANTIBUS IN TE*, the depiction of the Vinica relief echoes with the triumphant significance of the cross that brings resurrectional reward to all Christian believers.



The Cross Triumphant



Christ Incarnated

Function and significance

The eschatological character of the selected motifs, the funereal symbolism of the inscribed texts, the iconographic comparison of the selected motifs with the scenes depicted in the Roman catacombs, illustrated in Early Christian mausoleums and executed in the relief decoration of the marble sarcophagi, the dimensions of the multiple replicas of the themes, as well as the existing analogies of the ceramic reliefs discovered in the Late Antique tombs in the territory of France, Italy, Spain and Northern Africa speak in favour of the funerary function of the Vinica ensemble. Applied on the walls of the burial constructions which existed in the frames of the urban complex of the Late Antique settlement at the turn of the 6th century, the ceramic slabs of the Vinica Fortress, with their repertoire, played the role of a decorative revetment of the funereal chambers in the most appropriate way. According to the model of the stone sarcophagi from the Late Antiquity, decorated with relief scenes in square or/and rectangular fields, the Vinica terracottas, in their own ceramic medium of execution and in the context of the inimitable visual features of the ensemble, are the most authentic specimens of artistic creativity dedicated to the decoration of burial places. In the ecstatic embrace of the Vinica scenes, led by the psihopomp Archangel Michael and protected by the powerful missionaries of God Theodore, Christopher and George who slay the evil demons of the Underworld, the righteous souls of the deceased voyage through the mystical spheres of afterlife remembering the magical power of Christ's miraculous deeds. Accepting His sacrificial martyrdom as their own salvational reward and burning in the ritual flames of His sufferings, the believers await Judgment Day - when the ressurectional glory of Christ will bring a triumphant entrance into the Kingdom of immortal life. In the expressive symbolic forms of the Vinica terracottas, the creative fire of artistic execution has inimitably depicted the dramatic path of the souls from the nightmarish dream of death to the blissful awakening in the heavenly embrace of the resurrected Saviour.

**The quotations are given according to the Holy Bible (Old and New Testaments) in the King James Version.*

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Published by

Cultural Heritage Protection Office
Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Macedonia

For the publisher

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Photos

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Graphic design and printing

DATAPONS SKOPJE

Copies

500



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Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Macedonia
Cultural Heritage Protection Office

CIP - Каталогизација во публикација

Национална и универзитетска библиотека "Св. Климент Охридски", Скопје

738.6.046(497.733)

DIMITROVA, Elizabeta

The ceramic relief plaques from Vinica / Elizabeta Dimitrova ;
[photos Mishko Tutkovski]. - Skopje : Cultural Heritage Protection
Office, 2016. - 28 стр. : илустр. во боја ; 25 см. - (The most
significant values of the cultural and natural heritage)

Foreword: Macedonian cultural and natural heritage / Viktor Lilchikj;
стр. 6. - Библиографија: стр. 25

ISBN 978-608-4549-38-3

а) Теракотни икони - Винаца б) Културно наследство - Македонија
COBISS.MK-ID 101577738

