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THE TERRACOTTAS FROM VINIČKO KALE IN CONTEXT: THE MILITARY REFERENCES AND THE POSSIBILITY OF AN APOTROPEIC FUNCTION

Abstract. – The study of the terracotta plaques in archaeological context enables their functional analysis in a time interval and within the framework of certain historical and ecclesiastical context from the second half of the 5th to the first three decades of the 6th century. Despite the pacifist character of Christianity, the military had a strong influence in the formation of the Early Christian iconography. The military content and military references present in all the deciphered, but also in the still unknown motifs of the terracotta plaques from Vinica, as well as the strong militant character of the fortress, confirms the soldiers as the target group for which the plaques were intended. Hence, undoubtedly, the question can be opened about their apotropaic character as protectors from the real enemy but also from demonic forces at the same time. In addition to the apotropaic power, they were probably also a model for bringing the concept of the new, Christian, religion closer to the army, which was the most resistant to accepting the novelties brought by Christianity, especially during the periods of establishment of the Christian religion and the dominance of the last pagan emperors.

Key words. – Terracotta plaques, Vinica, weapons, holy warriors, roman military, Christianity, Early Christian iconography, apotropaic.

The terracottas from Viničko Kale, as still a unique example of early Christian creation in the Republic of N. Macedonia, allow the interpretation of their perception with a wide range of psychological, dogmatic and political implications on the one hand, as well as religious and initiation on the other. On the seemingly unremarkable relief plates of baked clay we see the outlines of one of the most striking and complete transformations of a culture that took place on European soil before the Renaissance, and that is the birth of a specifically Christian exegetical model of perception in art.



Fig. 1

The dating of the terracottas in an archaeological context enables their functional analysis in a precisely defined time interval and within the ecclesiastical/historical occasions from the second half of the 5th to the first three decades of the 6th century.¹ All samples, whole and fragmented, were found exclusively within the currently unknown city of Viničko Kale, which developed from a military fortification around

¹ Jakimovski, Manaskova 2022, 275-283.

the middle of the 4th century, due to the military-political situation in the Empire. The strong militant character of the fortress is evidenced by the reliefs themselves, i.e. the contextual analysis confirms the soldiers as the target group for which they were intended, primarily due to the numerous representations of soldiers (Joshua and Caleb, Christifor and George, Theodore, Archangel Michael, Achilles), as and representations of scenes with riders and battles. After the completion of extensive archaeological research in the period from 2008 to 2011, mapping of all the complete and fragmented reliefs found up to that point was carried out, including the reliefs from the former research campaigns for which there is a context of finding (Fig. 1).² The attached mapping clearly outlines the possibility of connecting the reliefs with certain objects from the architectural infrastructure discovered so far on the ground. It is about two residential buildings, one of which, due to its connection with the church, probably served as a church residence.³ Whole and fragmentary reliefs were also found in the immediate vicinity of one of the towers of the eastern rampart that communicates with one of the buildings (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2

The marginal position of the military aspect in the modern scientific approach to Late Antiquity is unjustified, given that it played a central role in Late Antique society, with a huge influence in the social,

² The mapping was done by archaeologists from the Terracotta Museum - Vinica: Magdalena Manaskova, Julijana Ivanova and Blagica Stojanova.

³ Manaskova – Angelovski 2017, 94-99.

economic and political life of most provinces.⁴ During this time period, brutal military campaigns, battles and sieges took place, led by Roman and non-Roman armies, both inside and outside the borders of the empire. The military and civilian population are no longer separated by the standard fort/vicus division. Instead, soldiers are stationed in civilian settlements, in border and interior regions. The distinction between military and urban settlements gradually disappeared as all parts of the empire were filled with numerous fortifications.⁵ The dominance of the military in the main political institutions is an important segment. In the 4th century, the emperors led military campaigns at the head of the armies, but although this stopped in the 5th century, former generals and soldiers from the militarized provinces continued to become emperors.⁶ In the increasingly centralized administration, the largest part of the officials wore military uniforms and was called *milites*.⁷ The warfare left deep traces on the culture of the subordinate empires, and the influence on the religious culture is particularly prominent. An indispensable part of this period is the iconography of the warrior – the saint Archangel Michael who fights with demons, as well as the expectations of the patron saints to defend cities and fortresses under siege.⁸

