
AD HONOREM DEI GLORIAM
ON THE EARLY HISTORY OF CHRISTIANISATION
OF THE SLAVS LIVING NORTH OF THE RIVER
DANUBE

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Abstract

From the beginning of our era up to the rise of Great Moravia, a more or less turbulent ethnic and Christianisation process run in the north-western inner Carpathians (approximately the present-day Slovakia). First Christians in Roman legions brought here a new faith, reflection of which anchored in the Germanic, Slavic and Avar environment. The long era of the proto-Christianisation (beginning of the 1st – end of the 8th centuries), that takes almost the entire first millennium, is documented by several preserved archaeological, historical, iconographic and epigraphic monuments (various artefacts bearing Christian symbols and sacral architecture). Christian reverberations, which were multiplied by missions organized by European Christian centres to the territories north of the River Danube, entered the life of societies with growing intensity in spite of the lingering Pagan background. In the end of the first millennium, the gradual Christianisation of the Slavs living north of the River Danube opened them the gate to the Christian civilization world of the Early Medieval Europe.

Keywords: Christianisation, sources, north-western inner Carpathians, first millennium AD

1. Roman anabasis in the central River Danube and first Christians

Not only for ‘Ad honorem Dei gloriam’ but also for the greatness, uniqueness, political and territorial interests of the Imperium Romanum, the Roman legions with first Christian in their troops crossed the River Danube around the year 6 AD and entered the territory of present-day Slovakia for the first time. Somewhere around the years 19–21 AD the Roman cohorts moved to the left bank of the River Danube between the rivers Morava and Váh. During the years 67–79 AD Roman garrisons settled within Pannonia and continued building the fortified Danubian border (Limes Romanus). In 93 AD the Romans

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built up bridgehead supporting military camps for their legion there, among them Gerulata (Rusovce near Bratislava), Devín and Iža near Komárno [1].

Anabasis of the most powerful ancient empire in the central Danube river basin stood in the beginning of the Christianisation history of the oldest Slavs in central Europe. With the Romans entering the central Danube river basin, the country and communities living in the north-western inner Carpathians (approximately the present-day western Slovakia) made their first contacts with Christianity. It means that in the period that is generally called the ‘proto-Christianisation’ (beginning of the 1st millennium – end of the 8th century), the Germanic and then also Slavic communities living on this territory get into primary contacts with Christian ideology. The intensity of their mutual interactions in the proto-**Christianisation** period can be learned mainly by means of writings and material sources.

2. Sources on the Christianisation history in the north-west Carpathians

Regarding this, we will focus our attention on the sources documenting the Christianisation process on the territory of the north-west inner Carpathians in the Roman period and in the later period of first interactions of the new religion with the Slavs that lived north of the River Danube from the Early Middle Ages. The proto-Christianisation here was connected with the influence and activities of first Christians in the Roman legions. Its context can be found in several written, archaeological and iconographic sources. Along with rather static written sources, the oldest material proofs of Christianity can be found among archaeological artefacts.

Regarding the proto-Christianisation period, two exceptional terracotta oil lamps that are dated to the first half of the 2nd century and decorated with motifs of fish and anchor are known. They were found in graves in Gerulata–Rusovce near Bratislava. On one of the oil lamps there is an anchor depicted to illustrate a human life anchored in the faith in Jesus Christ, who represents hope, redemption and salvation of mankind to the eternal life. This image is one of the oldest Christian motifs and very rare in the central Danubian region. On the other oil lamp a fish is depicted to symbolize affiliation to the Church. Fish, ICHTHYS (*ΙΧΘΥΣ*) in Greek, means acrotyschon, i.e. five initial letters of words hiding an abbreviation of the inscription *Iesu Christos Theou Hyios Soter* (Jesus Christ the Son of God Saviour) [2].

The group of relevant proto-Christian sources from the territory under study includes also tombstones from the Roman camps in Kelementia (Iža near Komárno) and Gerulata (Rusovce near Bratislava). These tombstones have been regarded as the oldest Christian monuments in central Danube region for long time. But now the possibility is considered that the Roman inscription can reflect no obvious Christian influence. The original tombstones are situated in the Roman fortress lapidary in Komárno. The discovered epigraphic monuments thus may (... or may not) indicate the Christian influence north of the Danube river. The first tombstone from Iža, which has been dated to the first third of the

4th century, bear a Latin inscription “*TU QUI [H]IC ORAS IUSTIANE IN MENTE [H]ABE NUNNANE[M] MATRE[M] TU[AM]*” (“You, who pray here, Iustianus, keep in mind Nunnane, your mother”). The mention of prayer could evidence the Christian influence [3]. On the other tombstone dated to the period around 400 AD is secondarily cut Latin inscription “*DIONISIA VIDUA*” (“Dionisia the widow”), the name in which can indicate the old-Christian origin [4].

