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Late Roman Villas in the Danube Balkan Region and the Evidence for the Development of Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture

Today I wish to consider in the short time available, whether the innovations introduced by the architecture of the late Roman villa found a parallel development in early Christian and Byzantine architecture. I should explain that the subject of my recent Ph.D thesis is Late Roman villas in the Danube-Balkan Region. By Danube-Balkan region (forthcoming BAR International Series, 2002). I refer to the Roman Provinces of Pannonia, Moesia, Dalmatia, Dacia and Thracia and by late I refer to post 250 AD. In my talk today I wish to outline three aspects of the findings of my thesis: 1) villa plans, 2) the relevant evidence for Christianity and 3) Roman antecedents for the Early Christian and Byzantine churches in the region.

Typology

The many other studies of this nature principally by E. B. Thomas, M. Biró and J. Henning define buildings according to predetermined plan types, often based on the central section of the building, and draw distinctions based on whether the central building was a peristyle type, a portico type, a winged corridor type or a basilica type.¹ For the purpose of this study, these categories were enlarged to the peristyle plan; enclosed courtyard plan; compact plan; apsidal hall plan; winged plan; the fortified plan, with two sub-categories, fortified perimeter and putative fortifications. Of the 64 sites identified in this study, these categories were developed from the ground plan of the residential building, and are defined by the outline of the plan and its form.

Not surprisingly, the majority of late Roman villas in the Danube-Balkan region are of the peristyle plan.² These develop from simple rooms around the courtyard in the second century to uniform symmetrical forms in the fourth century, and attest to the flexibility and durability of this plan, which is particularly compatible with the climate of south-eastern Europe. The reception room, which changes from a predominantly rectangular space to an apsidal form, associated particularly with the apsidal hall and triconch dining area, is a particular

focus of late Roman villa architecture. During the late third and early fourth centuries, therefore, the apsidal hall becomes the main focus for the reception functions and is decorated accordingly.

The development of the enclosed courtyard plan reflects security concerns; they are usually symmetrical and tend to be marked by a distinction between the residential and farming/industrial quarters. The reception rooms in these buildings tended to be basic, rectangular structures, which is consistent with the evidence more generally that these villas were not greatly associated, on the evidence of this survey and others, with recreation and luxury. Those surveyed here are predominantly from Moesia and Thracia, and date to the late second and early third centuries and to the military campaigns associated with those periods. On the other hand, the compact plan villas appear in each province, but these too are characterised primarily by small-scale farming and industrial activities, and therefore can be likened to the enclosed courtyard plan villas in their absence of a decorated reception area.

Conversely, in the apsidal hall plan the emphasis is precisely on the reception hall areas, with the principal rooms grouped around the corridor adjoining the hall. This plan represents an innovation in late Roman architecture, and is associated usually with villas of the third and fourth century. Being a plan of an enclosed type, it had a distinct security advantage for example over the winged plan, and on the evidence of the present survey it appears that the winged plan villa was rarely found in the Danube-Balkan region. This concern with security is reflected also in the number of villas fortified to varying degrees in the region as a whole. These tend to be concentrated around the Danube, and some villas with fortified perimeters may well have served to protect large stores of grain. In Pannonia the number of fortified villas and particularly those with putative fortifications is also greater in this province than across the region. The reliance on fortification came about in the third and fourth centuries when the upper Danube frontier was under frequent attack.

It may be seen from the Chart 1a, 1b and 1c that the

villas considered in this study were all substantially abandoned as Roman villas, i.e., they had ceased to function as Roman villas, by the end of the sixth century. In certain very few cases, such as Keszthely-Fenékpuszta there is evidence for continuous occupation beyond this time, but historically, if not on the archaeological evidence, of necessity they could not have operated in the context of a continuing Roman presence in the Region.³

Christianity

Only seven villas of the 64 examined in this study have yielded positive evidence for Christian occupation. None of these are monasteries, and only two have been positively identified to have contained Christian tombs. Nonetheless, a tentative pattern may be discerned in the association of the three parish centres with large and very large villa sites (Gamzigrad, Keszthely-Fenékpuszta and Mogorjelo). By contrast, single chapels such as those at Kékkút and Sümeg were associated with medium size villa complexes and were probably devoted to private use. In Pannonia, a marble altar slab from the villa at Donnerskirchen, a Christogram from the grounds of the small single-aisled structure referred to as a basilica at the villa of Kékkút, and thirdly, the Christian mausoleum at Kővágószőlős have all been associated with early Christian activity at these villas.⁴

The above results are perhaps not surprising, given that Christianity was established and largely practised in the towns of the region. It should not be concluded, therefore, from the absence of further evidence for Christian occupation of the villas surveyed that the owners and occupants of the villas were not Christians or influenced by Christian doctrine during the fourth to sixth centuries.

