

# Notes on Early Christian Ambos and Altars in the Light of some Fragments from the Islands of Pag and Rab

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# NOTES ON EARLY CHRISTIAN AMBOS AND ALTARS IN THE LIGHT OF SOME FRAGMENTS FROM THE ISLANDS OF PAG AND RAB

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## Abstract

The author discusses some possible new appearances of ambos and altars in the Roman province of Dalmatia, which could extend the noted morphological and decorative features of these items. The discussion is based on three fragments of early Christian church furniture from the islands of Pag and Rab. Two fragments from Pag, made of limestone, once belonged to an ambo installation. With its special decorative motives, the proposed ambo from the island of Pag differs from the known ambos in Dalmatia and can be dated to the end of Late Antique ambo production. The third fragment discussed in the article is preserved on the island of Rab. It is a fragment of a limestone slab with some morphological peculiarities that speak of a possible special purpose of the monument. The author suggests that the slab was a frontal slab of an altar installation.

The chosen monuments open discussion of the important issues of workshop origin, datation and new morphological and decorative elements of the early Christian ambos and altars in Dalmatia.

## Keywords

ambos, altars, early Christian Dalmatia

plutei.<sup>1</sup> If they really can extend the known corpus of ambos and altars, they deserve attention in spite of their fragmentary preservation and of the limestone of which they were made.

## Fragments of an ambo from Pag

Two fragments of church furniture with very rich ornamentation have been preserved in Novalja, on the island of Pag. They are displayed today in the local archaeological collection called Stomorica. The fragments originate very probably from the *basilica urbana*, a large church of the Zadar type, from the 5<sup>th</sup> century. The fragments, however, can be dated to the second half of the 6<sup>th</sup> century. The Novalja fragments have not previously been recognized as parts of an ambo. With that attribution they have an important place in the context of known early Christian ambos in Dalmatia. Because the supposed ambo, in the modelling of its ornamental decoration, differs from the standard appearances of ambos in Dalmatia, it is appropriate to outline the standard characteristics.

For the investigation of ambos in Dalmatia, the Salonitan examples, known for a long time, have a special importance. From Salona and surroundings (Manastirine, Marusinac, Kapljuč, Klapavice, Bijaći) parts of ambos of very similar characteristics originate.<sup>2</sup> The

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There are several reasons for discussion of the theme presented in this article. Among different groups of early Christian sculpture from the territory of the Roman province of Dalmatia, findings of ambos, altars and ciboria (which are generally separate groups of church furniture in relation to altar screens) exhibit many specific marks and represent a very complex field of study. Therefore, an analysis of lesser known or insufficiently described findings can contribute to a future synthesis. In this article, three stone fragments that could be interpreted as parts of an ambo and an altar have been chosen. They have not been interpreted in that way in the literature, in which they occur as ordinary

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1 Fragments from the island of Pag have been published by several authors. The fragment with lozenges, see in SHEPPARD 1984, Fig. 2. Both fragments have been published by SKOBLAR 2006, 27-34. M. Skoblar mentions other authors who dealt with the fragments. The fragment with squammae was published by A. Šonje in 1969. I have not read that work, but the author's opinion is given by M. Skoblar in her article. A. Šonje probably mentioned the same fragment again in 1981. See ŠONJE 1981, 14. For the fragment of a slab from the island of Rab see DOMIJAN 2007, 22; JARAK 2010, 82-83; JARAK 2013, 1558, 1565.