The proto-Christian impulses long before the historic Slavic settlement in the north-west Carpathian region is recorded also in several historical documents. Maybe the most remarkable of them is connected to the legend of ‘the Miraculous rain’ at time of the Roman offensive against Quadi in the Marcomannic wars [5]. The surrounded and thirst-exhausted Roman troops were saved from a crushing defeat by a cloudburst in June 11, 172 AD. According to Eusebius of Caesarea or Tertullianus, soldiers of the 12th legion from Cappadocian Mytilene knelt to the ground and prayed to God according to the Christian custom [6, 7]. Similarly important early-Christian impulses flowed to the space north of the River Danube along the ancient Amber Road. This significant communication vein of the new religion that spread in the Trans-Danubian provinces mainly from the half of the 3rd century, for a long time was a mediator of cultural impulses coming from Christian Aquilea to the central Danube river basin [3, p. 82].

The above-mentioned sources prove that the early proto-Christian reverberations of the Christian ideology in the central Danube river basin reach far to the period before the early Slavic settlement, to the Roman period and the Migration period when the entire north-west inner Carpathian territory was ruled by the Germanic Suebi. There are no convincing documents proving the first Slavs coming to the inner Carpathians. Comparing the written sources to the archaeological ones, we can better consider a gradual Slavic settlement progressing from the outer to inner Carpathians. In identifying the Slavs in the inner Carpathian space several widely known pieces of information are argued. Some of them underwent critical analyses and are adequately described in many studies [8-15]. In present a scenario has been accepted according to which the Slavs penetrated the inner Carpathians probably after 470 AD, when the space has become vacant after the Kingdom of Suebi had vanished as a consequence of the defeat by Ostrogoths in 469 AD. The vacant territory after the Suebi had gone west to the Alemanni could become an impulse for the Slavs to move to the north inner Carpathian territory [11, 16].

Written sources from the Roman period allow us to presume the Christians in Pannonia were well organized on the territorial basis in the half of the 3rd century already. Existence of a territorial organization and interactions of some rulers against the Christians is proved for example by the synod in Rome in 251, Gallienus’s edict from 260 and more other acts from the 3rd and 4th centuries with a clear anti-Christian seal [3, p. 82; 5; 17; 18]. The situation eased in 391 AD when a ban was placed on all pagan cults and the Christianity was raised by Emperor Theodosius I the Great to a state religion [17, p. 36]. During

the 4th century the Christianity spread mainly within the Noricum and Pannonia limits, where in addition to the already existing bishoprics in the space between Sava and Drava rivers new dioceses were established also in Christian settlement of Sopianae (Pécs), Savaria (Szombathely), Scarbantia (Sopron), Gorsium (Tác), Iovia (Heténpuszta) and Aquincum (Budapest) [5, p. 58; 7]. In the terminating 4th century the territory under study (Nitra) allied with the Germanic queen Fritigil and joined to her request to Milan bishop Ambrose for Christian teachers or a bishop [19].

In addition to the already mentioned artefacts from the proto-Christian period before the Slavs entered the north-west inner Carpathian space, some more artefacts with obviously Christian background are known. Together with various minute finds (head of the column, tegula, fingering, buckles, etc.) with Christian symbols [2, p. 39; 3, p. 83; 5], a pyxide from a tumulus at Žuráň is remarkable that proves the Christian presence in the royal Longobardi west-Carpathian milieu in the first half of the 6th century [20]. Similar as regards its importance is the epitaph commanding the missionary activity of bishop Martin of Tours that is dated before the year 580 AD, where also the Slavs living in central Danube basin are probably mentioned [11]. Progressive Christianity in Pannonia is documented since the 5th century also by finds of coins with the sign of the Cross or coins with Christograms that were discovered in several Late Roman objects [21; 2, p. 38; 3, p. 83].

3. The Avars in central Europe and the crisis period of Christianisation

Since the Early Roman period the gradually spreading Christianity in the north-west inner Carpathians got into its first serious crisis in the beginning of the Early Middle Ages. The critical turn came in the half of the 6th century when the Avars came from the east and settled in Pannonia after they had defeated Germanic Gepidi (567) and after the Longobardi left for Italia (568). The new steppe people from the east that comprised of several ethnic groups (it was a conglomerate of different tribes including the Slavs) stayed in the Carpathian basin for over two centuries (567–803). The space of inner west Carpathians became so the northern zone of the Avar Khaganate with noticeable settlement agglomerations on the territory of Bratislava Gate and in the south-east regions of the Košická kotlina basin. It is essential, however, that the new population with obvious steppe code brought with them also their own religion manifested mainly in burial rite and customs [7].

In the context of the new ethnic and political situation that was in central Europe after the arise of the Avar Khaganate, some researchers dealing with the Early Medieval history in central Europe adopted a thesis of subsequent decline of Christian culture at the turn of the 6th and 7th centuries [22]. Simultaneously, however, they express their opinion that not all older people could suddenly became pagans and that the Christian spirit vanished gradually; it did not disappear completely and survived partially to the next Christianisation period.

Such scenario can be proved by some Christian symbols placed on fundamental components of Avar material culture (the Cross motif on belt mountings).

