

Review

OLIVERA ILIĆ, *LATE ANTIQUITY AND EARLY CHRISTIANITY IN THE ROMAN PROVINCES OF MOESIA PRIMA AND DACIA RIPENSIS* (BAR International series S3101). Oxford: BAR Publishing, 2022. Pp. xiii + 87, illus. ISBN 9781407360331. £29.00.

The archaeological documentation of the Christian faith in the Roman imperial period has long been known to generate important insights into the spread of the new religion across the ancient Mediterranean and its hinterland: from Britannia to Judaea and beyond, followers of the Christian faith left significant material traces whose study has rightly had a massive impact on the modern understanding of the early development of one of the most powerful religious movements in human history (for a recent review, see Pettegrew *et al.* (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Archaeology*, 2019). Olivera Ilić's contribution to the topic presents the materials from the Roman provinces of Moesia Prima and Dacia Ripensis that (are assumed to) hail from (the long) Late Antiquity, roughly the fourth to the seventh centuries C.E. Across eight chapters, including an Introduction (surveying earlier scholarship and several sites, 1–21) and a (very short) Conclusion (69–70), this 'overview of archaeological monuments' (69) encompasses a broad range of material relics: sacral architecture (ch. 2: churches, chapels, baptisteries); objects for liturgical rites (ch. 3: vessels, censors, spoons, processional crosses); cult objects (ch. 4: reliquaries, gilded glass bases); church inventory (ch. 5: polycandela, candelabra, lamps); objects of profane character with Christian symbols (ch. 6: small arts, jewellery, decorations, utilitarian objects); funerary objects (ch. 7: paintings, inscriptions, and a sarcophagus). A catalogue (71–9) lists the movable remains (plus tomb paintings), a total of 77 items, each with a brief summary of the most relevant information. Maps indicating the (known) findspots of the architectural remains (ch. 1) and the liturgical objects (ch. 2) helpfully visualise the significant clustering of these relics chiefly along the Danube, from Singidunum (Belgrade) in the west to Aquae (Prahovo) in the east.

The Bibliography readily shows the key merit of I.'s study, namely to present for an audience able to read English but not the languages, notably Serbian, of the many original archaeological publications, the remains pertaining to the Christian faith in the region, thus enabling an enlarged readership to think across the respective Roman provincial borders and modern linguistic niches in the study of its early rise. I. herself avoids far-reaching geographical contextualisation or wide-ranging interpretation of the material: the presentation of the material evidence remains solidly on the descriptive level, even if I. regularly draws on broader, pre-established facts to situate her data. Notably, referencing the wider, current understanding of the development of religious life on the Middle Danube *Limes*, I. observes that 'the importance of Christianity was increasing' in the late antique period, a contention that is then deemed 'evidenced by the preserved material remains' (70): perhaps, or even likely; but it is a contention that is not actively generated from the material remains presented in this study, i.e. those 77 smaller relics, and the few churches, chapels and baptisteries, often only roughly dated. Rather, the *existing* historical meta-narrative is charged with giving meaning to the relatively small number of regional finds, instead of using those finds bottom-up in our historical reconstruction — however daunting the task would be.

The archaeological material opens up multiple intriguing vistas — such as through the objects' regularly modest production quality, suggestive of local manufacture (e.g. 43, 70; cf. 56), pointing to the role of craftspeople in religious transmission. Further, and notwithstanding the unreliable distribution of the finds (due to the haphazard selection of sites for excavation and the nature of archaeological exploration at these), several documented churches (ch. 1) highlight fortified structures, having been secondarily built into pre-existing fortifications. I. notes that these 'church buildings were primarily used for the military occupants of the fortification' (11): if so, what does this tell us about the relationship between the army and cultic transmission (here concerning the spread of Christianity), for which there exists a precedent in the region (above all regarding the influence of the army on the transmission of the cult of Dolichenus earlier in the Roman imperial period)? Or about the geographical direction of Christianity's spread, and the cultic relationship between Christian and pagan rituals? (Note in this context a brief reference to 'the meeting of Paganism and Christianity', citing also Mithraism, and the shared burial space at Viminacium: 63–7.)

The lack of translations for some of the basic, yet not always easy to interpret, inscriptions is unfortunate (esp. 64–6). Readers will also wish for more informative presentation of the dating: while some materials are dated by archaeological context and/or coin finds, others are dated primarily by historical inferences or analogy, without systematically indicating the basis for the dating of the analogous materials themselves (which the catalogue could have included). The question of the chronological location (and even relevance) of several objects therefore remains open; indeed, I wondered how much of the material is at all *securely* dated to the late antique period. A graph plotting the proposed date ranges of the 77 relics and other church remains would also have been helpful to facilitate the chronological grasp of this material. Inclusion of the catalogue numbers in the respective chapter discussions (and page references with the catalogue entries, especially for items not individually discussed in the chapters) would in turn aid cross-checking. Notwithstanding these issues and the book's descriptive nature, I. deserves credit for making the archaeological documentation of the Christian faith along the Middle Danube *Limes* accessible to English-reading scholars who do not work in (or on) the region.

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