In this period and during such ecclesiastical-historical occasions, the author of the terracotta reliefs lived in Vinica Kale. The revealed layer of vitreous plaster with a thickness of 2.5 cm found on the reverse of a certain number of examples speaks in favor of their use as applicative decor with an iconographic meaning. The remains of the stone base, which were discovered in the mortar layer preserved on the back of the plate, point to the data for a solid architectural structure that served as a support for the relief decoration. The large number of replicas is an indicator that the reliefs decorated one larger or more similar or identical architectural structure in which the replicas were arranged according to a specifically designed sequence of motifs and that in a certain period, according to archaeological evidence, after 530 years, the reliefs were removed from the walls of those structures, because their iconographic decoration was no longer appropriate or desirable.⁹ According to the iconographic analysis of the representations and corresponding analogies from the same period, it could be assumed that the reliefs, apart from being decorative, could also have a protective role. This is especially important if we take into account

⁴ James, 2011, 1-328.

⁵ Sarantis, 2013, 2

⁶ For details on the change of emperors and usurpers of the throne in the 4th and 5th centuries, see Lee 2013, 19-39.

⁷ Sarantis, 2013, 2.

⁸ Idem.

⁹ Димитрова, 2012, 104.

that a large number of them were found near the openings of the object, as well as the possible connection with the semicircular tower on the eastern rampart (Fig. 3).

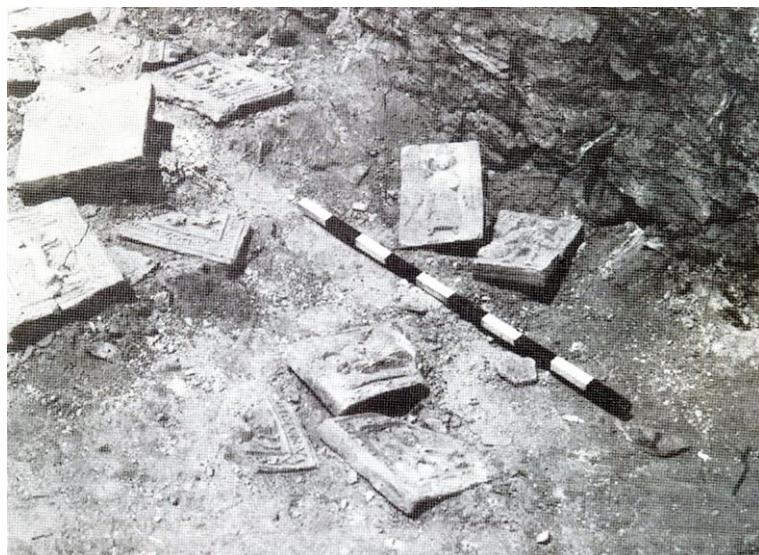


Fig. 3

Religious rituals were an integral part of the Roman army since the time of the Republic, regardless of whether it was a consecration assembly in temples or the custom of generals to offer sacrifices and other forms of consecration, such as ensuring the support of a certain deity in the battle for return. With the development of the empire starting from Augustus, the added value is the constant cycle of religious observance in the military camps, in the function of consolidating and strengthening the loyalty of the soldiers to the emperor, as can be seen on the well-known calendar from the 3rd century from the Roman fortress of Euphrates at Dura Europos, preserved on papyrus. It is evident that this calendar was not intended exclusively for soldiers stationed in Dura, it was a “standard list of holidays for the army”. Noteworthy is the emphasis on sacrifice and the representation of deities related to war and victory. Another important way in which religion influenced the life of soldiers is through the military oath, whose name in Latin (sacramentum) implies a religious character.¹⁰

Late Antiquity is a period of great religious upheaval and change, which undoubtedly had a strong influence on the entire social life, among others and on the armies. At the time of still undefined canons,

¹⁰ Lee, 2007, 177.

the terracottas from Vinica were analyzed using the contextual methodology proposed by J. Elsner, which puts the accent on the viewer of the work as opposed to the creator,¹¹ from the perspective of the viewers of that time, would be in the service of connecting the new religion with the already established practices within the framework of military life.

