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## Late antique paintings in *Naissus*. Historical, social and archaeological context



1. *Naissus*, vaulted tomb with figural representations, view from the east (photo Z. Radosavljević).

2a. Tomb with figural representations, eastern wall (photo Z. Petrović, N. Borić).



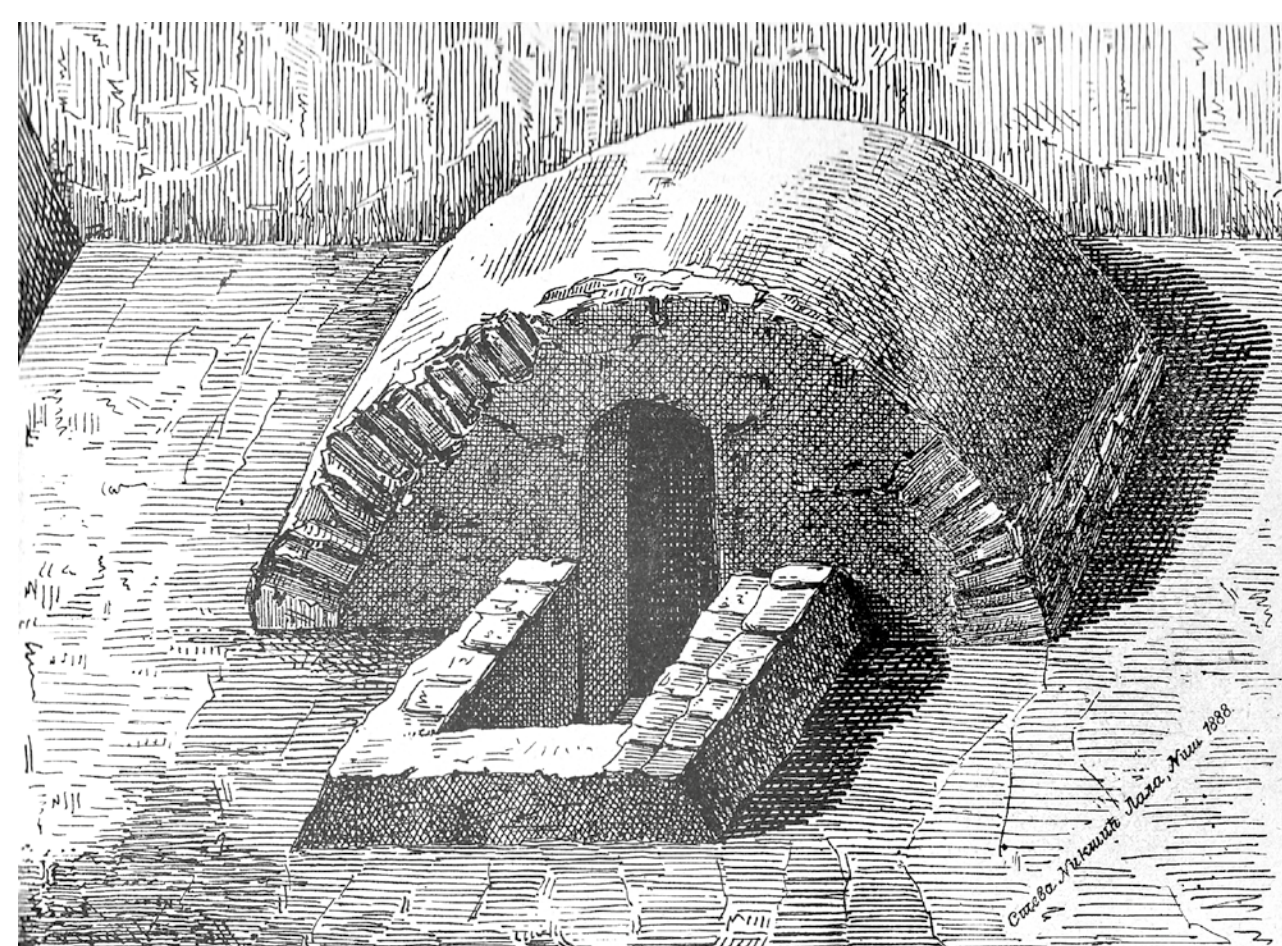
2b. Tomb with figural representations, western wall (photo Z. Petrović, N. Borić).



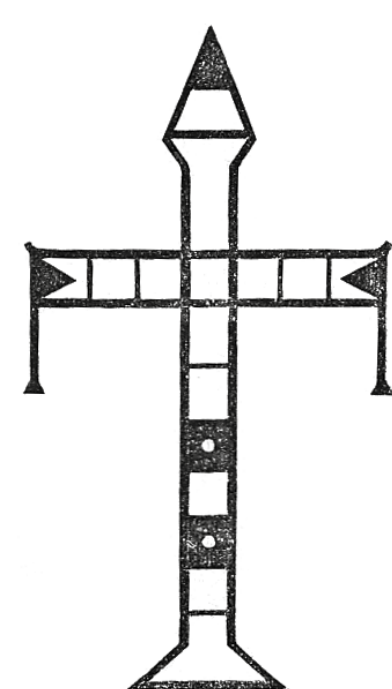
3. Tomb in the Ratka Pavlovića Street, view from the east (photo Z. Radosavljević).



