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Tóth, E., Vida, T., and Takács, I. (Eds.): Saint Martin and Pannonia: Christianity on the frontiers of the Roman World

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BOOK REVIEW



Both specialists and those interested in this period often have little to go by regarding written sources for this period of Pannonian history, and even less with regard to the entire Carpathian Basin, even though the first millennium AD was hardly an uneventful period in this region. This period during which Pannonia transitioned from a frontier province of a Mediterranean empire into an important region of a medieval Christian kingdom of steppean origin saw constant and tumultuous shifts in the region's political framework. A native of Pannonia, St. Martin's life and memory eloquently epitomizes the continuity between the Roman Empire, which adopted Christianity, and the medieval Kingdom of Hungary, founded after the ebb of the last major wave of the Great Migrations. Although the written sources offer few glimpses into the finer details of this transition, the surviving artefactual material, comprising countless superb pieces, whose number is constantly rising in the wake of archaeological excavations, abundantly make up for this lack. The period's treasures were showcased at Pannonhalma, in the monastery built on St. Martin's Hill, and in Savaria, St. Martin's birthplace, in 2016. The exhibition was accompanied by a lavish catalogue.

The catalogue offers much more than would be expected from this genre. Most of the twenty short studies making up the volume's first part are lucid, well-written and comprehensive pieces addressing the most important issues of religious, social and art history, making the volume a genuinely useful handbook of the history and archaeology of the Carpathian Basin between Antiquity and the Middle Ages, and particularly of the region's Christian relics. The first set of studies covers the major centres of Christianity in Roman Pannonia: Savaria (Szombathely), Sopianae (Pécs) and Sirmium (Sremska Mitrovica). Drawing from the period's writings, principally Sulpicius Severus's *vita* of the saint, Tamás Adamik reviews the life of Saint Martin, the most famous saint of Pannonia, who was born in Savaria. Zsolt Mráv describes and discusses the relics of the cult of the Hellenised Egyptian gods in Savaria and Scarbantia (Sopron). Evoking the Iseum of Pompeii in many respects, the Isis sanctuary of Savaria, whose golden age fell into the Severan period, is the most imposing architectural complex erected in honour of the Alexandrian deities, while the most salient trait of its counterpart in Scarbantia is that in addition to the cult of Isis and Serapis, Osiris, the latter's ancestral form, was also venerated. The architectural remains of the Iseum in Savaria are reviewed by Ottó Sosztarics, who also evokes the final days of the sanctuary. Anna Judit Tóth's study addresses the sources as well as certain theoretical aspects of folk religion in Christian Late Antiquity, while Endre Tóth offers a broad outline of the historical background to Christianity in Late Roman Pannonia, alongside a survey of the grave assemblages and religious structures as well as the finds of daily life such as grave inscriptions, inscribed liturgical cups and casket mounts bearing Christian imagery that can be associated with the period's Christian population. Mention is made of the fourth-century Silvanus finger-rings, which were intended to substitute for the fertility cults lacking in Christianity among the Late Roman rural population whose livelihood was predominantly based on farming. László Perendy traces the history of Arianism, an early Christian theological doctrine that also gained followers in the Carpathian Basin and probably had adherents in Sopianae, too. The early Christian funerary structures with their exceptional painted

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chambers and several stories eclipse by far the other late Roman cemeteries of Sopianae. The *cellae* of these tombs, now a listed World Heritage site, are surveyed by Levente Nagy and Zsolt Visy. Ivana Popovic has contributed a comprehensive overview of the fourth-century history of Sirmium – which became the most significant Christian centre of Pannonia after the persecution of Christians – and the cult of local martyrs. Hrvoje Vulić's study reviews recent advances in the period's study based on the discoveries made at Kamenica, where an early Christian imperial centre was investigated.

The second set of studies explores the Christian relics of the Migration period in the Carpathian Basin. Tivadar Vida's study addresses a spate of intriguing issues: the continuity of the Roman population and Christianity in Pannonia, the relics reflecting the Christian beliefs of the Germanic peoples (Goths, Suebs, Lombards, Gepids) settling in or passing through the Carpathian Basin, and whether the Christians remaining in the Carpathian Basin could practice their faith under the over two centuries long rule of the Avars, a people of Asian stock arriving from the steppe. Rodica Oanță-Marghitu describes and discusses the opulent royal treasures from Apahida and the contemporaneous lavish assemblage from Kolozsvár-Szamosfalva, both of which contain articles that suggest a familiarity with Christianity and its symbols. Ádám Bollók's study deals with the changes in Christian burial customs and specifically with the process of how the preference for burial in the proximity of martyrs eventually led to the compulsory interment in church graveyards. He correctly highlights that the lack of churches in the Carpathian Basin, a region which suffered the hardships brought on by the successive waves of the Migration period, does not automatically imply a lack of Christian communities. Orsolya Heinrich-Tamáška takes up the topic of the survival of the fourth-century Christian communities of Noricum and Pannonia, which in these two regions, particularly in Noricum, is strongly intertwined with the well-defendable hilltop settlements appearing from the mid-fifth century onward. Fenékpuszta and its basilica, one of the key sites attesting to the survival of the Romanised population, was only abandoned around the mid-seventh century owing to its location, ensconced as it was in the marshland of Lake Balaton. The settlement's fourth- to ninth-century burials are discussed in another study by Orsolya Heinrich-Tamáška. Ágota Perémi illustrates the distinctive traits of the Keszthely culture, representing a singular trajectory in the development of antique forms after the cessation of life at Fenékpuszta, through the finds of the Lesencetomaj cemetery. The early Christian church of Lonja in Croatia, abandoned in the earlier sixth century, roughly a century before Fenékpuszta, is presented by Marina Šimek. Péter Somogyi discusses the Christian symbols appearing on fifth- to seventh-century Byzantine coins. Given that the coins include pieces that had been used as Barbarian dress adornments, the intriguing question is whether the persons who wore these articles were aware of the message conveyed by these symbols. Rounding off the above are two studies focusing on the potential rivals of fifth- to ninth-century

Christianity: the beliefs of the Avars, rooted in the world of the steppe (Gergely Csiky) and those of the Germanic peoples (Attila P. Kiss).