Arms and armor as segments of the military equipment can be followed with some greater certainty to be identified on the terracotta with representations of Joshua and Caleb, St. Theodore, St. Christopher and St. George, as well as on the incomplete copies with horse riding presentations.¹² One of the main reasons for the problem of identifying the weapons is the poor artistic quality of the production and the impossibility of the local craftsman, who, despite looking at the weapons with which the soldiers, who were stationed in the fortifications of Vinica Castle, were armed, was not able to realistically transfer it to clay.



Fig. 4

The terracotta with the representation of the Old Testament soldiers Joshua (Jesus Navin) and Caleb has been described on several occasions, by several authors (Fig.4). Joshua wears armor that can be identified as a *lorica squamata*,¹³ represented up to the knees, under which is the tunica. This type of armor is most often represented as part of the defensive military equipment of the holy army.¹⁴ Its use value can be traced over a long period of time, and its origin is attribu-

ted to the East.¹⁵ The reliefs on the monuments are a reference source for following the standards of armament of the Roman army in a certain period. In this context, on the triumphal arch of Galerius in Thessaloniki, Roman soldiers are represented with *lorica squamata* type of armor, while on Trajan's column archers, who were barbarians, and fought on the side of the Romans, were represented in this type of ar-

¹¹ Elsner, 1995, 2.

¹² Petrovich, 2002, 25 - 27; Балабанов, 2011, 159, 164, 182, 185/6, 301-306; Grotowsky, 2011, 79, 89, 90; Димитрова 2012, 111-113, 123, 221/2, 231-233, 243-247; Ѓорѓиевски, 2012, 117-126.

¹³ Grotowsky, 2011, 89, 133; Petrovich, 2002, 25; Ѓорѓиевски, 2012, 118.

¹⁴ Ibid., 133.

¹⁵ Peterson, 1992, 42; Ангеловски, 2022, 29.

mor.¹⁶ Over the armor of Joshua, he wears a cloak that is tied under his beard.¹⁷ Caleb, on the other hand, is represented with a longer cloak tied with a larger knot that covers the upper part of the armor, thus making him unidentifiable. From the lower part of the torso, the skin strips – pteruges can be seen, which had a protective function. Under them, the tunic on which the armor was worn can be seen. The military belt in both cases shows almost identical form of circular applications.

The circular shield between Joshua and Caleb belongs to the *parma* type. It was in use in the Roman army throughout the period of Roman domination, as part of the armament of the auxiliary military units *velites*,¹⁸ and according to Josephus Flavius' report, only selected soldiers around the commander were armed with this type of shield.¹⁹ The continuity of the use of this shield can also be traced in the Byzantine army as part of the armament of the lightly armed military units, *peltastoi*, which was 70 cm in diameter.²⁰ The circular shield of Joshua and Caleb is somewhat smaller in size, considering that it is about a third of their height. What is striking about the presented shield is its pronounced convexity. Its decoration is performed with fourteen radially placed ribs around the central *ubmo* that form a motif of rosette. This type of decoration of the round shields is the most common in early Byzantine art, and in addition to the depictions on the terracottas from Vinica, it can also be traced to the mosaic depictions of St. George and St. Demetrios in Cefalu Cathedral in Sicily as well as on an encolpion from Constantinople dated to the 11th – 12th century, which is in the Cleveland Museum of Art - Ohio.²¹ The last segment of defensive weapons on the terracotta is the helmets, which are shown identically, in the form of a spherical calotte, with check guard and a nose guard. The horns of the helmet, one of which is on the crown, while the other is placed on the side, are brought into connection with the military unit *cornuti*, whose role is recorded in the battle of Constantine against Maxentius in 312, near the Milvian bridge.²² In the literature, these helmets are identified with the *Baldenheim* and *Berkasovo* types or as their combination.²³ The *Baldenheim* – type helmet was made of four to six metal bars or segments,²⁴ had no nose guard, and consequently, except for the poor artistic expression of the

¹⁶ Hofiler, 1911-12, 24, 27; Пилетић, 1963, 73; Ангеловски, 2022, 29/30.