2 The ambo fragments found in older excavations have been published in monographic issues on the Salonitan

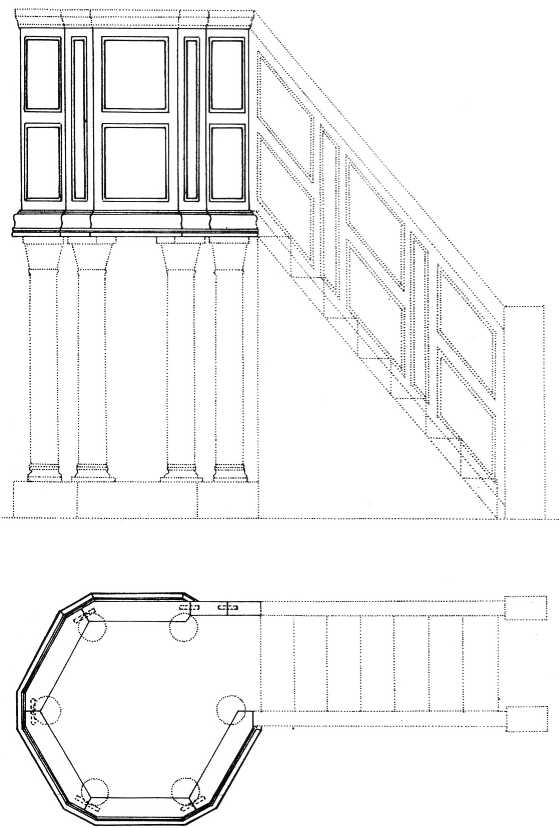


Fig. 1. Kapljuč – reconstruction of the ambo (according to Johannes Brøndsted and Ejnar Dyggve)

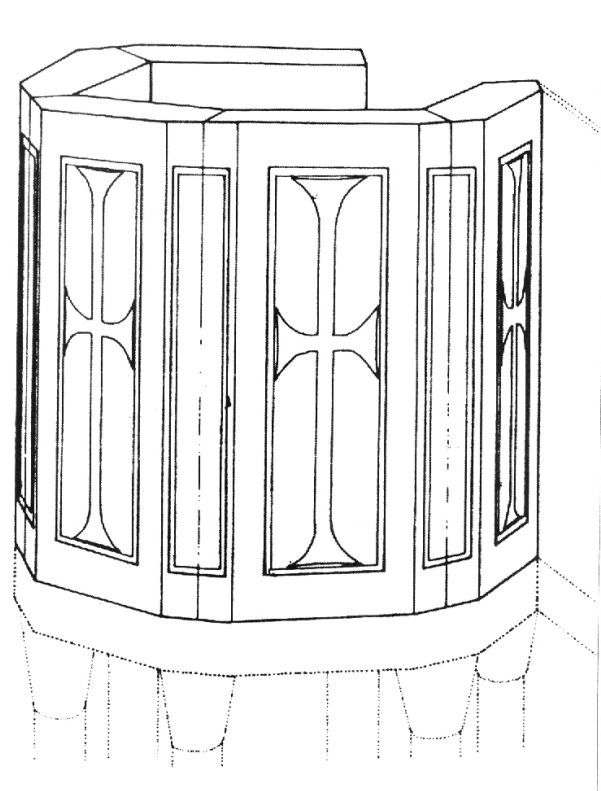


Fig. 2. Bijaći – reconstruction of the ambo (according to Pascale Chevalier)

elements of some ambos were sufficient for reconstruction of the whole installation. So we have proposals for reconstruction of the ambos from Kapljuč (Fig. 1) and Bijaći (Fig. 2).<sup>3</sup> They were reconstructed as polygonal structures made of rectangular slabs. The slabs differ with regard to their ornamental motives, but they have some common formal features. The slabs of middle Dalmatian ambos have mostly plain upper and bottom edges, without any prominent profiles (Fig. 3, 4, 5, 6). An exception is the ambo from Kapljuč whose slabs, according to some preserved fragments, had prominent profiles on the upper and bottom edges. The slabs (plutei) of early Christian ambos in Dalmatia are rectangular in shape, with precisely determined places for ornamental decoration. The main, rectangular parts of the plutei, are divided into

two profiled fields, which bear the ornamentation. Sometimes, as in Bijaći, there is only one ornamental field along the slabs. The ambo plutei have narrow inclined parts at the sides of the main field. At the narrow inclined part where one slab is connected with the other, there is an engraved geometrical motive – a half of a rectangle.

Parts of ambos have also been discovered in the northern Dalmatia. Fragments from Vagići in Mokro polje near Knin were published by V. Delonga 30 years ago.<sup>4</sup> The fragments have no preserved upper and bottom edges, so we do not know whether they were plain, like most Salonitan examples, or profiled. The motive on the best preserved fragment consists of single-stranded bands which make a geometrical pattern of lozenges. A great number of known findings from the territory of northern Dalmatia have prominent multiply profiled upper and bottom edges. Particularly testifying to this is the most important finding of an ambo in northern Dalmatia, that from Srma. In Srma near Šibenik, Z. Gunjača found many fragments of two ambos from the twin basilicas.<sup>5</sup> The fragments were sufficient for the reconstruction of the ambo of the south

tan localities: BRØNDSTED 1928, 88-93, fig. 39, 78-81; DYGGVE, EGGER 1939, 30, 33, fig. 45; of the ambo from Klapavice see BULIĆ 1907, 101-122, T. XI. Of the recent works see DUVAL, MARIN, METZGER (eds.) 1994, 185-194; T. LXV-LXVII; CHEVALIER 1999, 109-140; JELIČIĆ-RADONIĆ 1999, 133-145.