The themes explored in the studies, written by the period's leading Hungarian and foreign specialists, cover the most crucial issues in the period's research. How was early Christianity and the fate of the Roman population living in Pannonia intertwined following the persecution of the Christians and the fall of the Western Roman Empire? Cut off and isolated from the universal community of Christendom, what kind of life did the Christian communities of the Carpathian Basin lead under the rule of the Germanic tribes and in the Avar Khaganate, the latter representing a markedly different culture originating from the steppe?

These intriguing issues are illuminated by finds such as the fragment of a marble *mensa* bearing a scene from Jonah's life, and portrayals of Christ and the Apostles. The *mensa* found in Sirmium and the comparable pieces from Aquincum and other Pannonian sites had probably stood in the house of wealthy Christians who had opened their homes to their community for festive commensality. The fourth-century silver bowl from Kismákfa in County Vas, a relic associated with the Ostrogoths, had possibly also been used in a liturgical context since its depictions of fish and birds fit into the Christian symbolic vocabulary.

Another remarkable find associated with the Germanic peoples is the late fifth-century lead sheet bearing the Lord's Prayer in Gothic. The text is one of the earliest relics of Gothic literacy and was undoubtedly made by a literate ecclesiastic person for the high-status young man in whose burial it was deposited; the peers of this Gothic warrior eventually ended their life journey not in Pannonia, but in Italy. Thrasarich, the Gepidic king of Sirmium (488–504), who fled to Constantinople in the face of the Ostrogothic advance, had probably been born in the Carpathian Basin. He had in all likelihood been a Christian, as had the high-ranking woman buried in the Szentés-Nagyhegy cemetery whose metal articles attest to both pagan and Christian influences. Her grave goods included a silver box adorned with a Byzantine cross, most likely a reliquary for secondary relics. The catalogue presents countless examples of how Christian iconography was employed, highlighting also the controversies in their interpretation. The high number of pectoral crosses found in the territories under Avar rule had more likely served as apotropaic amulets than as expressions of a Christian identity – which is hardly surprising in a cultural milieu in which the newly-arrived population groups had few previous encounters with Christianity. Two studies focus on the survival of the religious beliefs of the Germanic and steppean peoples in the Carpathian Basin, illustrating their points with superb finds such as the silver gilt belt buckle found in the Kölked cemetery, whose elaborate imagery reflects the impact of Germanic-Scandinavian mythology, and the Nagyszentmiklós Treasure, the masterpiece of late Avar goldsmithing.

The single major Christian church used between the fifth and the seventh century in Transdanubia was the basilica at Keszthely-Fenékpuszta. The investigation of the late Roman



castrum built on Lake Balaton brought to light a remarkable find material rooted in the culture of late Antiquity which shares many affinities with the eastern Alpine episcopal towns of Roman origin. Following the abandonment of Fenékpuszta sometime in the mid-seventh century, a new archaeological culture known as the Keszthely culture made its appearance, which preserved many elements of the antique heritage, but also incorporated elements of Avar culture. Although the Christian faith of these communities cannot be conclusively proven, a detailed study of the decentralised settlement network emerging after the abandonment of the earlier cemeteries and the central place at Keszthely-Fenékpuszta will undoubtedly yield new insights regarding potential continuity.

Christianity had never entirely disappeared from the Carpathian Basin: we know that Charlemagne found isolated groups of Christians living in the regions conquered from the Avars. Establishing itself in western Pannonia and initiating an intense missionary activity, the Carolingian administration built its centre in Zalavár. However, the relics of this new centre were not included among the articles displayed as part of the exhibition, probably because Charlemagne's early medieval Christian empire comprised a

wealth of entirely novel elements, which overshadowed what had been preserved of the Roman Empire of old. The ill-fated Seuso Treasure would definitely have merited a place among the display of lavish artworks – the reproduction of the magnificent platter inscribed with the Latin name of Lake Balaton hardly compensated for the absence of this sumptuous assemblage. Although Seuso's luxurious dining set was omitted, the last part of the catalogue does offer a detailed coverage – accompanied by superb photos – of the dazzling treasures of the Barbarian elite of the Carpathian Basin who came into contact with Christianity. These include the tokens of power of the Hunnic sacrificial assemblage from Pannonhalma, the golden treasure of the Germanic woman buried in the Kölked cemetery and the Byzantine *solidi* reaching the Carpathian Basin as part of the tribute paid by the Byzantine emperors as well as the vessel engraved with a cross of the Nagyszentmiklós Treasure attesting to Byzantine influence. The volume, which – as noted in the above – will doubtless serve as a useful and comprehensive handbook of the history of Christianity in the Carpathian Basin during late Antiquity and the Migration period, is complemented by an index of sites, maps of early Christian Pannonia and an exhaustive bibliography.