¹⁷ Grotowsky, 2011, 89; Димитрова, 2012, 112.

¹⁸ Hofiler, 1911 – 12, 54; Piletic, 1963, 70; Ангеловски, 2022, 36.

¹⁹ Hofiler, 1911-12, 55; Ангеловски, 2022, 37.

²⁰ Grotowsky, 2011, 226.

²¹ Grotowsky, 2011, 239.

²² Alföldi, 1959, 169-185; Горѓиевски, 2012, 118.

²³ Petrovich, 2002, 25; Горѓиевски, 2012, 118.

²⁴ Hofiler, 1911-12, 227-228; Манева, 1989, 22 ; Bishop & Coulston 2006, 215; Ангеловски 2022, 46/7.

artist and the extreme stylization of the representations, there is not a single element to identify them with this type. The second type of helmet belongs to the *Intercisa* type, made of two segments, two calots that are connected in the middle with a ridge and has a nose guard. The most representative kind of helmet of this type is the sample from Berkasovo.²⁵ In this case, the only element by which the helmet would be identified with the *Intercisa* type is the nose guard, while there is no element on the helmet that would refer to it. The spears armed with Joshua and Caleb is the icon's only offensive weapon segment. They are identical, with almost the same length as the height of both representations, with a rhomboid top and a socket that is schematically represented as a ball. In the iconography of the holy warriors, the spears were usually represented shorter, that is, with a length that reached the soldier's head.²⁶ In the armament of the Byzantine army, two types of spears were in use: short, in the function of throwing projectiles – me-naulion and long, kontarion, in the function of direct combat, with which the infantry and cavalry were armed. The long spear (kontarion) in military manuals of the middle Ages is compared to the Macedonian long spear – sarissa.²⁷ In iconography, the representation of the spear as a symbol of military and civil power dates back to the period of early Rome. That long tradition in the representations of spears and their schematization, which most likely occurs as a result of the limited space for artistic expression, is cited as the main reason for the different representation of spears in iconography from those that had a practical use value.²⁸

The terracotta with a representation of St. Theodore is fragmented (Fig. 5). The preserved part shows the saint on horseback, with a spear in his right hand, on the back of which a dragon's head is represented, probably as a military insignia, given that according to the way he holds the spear, the tip is pointed downwards, in order to pierced the fallen human figure, which cannot be precisely identified.²⁹ The armor with which the saint is represented is highly stylized and schematized, but it could still be identified as armored of the *lorica hamata* type. On the waist, the armor is fastened with a military belt. The continuity of use of this type of armor can be traced back to the republican period, and some of the soldiers on the triumphal arch of Septimius Severus are also represented with it.³⁰ In connection with the lack of pictorial representations of holy warriors with this type of

²⁵ Marijanski – Manojlović, 1964, T I, XI: V; Klumbach, 1973, 103 – 9, Taf.45 – 47; Bishop & Coulston, 2006, 210; Ангеловски, 2022, 46.

²⁶ Grotowsky, 2011, 313–320.

²⁷ Grotowsky, 2011, 322, 324/5.

²⁸ Ibid., 329.

²⁹ Горѓиевски, 2012, 120; Димитрова 2012, 221.