On another point, Arianism became the dominant Christian doctrine in the provinces of Pannonia and Moesia during much of the fourth century, after the presence of Arius in the region from 325-334 AD.⁵ The doctrine appears to have particularly captivated the province of Pannonia, where the town of Sirmium was the epicentre for dogmatic conflicts between the followers of Arius and the orthodox faith until 358 when a synod showed Arianism already in retreat.⁶

It is difficult to gauge the proportion of Christians to pagans in the Danube-Balkan region during the fourth and fifth centuries. In addition, it is not possible, on the basis of the archaeological evidence of church plans and religious monuments, to estimate the relative proportion among Christian believers of Arians to those of the Catholic faith. A rare example of a tile inscribed with the name Ario depicts a bare-headed figure with arms raised in orans movement and wearing a cloak. It was found at Kisdorog, Pannonia⁷. This is the only presumed surviving image of Arius. There are otherwi-

se no references to him in churches, as Arians occupied churches without expressing any particular form of liturgy. The result, borne out by the absence of any notable divergence of Christian church plans in this region when compared to other regions where Arianism did not take root, is that the practice and profession of Arianism required no special architectural accommodation.

Roman Antecedents

Returning to the evidence of the late Roman Villas in this region, they appear to have developed along noticeably formal lines, reflecting perhaps the unusual imperial presence in these provinces. In my thesis, I suggest that it is likely that architectural ideas radiated from imperial palaces and governors' seats, and that the élite landowners may have consciously adopted the forms and elements associated with the emperor. The Danube-Balkan region was the birthplace and heartland of many late Roman emperors, notably the Tetrarchs. Diocletian, Galerius and later Constantine the Great built important palaces close to their birthplaces, in the late third to early fourth centuries, and are acknowledged to be leading examples of innovative architectural style.

The imperial palace at Gamzigrad is attributed to Galerius. The palace plan has a similar configuration of apsidal hall and triconch dining area linked by a peristyle within a large fortification⁸. Equally, the palace identified as that of Constantine the Great at Mediana, near the modern town of Nis, Serbia has a large apsidal hall and adjacent triconch dining hall⁹. To my mind it is quite clear that the innovations in imperial architecture influenced the design of contemporary villas in the region. Certainly, large scale halls and separate dining areas are found in many of the villas in the Danube-Balkan area, not just in the imperial palaces, but also in the large to medium and smaller villas. At the imperial level the larger size reception rooms would have accommodated the appropriate grandeur of scale of imperial assemblies. The palace halls are vast, demonstrating the power of the emperor. Constantine's apsidal hall at Mediana is 26.5 m, the apsidal hall of Diocletian's palace at Split is 41 m long, and Gamzigrad has two apsidal halls at 15 m and 17 m. Other large scale villas in the region such as Keszthely-Fenékpuszta and Hosz-szúhetény, Hungary have apsidal halls measuring 21 m and 26.5 m in length respectively. Combinations of these forms are also found in the urban administrative palaces such as at Gorsium. Several examples of villas survive where an apse was added to a rectangular dining hall or *triclinium* to create an apsidal dining hall. A good example may be seen at Balácapuszta in the third century.