Relation of the Khaganate toward the Christians seems to be neutral [23]. The Avar hegemony was not so strong to expel activities of foreign priests, who in that period could come to Pannonia as well as to other regions occupied by the Avars [24]. Tolerating of the Christian religion by the Avars was not sufficient to sustain this political bloc in the environment of Christian Europe as it was obvious in the period of the Khagante's gradual vanishing. In the terminating 8th and incipient 9th centuries, the absence of wide Christianisation of Avar society with all positives in its ideology and organization was a fundamental reason for the empire end [25]. First indications of accepting Christianity in the Avar society appeared rather late, the most probably in its irrefutable end, by Christianisation of Avar highest representatives. This trend is proved by names of last khagans before the end of Avar reign in Europe (Theodorus, Abraham). The Christianity in central Europe survived continuously in spite of turbulent times in the period of its proto-Christianisation history when it had to overcome many difficulties and changes [23, p. 158]. Acceptation of Christian ideology was long-lasting continuous process that was manifested also in the form of so-called double belief, when the society oscillated between Christianity and paganism [7]. The world of the dead corresponded directly with changes in the world of the alive what was reflected in archaeological sources. A bi-ritual burial mound in Skalica (Slovakia), on which 66 inhumation graves were revealed together with three urn burials can serve an example of parallel existence of the pre-Christian and Christian world [26]. In the end of Early Middle Ages the similar situation was in the whole territory of north-west inner Carpathians, where cremation and inhumation burials were parallel; the cremation burials dominated only in the east part. Majority of Slavic mound necropolises is dated to the second half of the 8th and first half of the 9th centuries, i.e. to the turning point of the proto-Christianisation and early Christianisation periods. Under the mounds, members of more important family clans were buried [27].

4. Golden age of Christianisation north of the river Danube

The early Christianisation period (end of the 8th – first third of the 9th centuries) means a new quality in the Christianisation history of pre-Great-Moravian Slavs. This was the period of extremely significant movable archaeological, iconographic and historical Christian monuments that represent almost universal source of knowledge in the Carpathian space north of the River Danube. A bronze mounting from Hradec that is dated to the turn of the 8th and 9th centuries with insular motif of bird figures with heads facing backwards [28] together with more finds of the same provenience from the Trans Carpathian space (buckles, belt endings and mountings [18, p. 83f] are documents of possible influence of the Island art and – alongside with east-Frankish and north-Adriatic – of Irish-Scottish missions on the territory of Slavs north of the River Danube. Besides the mounting from Hradec, numerous belt ends decorated with

Greek, Latin and Saint Andrew's cross, more reminding Adriatic culture [18, p. 86f], can be classified to a wider assemblage of movable monuments of the early Christianisation period in the west north-Carpathian territory.

Sources to the proto-Christianisation and early-Christianisation periods of the Slavs living in the inner north-west Carpathians can be found across the whole spectrum of scientific disciplines. In addition, the consolidation period on the territory of former Avar Khaganate and retreat of Avar-Slavic quarrels in the years 822-825 AD [22] is already depicted in written sources, in which also missionary activities with the Slavs living north of the River Danube is described more noticeably. In Rastislav's message to Constantinople missionaries "from Vlachy, Greece and from Nemce" are mentioned, it means organizing missionaries from several centres. As the "missionaries from Vlachy" the most probably are thought clerics from Aquileia patriarchate, who could come to the Slavic territory north of the Danube from their original space between Drava and Sava [23, p. 160]. The missionary context with the south-east Europe, Dalmatia and Macedonia was probably reflected in the north space of the Danube in sacral architecture [29], which is another rich segment of finds to study of the early Christianisation processes in the northern Carpathians.

The really 'Golden century' representing also completion of the early Christianisation period of the Slavs living north of the River Danube can be considered the ninth century. In 828 AD prince Pribina of Nitrava built a church [30] that was consecrated by archbishop Adalram of Salzburg (\dagger 836) in person. The Nitrava Slavs entered the contemporary cultural Europe by this act. Fifty years later, in 880 AD, "the holy church of Nitrava", as it is written by the Pope John VIII (872-882) in his bull *Industriae tuae*, in present days the oldest diocese in central and eastern Europe, got a bishop Viching (around 840-889). The Nitrava principality, its settlement agglomeration and formed-out church structure gained a dominant importance within the whole inner Carpathian space [31].

5. Conclusions

In the long, almost one thousand years lasting period of proto- and early Christianisation that spanned from the Roman period up to the rise of the Nitrava principality, ideas of Christianity entered with growing intensity the life of societies living in the inner west Carpathian territory. In spite of the lingering pagan subsoil they obtained an elaborated, organized and focused form that was represented also by missionary activities which were pouring from European Christian centres (Salzburg, Passau and Aquileia). In the Slavs living north of the river Danube in present Moravia and Slovakia the spreading Christianity gradually dominated old pagan religions and since the second half of the 9th century it gained a decisive spiritual role in the emerging Great Moravia [32]. This is documented by many written sources, sacral architecture and by concentration of artefacts with Christian symbols. Gradual conversion to the new faith culminated with the arrival of Cyril and Methodius to the Great Moravia

and it brought positive moral-ethical ethos [33] into the societies living in the central Danubian basin by opening the gate to the Christian civilization world of the early historical and early medieval Europe.

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