4. Tomb in the Ratka Pavlovića Street, Christogram on the ceiling (photo Z. Radosavljević).



5a. Tomb discovered in 1886 (according to M. Valtrović 1888).



5b. Tomb discovered in 1886, detail of the wall painting (according to M. Valtrović 1888).



6. Tomb discovered in 1933, detail of the wall painting (photo documentation of the Institute of Archaeology, Belgrade).

Sojourns of emperors during the 4<sup>th</sup> century, important production centres, military factory (*fabrica*) and imperial *officinae* for objects made of precious metals, the fact that emperors Constantine I (306-337) and Constantius III (421) were born there – Constantine I played an important role in the shaping of the city of his birth – influenced prosperity, monumentalization and intense building activities in *Naissus* (Niš, Serbia). Although few in number, the frescoes in public and private buildings testify the importance of this kind of decoration in the Constantinian and post-Constantinian city and its surrounding. Archaeological researches established the fact that painted walls could be found in representative buildings within the Late Antique fortified city of *Naissus* and economic-distributive centre with villas of rich citizens in the vicinity of the city, in the *suburbium* identified as *Mediana*.

The Roman and Late Antique city of *Naissus*, preserved below the layers of modern and medieval city of Niš, has been researched for more than 150 years with varying intensity; however, it is known to a very modest extent. Today, the best explored areas are the necropolises. On the eastern city necropolis in Jagodin Mala there are various types of graves, demonstrating different ways of burying the dead, according to the possibilities, beliefs or legacies of families and persons taking care of the funeral. A special place among the tombs is occupied by those decorated with wall painting decorations that include representations of saints, heavenly paradise, set in dynamic and rich decorated images and multi-layered narratives. So far, four of those tombs have been registered, but only one of them is conserved and accessible to the public.

The most significant fresco painted tomb with figural representations was accidentally registered in 1953 (fig. 1). In the tomb interior, three partition walls were built which lined the burial places for three or more deceased. Over a thin layer of fresco plaster, the skillful painter's hands painted decorations on all the interior walls, ceiling and partition walls of the sarcophagus. On the eastern wall there are two male figures dressed in togas with cloaks. It is assumed that representations of apostles Peter and Paul are painted (fig. 2a). Representation on the western wall is similar (fig. 2b), it is possible that the persons painted there are apostles, martyrs, saints, less probably persons who are the tomb owners or who are buried in it.

Among the latest discoveries is a fresco-painted tomb discovered in 2006 (fig. 3). All walls and ceiling of the tomb were fresco painted. On the western wall, in the socle zone, two panels are represented with imitation of marble slabs with veins, painted in shades of blue and northern with representations of various pebbles on a red background. On the ceiling of the tomb, in a circular medallion diameter of 1.15 m, the monogram of Christ is represented, around which is a laurel leaves wreath (fig. 4). In the tomb were found skeletal remains of three individuals, and the inventory found comprises two glass bottles, remnants of silk clothing with gold embroidery and a coin of Theodosius from 383/4, which approximately dates one of the above mentioned funerals in the end of 4<sup>th</sup> century. According to archaeological findings and stylistic analyses, they belong to the Theodosian epoch. This is a period of intense Christianization of *Naissus*, which can be best seen in programs of fresco-paintings in tombs of the privileged rich population of the city.

Unlike the rich graves in the form of mausoleums and their appertaining fresco-paintings, other findings discovered in *Naissus* – bearing in mind, though, that this is an insufficiently researched part of the city's territory – indicate a certain decline in the economic and housing standard.

In the period of the 5<sup>th</sup> and the 6<sup>th</sup> century, after the city was destroyed and the number of inhabitants declined, its restoration gradually began, with the dominant role of the Church. Fresco decorations from this period were recorded in the cemetery basilica and neighbouring tombs. The wall paintings of this epoch show reduced displays of celestial spheres and crosses imitating metal models. The first tomb, discovered in 1886 (fig. 5a), was plastered and modestly decorated with the representation of the cross type *crux gemata* (fig. 5b).

Another tomb, according to the findings of coin, was dated to the time of Justinian I, in 532-537 (fig. 6). In the lower zone there were geometrical and vegetative motives, symbolizing the earthly life that flourishes, and in the upper zone, six vaults were represented (symbolizing the heavens), with drawn crosses, christograms, stars and planets.

The problem regarding the workshops which made the frescos in the 4<sup>th</sup> century and later periods remains open, since parallels can be found in a wider Balkans region, but also in important cultural centres of the eastern and western provinces of the Roman Empire.

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