In architectural terms, the apsidal hall is defined as a hall terminated by an apse. Aesthetically, the apse ser-

ved to vary the perspective of the back wall of an important room, and it also lent stature to the persons who occupied the apse at the end. The apsidal hall becomes the room in an imperial palace where consultations, recitations, meetings and lectures were conducted.¹⁰ With the development of the apse as a decorative aspect to a hall from the late second century, the rectangular dining couch of the triclinium or *tri-kline* (three couches) was widely replaced by the *stibadium* couch, a semi-circular or *sigma*-shaped couch which fitted into the apse. Furthermore multiples of the apse gave rise to the triconch. The transition from a rectangular room to a triconch-shaped room seems unnatural unless the apsidal hall is taken as a first stage of this development. In the Danube-Balkan region two visual depictions of the *stibadium* scene survive. At the centre of a silver plate from the fourth century Sevso treasure, there is the depiction of an outdoor dining scene.¹¹

The scene is also found decorating part of a fourth century tomb wall painting at Tomis, Romania.¹² The *refrigerium* or anniversary meal of the dead is illustrated here and it should be no surprise that the same rituals and forms for daily dining were also used in the funerary context. A variant of the triconch is also used for the fourth century pagan mausoleum at Alsóhetény-puszta, Hungary. Although the triconch was little used in the funerary context, it is seen here with two adjoining apses which were designed to hold *stibadia* for dining on during the *refrigerium*.

The imperial Palace at Gamzigrad has both the triconch and the quatreconch forms. They are separated out from the ceremonial apsidal hall by means of an adjoining circular room. The imperial palace at Split also has a variant of the triconch, the cruciform dining area. Examples of these dining features are found as variants of the triconch at the imperial palace at Mediana. It has an adjacent rectangular/apsidal chamber located next to the apsidal hall. The mosaic pattern in the apses suggests the function of this area for dining, as the tessera mark out the exact location of the *stibadium* couches.

Examples of Pannonian urban governors' residences dated to the third and fourth centuries such as the example already cited, Gorsium, reveal the use of the peristyle plan and the ceremonial reception hall. Further stylistic comparisons can be drawn with the fourth to sixth century bishop's palaces (it is assumed here that the bishop adopted a central position in society on a par with that of the Roman governor). The example cited is of the sixth century palace at Butrint, Albania (a part of the ancient site of Buthrotum, Epirus) excavated in 1990, where the plan includes a triconch hall (Fig. 1). The palace forms part of a complex of buildings which include a circular baptistery and a Christian basilica. It is with these examples that we can begin to obtain a sense of the continuity of these forms in the Byzantine east.

It is suggested here that the plan of the apsidal hall in the late Roman villa together with the triconch may well have had an influence on the parallel development of the early Christian basilica seen together occasionally with an adjoining triconch baptistery. The positioning of the triconch at the end of the hall created a type of triconch basilica examples of which are also found in the region. It is this combination of rooms that might also have provided a model for the apsidal chapel and adjoining triconch baptistery. While it is recognised that such a link cannot be proved, the appearance of these forms (the apsidal hall and the triconch) in early Christian buildings in the Danube-Balkan region can be interpreted in part as a response to the stimulus provided by the existing forms found in late Roman villa plans. Thus, it is possible to trace an alteration from a secular function, that of the triconch dining area and adjacent apsidal hall or reception hall, to the Christian basilica and baptistery.

Take the example of the imperial villa of Gamzigrad. The palace was reused as the seat of the bishopric under Justinian in the sixth century when some building work took place (Fig. 2).¹³ On the south side of the peristyle across from the apsidal hall and triconch dining area, a basilica with a quatreconch baptistery was erected. This is an example of the secular ceremonial forms acting as a direct source of inspiration for the basilica and the baptistery, and of evidence for the transfer of forms from pagan to Christian use, re-using the plans of existing buildings.

The triconch form was suitable for the complex liturgy in operation in the Danube-Balkan region. In particular, the concelebrants would congregate in churches for the purposes of church services as well as for commemorating martyrs. For example the three apses would have framed statuary associated with the ceremony, the worshippers assembled in the nave. For example at Arpaj in Albania, the east end was terminated by a triconch hall (Fig. 3). Another variant of this form is seen at Mesambria, Thracia, where the basilica terminates with an apse and the aisles terminate with triconch chapels (Fig. 4). The triconch basilica at Mostar, Dalmatia, provides another example (Fig. 5). Thus, by the sixth century, the use of the triconch form in the church plan was prevalent and an accepted part of Byzantine architecture.