³⁰ Hofiler, 1911 – 12, 27, 28; Ангеловски, 2022, 28/9.

armor, considerations are in the direction that this armor was worn by soldiers of a lower rank.³¹ On the other hand, some authors tie exactly this armor to soldiers with higher ranks - miles gregarius.³²

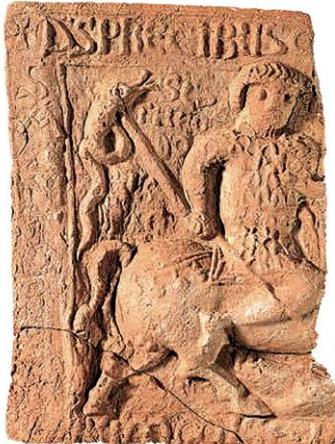


Fig. 5



Fig. 6

On the terracotta with a representation of St. Christopher and St. George (Fig. 6) the only defensive weapon segment is the shield between the two figures which is identical to the shield of Joshua and Caleb. Both saints are represented piercing a snake with a human head with their spears.³³ With the spears as part of the offensive weapon, the rear segment – sauroter – is clearly visible, and in both cases it is represented schematically. Offensive and defensive weapons can still be identified on several fragments of terracotta depicting horsemen, but the content could not be reliably deciphered due to the incompleteness of the samples found so far. In that context, the sword is found on the fragment with the inscription “BOLGAR”, in the right hand of the presented horseman placed in a swinging position, i.e. striking (Fig. 7). Analogies of the sword in the existing literature are tied to imperial swords of the *gladius* type,³⁴ as well as to a short saber identified with the *anjari* knives.³⁵ However, it must be noted that in the period of late antiquity, a standard part of the armament of the Roman army was the sword of the *spata* type,³⁶ while the clear representation of the sword on the fragment, which is double-edged with a short pointed tip – *mucro*,

³¹ Марковин, 1995, 567 – 626, 597/8; Grotowsky, 2011, 157.

³² Bishop & Coulston ,2006, 63; D'Amato, 2009, 38; Ангеловски, 2022, 26.

³³ Балабанов, 2011, 164.

³⁴ Горгиевски, 2012, 123.

³⁵ Балабанов, 2011, 281.

³⁶ Bishop and Coulston, 2006, 154; Ангеловски, 2022, 51.

rejects the possibility that it is a single-edged sword *anjari*. In any case, he is presented schematically again, which makes his more precise identification, impossible.



Fig. 7

On a fragment of the same terracotta, under the horse's front legs which are stretched out in a gallop, there is part of a shield with a rosette motif, identical to the shields of the icons of Joshua and Caleb and St. Christopher and St. George. This fragment of the composition is identified as an arrow that sticks into the shield.³⁷ What leaves room for doubt in the identification of the winged

arrow stuck in the shield or just penetrating the shield is the moment that the so-called arrow is not represented in relief but as a negative, i.e. it is a groove, perhaps a broken part of the relief. The second point that opposes the identification of a representation of an arrow is that if the idea of the artist was to show an arrow stuck in a shield, it would have been stuck in the front, that is, in the face of the shield, and not in its back part. At the same time, on the fragmented terracotta with an unknown representation, in the lower right side you there is an arrow quiver attached to the horse, where the arrows are represented in relief and thinner (Fig. 8). The fragment on the upper right side of the composition represents a horseman holding a spear in his right hand in an upper position with his arm raised, as if he is preparing to throw it at the enemy.³⁸ The typology of the spear in the case could be deduced solely on the basis of the idea of the representation, which is that it is a short spear with a rhomboid tip that had the function of a throwing projectile.

The final weapon segment of the terracottas is the bow represented in the composition with four horsemen identified by E. Dimitrova as the Old Testament motif of the deliverance of the righteous kings by the prophet Elisha (Fig. 9).³⁹ It is a composite reflex type of bow that is associated with nomadic peoples who were very skilled in handling this type of weapon. This type of bow was also part of the armament of the archers, who were mercenaries in the Roman army from

³⁷ Балабанов, 2011, 286.

³⁸ Idem.

³⁹ Димитрова, 2012, 121-127.

the oriental peoples, even in the early imperial period, confirmed through a multitude of archaeological finds, bone segments, discovered in places where there were no penetrations of nomadic peoples.⁴⁰



Fig. 8



Fig. 9

The other terracotta motifs that do not have explicit military iconography can still be connected to the military through the symbols presented on them or through the message contained in the inscription.