3 BRØNDSTED 1928, 92, fig. 80; CHEVALIER 1999, 131.

4 DELONGA 1984, 272, T. IV, 1,2.

5 GUNJAČA 1985, *passim*; MARŠIĆ 2005, 73-188.



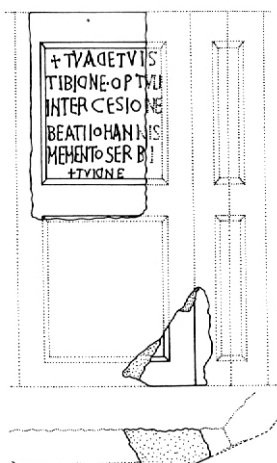


Fig. 3.  
Marusinac – ambo  
slab (according  
to Jasna Jeličić-  
Radonić)

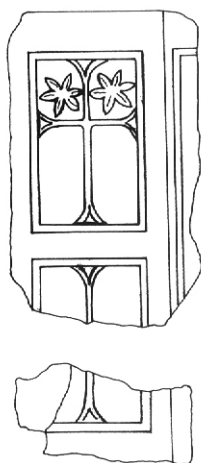


Fig. 4.  
Manastirine  
– ambo slab  
(according to  
Jasna Jeličić-  
Radonić)

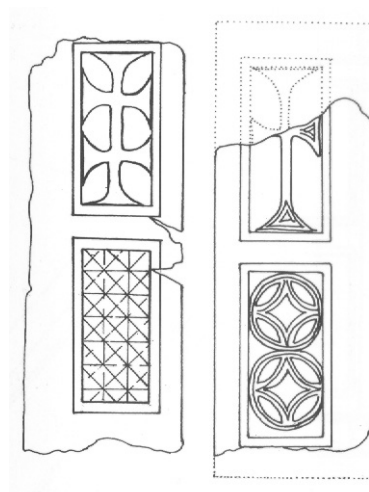


Fig. 5.  
Klapavice – ambo  
slabs (according  
to Jasna Jeličić-  
Radonić)

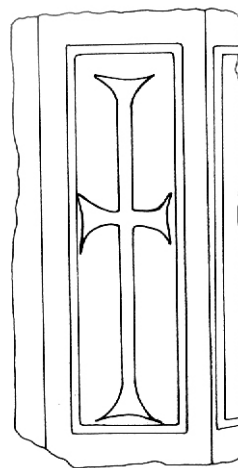


Fig. 6.  
Bijaći – ambo slab  
(according to Jasna  
Jeličić-Radonić)

church.<sup>6</sup> That ambo represents a complex structure consisting of two entrance stairways and an upraised podium. The upper part of the ambo was made of four parapet slabs with very rich ornamental decoration (Fig. 7). The plates have a surface division typical for ambos – there are two profiled rectangular fields and edges that break off at an angle of 21 to 23 degrees. One inclined edge is decorated with profiles in the shape of a half of a rectangle. Upper border has manifold profiles – an “S” profile (*cyma recta*) and two bordering strips. The bottom also has a profile of the “S” type (reverse *cyma recta*). Two slabs of the parapet were interconnected making one side of the decorated ambo surface. The other side was made of the remaining two slabs, and between them were passages to the stairways. This solution of the south church ambo is presented in a theoretical reconstruction of its appearance (Fig. 8).

It is interesting that the other ambo from Srima, that from the north church, differs in some respects from the south church ambo. One preserved slab of the north

church ambo has, on the main surface, two profiled rectangular fields without decoration. Its upper and bottom edges are plain like the border parts of the Bijaći ambo and similar examples.<sup>7</sup> The ambos from Srima were, thus, morphologically different and, because of the different chronological determination of the furnishings of the two churches, they were made separately in the middle and second half of the 6<sup>th</sup> century. The later ambo, from the second half of the 6<sup>th</sup> century, has plutei with rich ornamental decoration and multiply profiled upper and bottom borders.