The triconch form, hitherto seen as an element of a larger building plan, also comes to be used as a building in its own right as a Christian *martyrium*. In the Danube-Balkan region the examples are found at Sopianae which was an important administrative centre under Diocletian and developed as a centre for early Christians (Fig. 6). The triconch and the polyconch are employed as funerary chapels and chapels for commemorating martyrs. The triconch form being associated with the symbol of the Holy Trinity.

The persistence of these forms among the new build-

dings of the aristocracy in secular use for episcopal palace buildings and for religious use with early Christian churches, baptisteries and tombs ensured that they endured as forms and became a feature of early Christian and Byzantine architecture.

Today I have only touched on the well established evidence for the existence of some influence, at least, of late Roman villa architecture in the form of elite secular buildings of the Byzantine period. I hope I have said enough to demonstrate that late Roman villa architecture may have had an enduring influence. For me a strong point to emerge from my study was that this influence may have been most enduring, and most important, in the now familiar forms of Christian architecture. Al-

though it may be argued that there is no direct linking thread from one to the other, the appearance of these forms (the apsidal hall and the triconch) in early Christian and Byzantine architecture in the Danube-Balkan region can be interpreted in part as a response to the stimulus provided by the existing forms found in late Roman villa plans.

There is I believe, a certain basis for continuity in the evolution and transfer of ideas from Roman secular buildings to later religious buildings. Specifically, it appears to me that the examples of the apsidal hall and the triconch, after much experimentation in the Roman period, served to provide a series of models for Byzantine architecture.

Note:

¹ For Pannonia, E.B. Thomas, *Römische Villen in Pannonien* (Budapest 1964) and M. Bíró, "Roman Villas in Pannonia", *AAASH*, 26 (1974), 23-57. For Dalmatia, M. Vasic, "Römische Villen vom Typus der Villa rustica auf jugoslawischem Boden", *Arch. lug.*, 11 (Belgrade 1970), 45-82. For Moesia and Thracia: J. Henning, "Die ländliche Besiedlung im Umland von Sadovec und die römische Agrarstrukturen im europäischen Vorland von Byzanz", in H. Bender und H. Wolff (eds.), *Ländliche Besiedlung und Landwirtschaft in den Rhein-Donau Provinzen des römischen Reiches. Vorträge eines Internationalen Kolloquiums vom 16-21 April 1991 in Passau* (Leidorf, Espelkamp 1994), 463-504 and C. Dremsizova, "La Villa Romaine en Bulgarie", *Actes du Premier Congrès International des Études Balkaniques et Sud-Est Européennes 2, Sofia, 26 Aug-1 Sept 1966* (Sofia 1969), 503-512. For Dacia, V. Baumann, *Ferma Romana din Dobrogea* (Tulcea 1983). J.T. Smith, in his *Roman Villas: A Study in Social Structure* (1997), devotes one chapter to the villas of south-east Europe, but this is a limited study whose typology proceeds from a non-architectural standpoint.

² The format of the peristyle plan as it developed for use in Roman provincial houses from the first century BC had an atrium at the entrance, a peristyle in the centre of the house with the dining room or triclinium placed across from the entrance on a central axis. This plan is thought to have its origins in the Italic style as first adapted in first century urban Roman examples, such as at Pompeii and Herculaneum. A. Wallace-Hadrill, *Houses and Society in Pompeii and Herculaneum* (New Jersey 1994), refer to plan example fig. 3.10, 42, Casa del Menandro, Pompeii.

³ L. Barkóczi, "A Sixth Century Cemetery from Keszthely-Fenekpuszta", *AAASH*, 20 (1968), 275-311.

⁴ For Donnerskirchen: A. Barb, "Die römischen Ausgrabun-

gen von Donnerskirchen und das älteste Denkmal christlichen Kults in Österreich", *BH*, 15 (1953), 97. For Kékút: E. B. Thomas, "Villa settlements", in A. Lengyel and G. T. B. Radan (eds.), *The Archaeology of Roman Pannonia* (Budapest 1980), 275-321. For Kővágószőlős: A. Burger, "The Roman Villa and Mausoleum at Kővágószőlős, near Pécs (Sopianae). Excavations 1977-1982", *A Janus Pannonius Múzeum Évkönyve*, 30-31 (1985-1986), 65-228.