Archangel Michael has a significant place in religious life in the 5th and 6th centuries. Based on the Old and New Testaments, his authority and the roles he plays are mainly related to protection, mediation and as a psychopomp – ensuring the safe passage of the souls of the righteous to heaven. However, in the New Testament, Archangel Michael takes on a new, more significant role and status as a mythical hero whose actions are intertwined with historical ones. As the supreme commander of the heavenly army, Michael accompanies Christ to hell and leads the Old Testament righteous to heaven.⁴¹ The nature of his roles in ecclesiastical literature enabled the genesis and migration of the archangel cult in late antiquity and the early middle Ages, especially in the Christian communities of the Near East.⁴² In the Vinica ensemble, Archangel Michael (Fig. 10) with the role of the supreme commander of the angelic army can be connected as a whole with the motif of Constantine's cross,⁴³ and with the Old Testament scene of the

⁴⁰ Манева, 1985, 87, 51; Bishop and Coulston, 2006, 205; Ангеловски, 2022, 59.

⁴¹ Johnson, 2005, 30.

⁴² Talloen, 2011, 589 – 590.

⁴³ Johnson, 2005, 33 – 36. Constantine is the founder of the most famous sanctuary of the Archangel Michael at Chalcedon, on the site of a former temple known as the Sostenion, a site with a rich pagan history. A few years after the founding of the temple, during the battles with Licinius, Constantine allegedly had several visions in which the

prophet Daniel.⁴⁴ From the perspective of the soldiers as an audience, St. Michael connects with them through his own belonging to a military order, but especially with the protective role. A protective role of archangels is evident in late antiquity and is not exclusively associated with Christianity. Inscriptions invoking archangels have been found on walls and amulets during the 4th and 5th centuries, such as the apotropaic inscription from the northwest corner of the theater at Miletus, an amulet depicting the god Set and the names of the archangels from the British Museum, the amulet from the National Library of France, the amulet from the Roman necropolis at Bulgarkoi near ancient Cyzicus, and the gold lamina from Thessaly.⁴⁵



Fig. 10



Fig. 11

The terracotta relief with a representation of Constantine's cross (Fig. 11) and the inscription "Cross of Christ conquers and enables victory to all who hope in you" contains a strong militant reference. The trium-

Archangel Michael foretold his victory. He won the final victory in 324 with the battle of Chrysopolis, in the immediate vicinity of Chalcedon and the Michaelion he founded. In the *Vita Constantini*, Eusebius of Caesarea writes that after the victory, Constantine commissioned a painting of himself and his son standing on a pierced serpent. The painting was exhibited in front of the emperor's palace. This iconographic representation of Constantine's victory over Licinius is a clear visual association with the mythical battle of Archangel Michael in Revelation 12:7-9. Constantine thus identifies himself with the Archangel Michael, the commander of the heavenly host, just as he had previously identified himself with Sol Invictus and Apollo.

⁴⁴ Johnson, 2005, 13 – 17. In Jewish literature, one of the significant developmental stages of the Archangel Michael's character occurs in the apocalyptic narrative of the second half of the book of Daniel (7-12).

⁴⁵ Cline, 2011, 55-78.

phal meaning in the artistic production was acquired after the historical event of 312, i.e. after the battle of the Milvian Bridge, when Constantine defeated Maxentius with the help of the cross from his triumphal vision.⁴⁶ The prohibition of the pagan ritual of sacrifice by Theodosius in 391 did not result in the complete elimination of this ritual; on the contrary, there is evidence of its practice during the 5th century.⁴⁷ The representation of a Bull (Fig. 12) on one of the terracottas illustrated with the opening words of the fifteenth verse of Psalm 65