In Zadar, small fragments of the ambo slabs are also known. One fragment was found at the locality of the Church of St. John in front of the town, and the other in St. Donatus' Church.<sup>8</sup> They have common features with the Srima slabs – a prominent profile of the base, of the bottom edge (Fig. 9, 10). One more fragment of a north Dalmatian ambo was found in Galovac. That

6 MARŠIĆ 2005, 112, fig. 28.

7 MARŠIĆ 2005, 108-115, 135, fig. 27.

8 VEŽIĆ 1997, 281, T. I,6; VEŽIĆ 2005, 171-172.

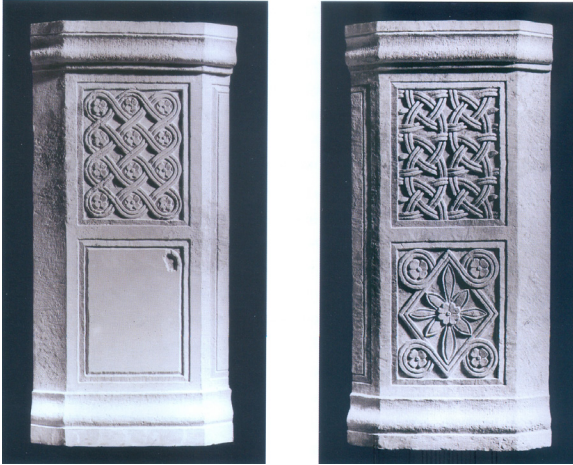


Fig. 7a. Srma – ambo slabs from the south church (after Zlatko Gunjača and Dražen Maršić)

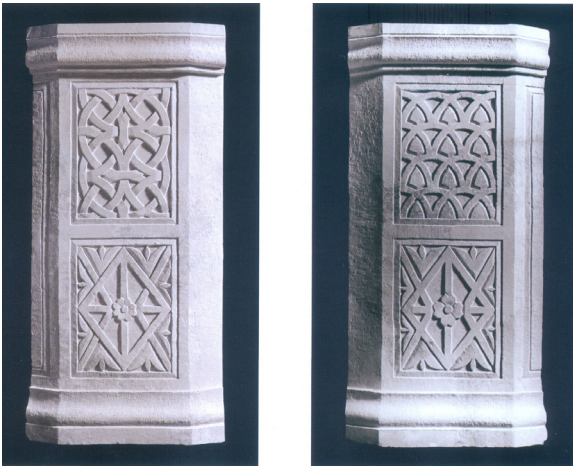


Fig. 7b. Srma – ambo slabs from the south church (after Zlatko Gunjača and Dražen Maršić)

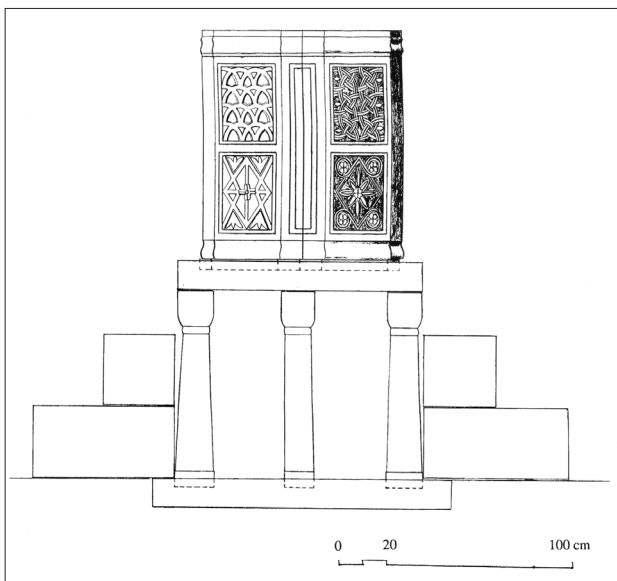


Fig. 8. Srma – reconstruction of the south church ambo (according to Dražen Maršić)



Fig. 9. Zadar, St John's Church in front of the town – fragment of an ambo slab (according to Pavaša Vežić)



Fig. 10. Zadar, St Donatus – fragment of an ambo slab (according to Pavaša Vežić)

fragment is very small and belongs to the upper part of the ambo slab. It has a plain border strip.<sup>9</sup>

Besides these examples of early Christian ambos, we must reckon with others that have not been published or recognized.<sup>10</sup> Based on known morphological features, a preliminary insight gives the following picture: a multiple profile of the edges is a more typical feature of north Dalmatian than middle Dalmatian pulpits. But in both groups, less frequent features also occur and precise differentiation of northern from middle Dalmatian ambos based on their morphology is not possible.