⁵ Arius was a Libyan d. 336 who championed subordinationist teaching. Eusebius of Nicomedia was a supporter. His writing are known through letters of Eusebius and through a work known as the 'Banquet' or *Thalia*. F.L. Cross (ed.), *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford 1997), 315. E. B. Thomas, "Religion", in Lengyel and Radan, *The Archaeology of Pannonia*, 177-204 and esp. 201-206 for references to Arianism in Pannonia.

⁶ Sirmium (AD 420) was one of the few towns in Pannonia which remained in Roman control in the fifth century AD. B. Migotti, *Evidence for Christianity in Roman Southern Pannonia (Northern Croatia): A Catalogue of Finds and Sites*, *BAR. Int. Ser.* 684, 1997, 19-25 and A. Mócsy, *Pannonia and Upper Moesia, A History of the Middle Danube Provinces of the Roman Empire* (London and Boston 1974), 352.

⁷ Thomas, *op. cit.* n. 5, 201-206.

⁸ D. Srejavic (ed.), *Roman Imperial Towns and palaces in Serbia: Sirmium, Romuliana, Naissus* (Belgrade 1993), 31-45.

⁹ Srejavic, *ibid.*, 57-81.

¹⁰ K. Dunbabin, "Triclinium and Stibadium", in W.J. Slater (ed.), *Dining in a Classical Context* (Ann Arbor 1991), 121-148, esp. 147-148.

¹¹ M. Mango, "Seuso Treasure", *JRA Supp.*, 12, 1 (1994), 1-

49 and *idem.*, "Der Seuso-Schatzfund, Ein Ensemble westlichen und östlichen Kunstschaffens", *Antike Welt*, 21, fasc. 2 (1990), 70-88 and J. Elsner, *Art and the Roman Viewer: the Transformation of Art from the Pagan World to Christianity* (Cambridge 1995), 259.

- ¹² A. Barbet, "Le Tombeau du Banquet de Constanta en Roumanie", in *Edifices et Peintures 4-9 Siècles, Colloque CNRS 1992* (Auxerre 1994), 30-47 and A. Radulescu,

"Entre Faste et Dénueement", *Archéologie Nouvelle*, 1 (1993), 43-47.

- ¹³ Procopius (*De Aedificis* 4, 6, 19) noted that Justinian restored a *castellum* in this region for use as a Bishop's residence and an administrative centre of the Cora of Aquae (Prahovo). This is associated with Gamzigrad, D. Srejo-
vic, *Roman Imperial Towns and Palaces in Serbia* (Belgrade 1993) 184-187.

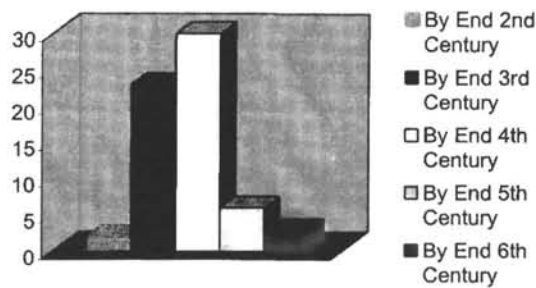


Chart 1a Substantial Abandonment as Roman Villas.

1a táblázat: Római villák tényleges felhagyása.

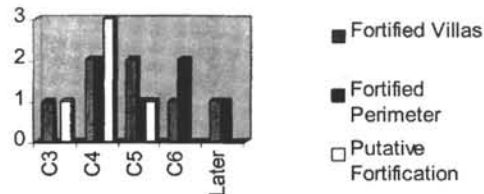


Chart 1b Survival of Danube-Balkan Villas with Fortifications.

1b táblázat: Villa-erődítmények továbbélése a Duna-Balkán régióban.



Chart 1c Evidence for Continued Occupation beyond the Sixth Century.

1c táblázat: Bizonyítottan folyamatos lakosság a VI. század után.

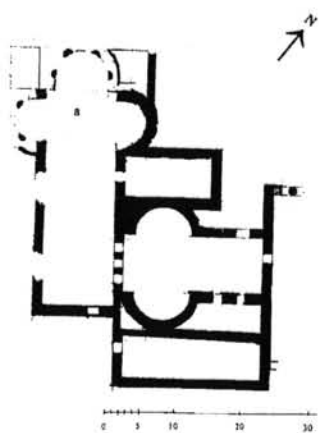


Fig. 1. Butrint (Epirus, Albania), plan of so-called Bishop's Palace.