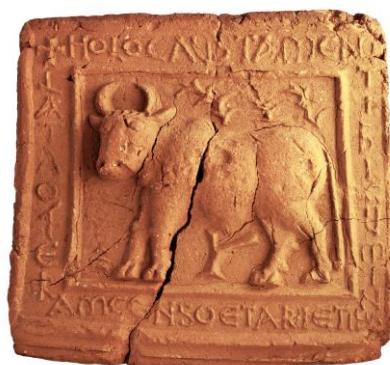


Fig. 12

of David "I will offer you fat burnt offerings, with incense from rams, I will offer you oxen and goats"⁴⁸ is an obvious reminiscence of the *suovetaurilia* for the lustration of Roman military units. Although it was no longer performed, this ritual, through the image of the bull, subtly conveys to the soldiers the main message that we find in the inscription, that is, the image of the past is used in a Christian exegetical discourse. Christianity

shifts the paradigm from offering a sacrifice to being a sacrifice, like Christ. The martyrs, canonized later as saints, do not offer sacrifices; they are the victims, which is evident from the mosaics depicting the procession of martyrs and virgins from San Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna.⁴⁹ That's why after 530 this motif is no longer desirable for public display and like the others; it was removed from the object/objects on whose walls it was located.

As someone who is under constant threat of death and faces that fear every day, the soldier - viewer of the terracotta reliefs, found comfort and encouragement in the illustrated Psalms of David, 36 (Fig. 13) and 41 (Fig. 14), as well as in the first part of the ninth verse of the 79th Psalm of Asaph (Fig. 15). The soldier could give his own, additional meaning to each of the illustrations. The prophet Daniel in the den of lions illustrates a part of the Old Testament *Septuagint*, composed in order to support the faith and hope of the Jews during their Babylonian captivity, to raise the broken morals, to encourage the resistance of the oppressed and to glorify the heroism of the martyrs in imprisonment.⁵⁰ Attributes of the cult of Dionysus, such as the vine and

⁴⁶ Димитрова, 2012, 195.

⁴⁷ MacMullen, 1981, 34-42.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 160.

⁴⁹ Elsner, 1995, 221-245.

⁵⁰ Димитрова, 2012, 142.

the cantharus, were adapted as Christian symbols of the Eucharist and very often used in Christian artistic production.⁵¹ The vine signifies the relationship between God and his people and in that sense, the works of the early church fathers take references from the Old Testament texts in which the vineyard is perceived as a protected place, a promised land, where believers live under the sure protection of God.⁵² Hence, the protective role of this play is imposed.



Fig. 13



Fig. 14



Fig. 15



Fig. 16

The motif of the “divine horseman” (Fig. 16) is re-identified in a Christian context from older symbolic systems associated with religious teachings from pre-Christian times.⁵³ On the samples from Vinica, this symbolic image of the victorious leader is accompanied by

⁵¹ Talloen, 2011, 590.

⁵² Димитрова, 2012, 174-175.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 183 – 184.

the inscription “Emanuil, save me and I will be saved” and the standard battle-cry – *Nobiscum Deus*. part of the commemoration of the famous martyrs-soldiers, among which the names of Christifor, George and Theodore are mentioned. The *Strategicon* of Maurice, a late-sixth century tactical handbook, devotes a chapter to battle cries in which there is advice about the chanting of the *Kyrie eleison* and *Nobiscum Deus*.⁵⁴ Hence, the relationship that the 5th century soldier-spectator will have with this compilation of pagan iconography already well known to him and the new Christian context, has a profound effect.⁵⁵



Fig. 17

The complex symbolism of the lion (Fig. 17) in the Christian era is a sublimation of the peculiarities that were attributed to it in older beliefs. At the basis of this symbolism are courage and power, a splendid appearance, but also other virtues associated with its appearance. The inscription that follows the scene “Lion of the tribe of Judah and sapling of the vine of Jesse” is a combination of the apocalyptic text of the evangelist John and a quote from the book of the prophet Isaiah and apostrophizes the meaning of Christ for humanity.⁵⁶

The combination between the image of a lion that associates the soldier with royal dignity, a just and powerful protector and the inscription that embodies the image of the resurrected Christ is a message of victory and protection.