Turning back to the Pag fragments, it is obvious that they have a close similarity with the reconstructed

9 BELOŠEVIĆ 1996-97, 310, fig. 5, 337, T.III,2.

10 J. Jeličić Radonić has mentioned elements of an ambo found in Lovrečina and a possible example from the island of Hvar. See JELIČIĆ RADONIĆ 1999, 141-142.





Fig. 11.  
Novalja on the island of Pag –  
fragment of an ambo slab  
(photo: Mirja Jarak)



Fig. 12.  
Novalja on the island of Pag –  
fragment of an ambo slab  
(photo: Mirja Jarak)

Srima ambo and related monuments. The fragments have a main field and a narrow inclined side that breaks off at an angle of 21 and 25 degrees. The fragment with the smaller angle of 21 degrees has the following dimensions: height 22 cm, length 29 cm, thickness 4-7 cm. On the partially preserved main field there are carved lozenges as ornamentation (Fig. 11). The fragment with the angle of about 25 degrees has the following dimensions: height 26 cm, length 20 cm, thickness 5-9 cm. This fragment has only a small part of the main field, which has been decorated with scales or squammas. Accordingly we refer to it as the squammae fragment (Fig. 12). Ornamental motives

in the partially preserved main fields on both fragments are common in the decoration of early Christian ambos. But both fragments have some additional motives which are not standard features. The fragment with squammae has additional motives of astragals and a profiled rectangle. The fragment with lozenges has two-stranded volutes and a partially preserved similar rectangle at the border part. On both fragments rectangles were carved on the narrow inclined side which was the final part of the slabs. The astragals and double-volutes were carved on the plain main surface of the monuments. Behind the strips with these ornaments, the slabs break off at the