1. kép: Butrint (Epirus provincia, Albánia), az un. Püspöki palota.

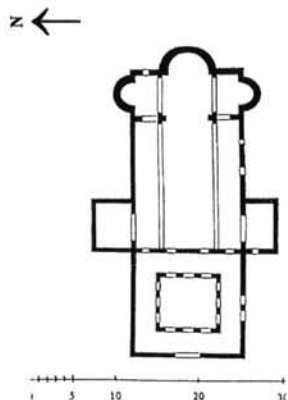


Fig. 3. Arpaj (Dyrrachium, Albania), plan of triconch basilica.

3. kép: Arpaj/Dyrrachium (Albánia), háromapszisos bazilika.

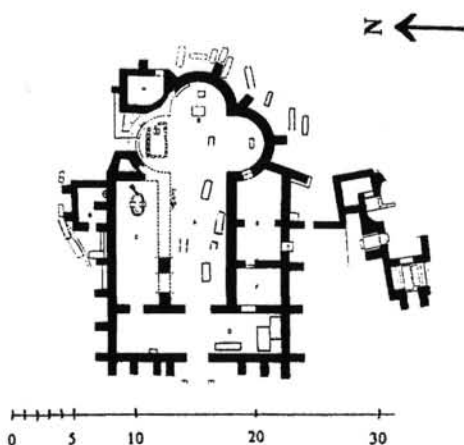


Fig. 5. Mostar (Dalmatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina), plan of basilica.

5. kép: Mostar (Dalmatia provincia, Bosznia-Hercegovina), bazilika.

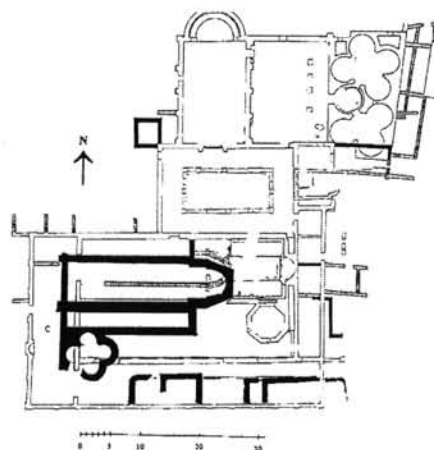


Fig. 2. Gamzigrad (Moesia Superior, Serbia), plan of sixth century basilica.

2. kép: Gamzigrad (Moesia Superior provincia, Szerbia), VI. századi bazilika.

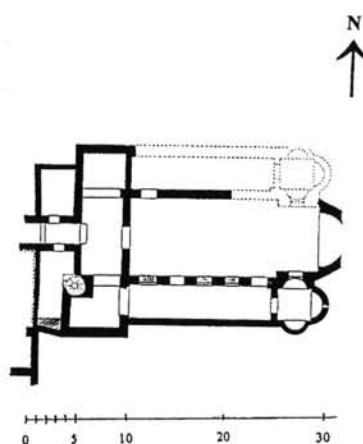


Fig. 4. Mesambria (Thracia, Bulgaria), plan of sea basilica.

4. kép: Neszebar/Mesambria (Thracia provincia, Bulgária), tengeri bazilika.

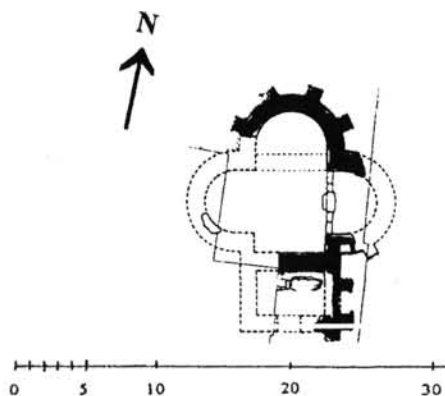


Fig. 6. Sopianae (Pannonia Inferior, Hungary), plan of mausoleum.

6. kép: Pécs/Sopianae (Pannonia Inferior provincia, Magyarország), temetőkápolna.