The terracotta relief depicting Homer's Achilles (Fig. 18) is part of the distinctive Roman iconography of late antiquity and marks the self-definition of the status of the Roman aristocracy in the 5th century. The typically pagan motif among the new Christian iconography is connected with the so-called *mos maiorum* is a reminder and confirmation of the elite's need to preserve tradition. Achilles was not perceived by early Christians in the same way as other mythological heroes, such as Theseus and Odysseus, and adapted for use in Christian analogies. Instead, he continued to represent the ideals of the traditions represented by *mos maiorum* and *virtus*, which were of great importance to the Roman elite, especially the military.⁵⁷ Achilles placed among the Christian themes also had another purpose, which is to subtly

⁵⁴ Maurice, *Strategicon* 2.18

⁵⁵ Jacobs, 2020, 789 – 836.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 200 – 2007.

⁵⁷ Parks Bare, 2009, 146-147.

remind the Christian viewer that there is no strict line between the secular and the religious. People in late antiquity did not see the world as just “Roman” or just “Christian,” but as a combination of both. Although the audience for which the reliefs were intended in the fifth century was Christian, this multivalent iconography allowed them to balance the *mos maiorum* with their religion.



Fig. 18

The use of Christian symbols in an apotropaic connotation, ie. for winning a victory, dating from the time of Constantine the Great, with the inclusion of the labarum, as a legacy of the older tradition of sacred banners. The connection with the new religion is made on the basis of the Old Testament Ark of the Covenant.⁵⁸ The earliest mention in the sources that refers to the use of a Christian relic as palladia, is by Egeria, who in the late 4th century writes about the miraculous letter written by Christ that was used in Edessa as protection during a siege of the city.⁵⁹ Writing a few years after Egeria, the pagan historian Ammianus Marcellinus suggests that the commander Sabinianus, a Christian, practiced rituals at the tombs of martyrs in Edessa before going into battle and firmly believed in the power of relics.⁶⁰

The critical review of the sources provides certain insights into the development of this process and connects it to the Roman-Persian conflict, where the largest number of examples of military use of Christian relics and visual objects with an apotropaic function are recorded. Although to the greatest extent recorded in this context, as an occurrence they are spread in all parts of the Empire.⁶¹

By gaining official status within the Roman Empire and creating a state cult, Christianity brought the potential for an intense and close-knit sense of identity, appropriate for an exclusive initiation cult, to vast numbers of the empire's population. In large part that sense of

⁵⁸ Shean, 2010, 1-31.

⁵⁹ Serrano del Pozo, 2022, 58.

⁶⁰ Ammianus, *Res Gestae*, 18.7.7: *Dum haec celerantur, Sabinianus inter rapienda momenta pericolorum communium lectissimus moderator belli inter necivi, per Edessena sepulchra, quasi fundata cum mortuis pace, nihil formidans, more vitaeremissionis fluxus agens, militari pyrrice I sonantibus modulis pro histrionicis gestibus, in silentio summo delectabatur, ominoso sane et incepto et loco, 2 cum haec et huius modi factu dictuque tristia, futuros praenuntiantia 3 motus, vitare optimum quemque debere saeculi progressionem discamus.*

⁶¹ Serrano del Pozo, 2022, 65.

exclusivity was fueled by the complexity of the initiation required to identify biblical themes and understand their symbolic connections, their typological meanings. The importance of Christian art on a societal level, as we see on the Vinica terracottas, lies in its brilliant visual ability to convey the meanings and connections of typological thinking in Christian culture to anyone who wants to understand. In that way, it conveys the Christian identity itself.⁶² Starting from the second half of the 6th century, evidence points to the disappearance of pagan elements in the iconography of utilitarian and decorative objects.⁶³ Their place is taken by explicit Christian motives. The establishment of canons leads to the slow creation of Christian canonized iconography in which there is no place for pagan motifs. This transition from an older and more diverse culture to a strict Christian society, along with the gradual disappearance of residential pagan iconography during the 6th century can be explained by what Robert Marcus has described as a shift from “ancient” to “medieval” Christianity.⁶⁴

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⁶² Elsner, 1995, 284-285.

⁶³ Talloen, 2011, 599; Karivieri 2001, 196.

⁶⁴ Markus, 1990, 137-213.

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