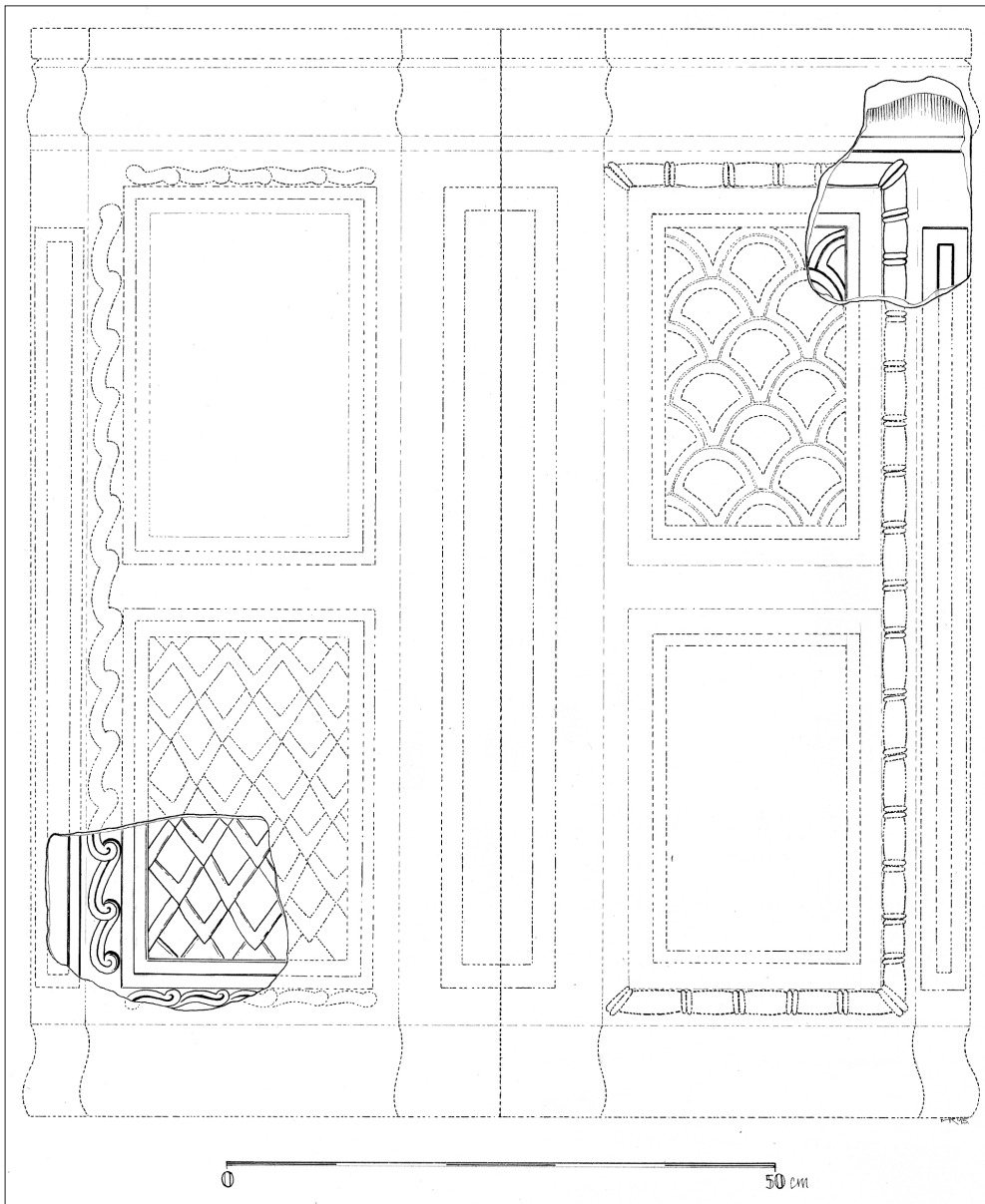


Fig. 13.  
Novalja –  
reconstruction of  
supposed ambo slabs  
(according to Mirja  
Jarak; drawing by  
Martina Rončević)

mentioned angles. Ornamental strips with astragals and volutes turn in a horizontal direction around the double-profiled main ornamental fields. The fragment with squamiae has a partially preserved upper edge. It was carved with a prominent round profile, quite similar to the profiled edges of the south church ambo in Srima. This detail and the inclined narrow parts at both fragments from Novalja testify to their original appearance in the frame of the slabs of an ambo. The fragments fit in with a hypothetical reconstruction of the ambo slabs that could have been connected like other known Dalmatian examples (Fig. 13).

If we want to date the fragments from Pag, support can be found in the widening of the standard ornamental zones and the application of new motives. The additional decorative bands could be interpreted as a widening of the standard prototypes at the end of the workshop

production of ambos in Dalmatia. That means dating at the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> or even the beginning of the 7<sup>th</sup> century.

For the precise determination of ambo production in Dalmatia, it would be necessary to gain a broader insight into the workshops' activity and stone origin. Some steps have been taken already. For example, the origin of the limestone of the Srima furnishings has been exactly determined.<sup>11</sup> In the case of the Pag fragments, specification of the limestone has not yet been provided. If the limestone were used in certain workshops, our knowledge would be supplemented with exact data. Conclusions based only on stylistic data, such as the dating

11 MARŠIĆ 2005, 74, *passim*. It is interesting to compare numerous types of Brač limestone depicted in MARINKOVIĆ, MILIŠA 2015, *passim*.





Fig. 14. Rab, Monastery of St. Andrew – fragmentarily preserved slab (photo: Damir Krizmanić)



Fig. 16. Rab, Monastery of St. Andrew – detail of the slab (photo: Damir Krizmanić)



Fig. 15. Rab, Monastery of St. Andrew - fragmentarily preserved slab (photo: Damir Krizmanić)



Fig. 17. Rab, Monastery of St. Andrew - detail of the slab (photo: Damir Krizmanić)

of the Pag fragmentary slabs, could, after specification of the stone, perhaps be wider and more secure. Having in mind the state of research into early Christian ambos in Dalmatia, a complete list of stone origins and other data connected with the specifications of stone should be among the tasks of future investigations.

### Fragmentary monument from Rab

One fragmentarily preserved early Christian stone monument is stored in the closed part of the Benedictine monastery of St. Andrew in the town of Rab. That is a slab with clear early Christian ornamental decoration typical of church furniture of the broader territory of northern Dalmatia. At the first sight the slab looks like an ordinary pluteus of an altar screen and it has been so published in the recent literature.<sup>12</sup> But, due to some peculiarities in its modelling, the fragmentarily preserved slab differs from ordinary plutei and very likely had some other original function.

The slab from St. Andrew's Monastery is made of limestone and has the following dimensions: height - 84 centimetres; length - 44 centimetres; thickness - 9 centimetres (Fig. 14, 15, 16, 17). While the extant height is similar or identical to the original appearance of the monument, the length is much smaller than the original dimension must have been. We can suppose that the slab had a length of about 1 meter. So, only a half of it has been preserved. The preserved part has one finished lateral side and a bottom edge. On the preserved lateral side, a half-column with a clearly visible base and a damaged capital has been sculpted. Just in the line of the capital the slab has been damaged and its upper edge is very thin. The lateral half-column and the height of the capital indicate that the slab was not significantly higher. The bottom border of the panel is composed of two fillets: an upper, narrower segment and a lower, wider one. The central ornamental decoration consists of quadrangles with inscribed Greek crosses. The arms of the crosses come out of one quadrangle and enter the adjoining one, so they are all connected.

The described motives have regular geometrical lines and they are similar to a large number of decorative patterns on early Christian plutei from the Zadar region. It has been noted that early Christian plutei from Zadar and the surrounding area often have geometrical decorative patterns. During the early phase of the workshop activities in Zadar, in the second half of the 5<sup>th</sup> century, plutei with octagons and crosses were produced.<sup>13</sup> A fragment of such a pluteus of Zadar origin has been preserved in Supetarska Draga on the island of Rab. Besides the plutei

with octagons and crosses, there are other variants of geometrically decorated plutei in the wider Zadar area (examples from Zadar, Podvršje, Biograd...). The slab from St. Andrew's Monastery can be compared with a fragmentary pluteus from Biograd, which also has a geometrical decoration with the main motive of the Greek cross.<sup>14</sup> An especially close analogy could be represented by a newly discovered fragmentary pluteus from the island of Vir, with relief crosses in a continuous row.<sup>15</sup> Geometrically decorated stone monuments from the Zadar workshop originate from the second half of the 5<sup>th</sup> century or later. Therefore, the slab from St. Andrew's Monastery could be dated as early as the later 5<sup>th</sup> or the 6<sup>th</sup> century.

While the workshop origin of the slab from Rab can be very confidently determined, its original function is uncertain. The main question is whether the slab was an ordinary pluteus of an altar screen or had some other purpose. In favour of an ordinary pluteus is the execution of the lower border zone. It is composed of two fillets and can be compared with some early plutei from Zadar.<sup>16</sup> The half-column on the lateral side of the slab brings uncertainty. There was, obviously, an identical column on the other, lost part of the monument. In that way we would have a pluteus with semicircular lateral sides, which would have had to stand freely in space, without pilasters or the possibility of being fixed onto the wall of the building. Such a pluteus would be quite extraordinary among monuments from the eastern Adriatic coast.<sup>17</sup> Plutei with lateral columns might, perhaps, have some connection with altar screens made of a row of little columns known from the Salonitan area, from the Episcopal Complex and Manastirine.<sup>18</sup> These nicely carved altar screens were of Proconnesian marble and are dated to the 6<sup>th</sup> century, most probably to the time of Justinian. They could hardly have been a prototype for the modelling of the Rab slab with its lateral column, if not for other reasons then at least because of the different dating. The Salonitan altar screens with a row of columns can speak in favour of the possibility that other specific forms exist, like a hypothetical altar screen with plutei with lateral carved columns.

12 DOMIJAN 2007, 22; JARAK 2010, 82-83.

13 VEŽIĆ 1990, 247-262.

14 URODA 2005, 15.

15 The pluteus has not been published yet. It was discovered during the joint archaeological works of Nin and Zadar archaeologists. Thanks to colleagues from Nin, I had opportunity to see it in 2015.

16 VEŽIĆ 2005, 167.

17 I have no knowledge of such plutei, but they could have been noted or preserved in Dalmatia or Istria.

18 GERBER 1917, 56, fig. 91; EGGER 1926, 20-21, fig. 17, 18; CAMBI 2002, 276-277.



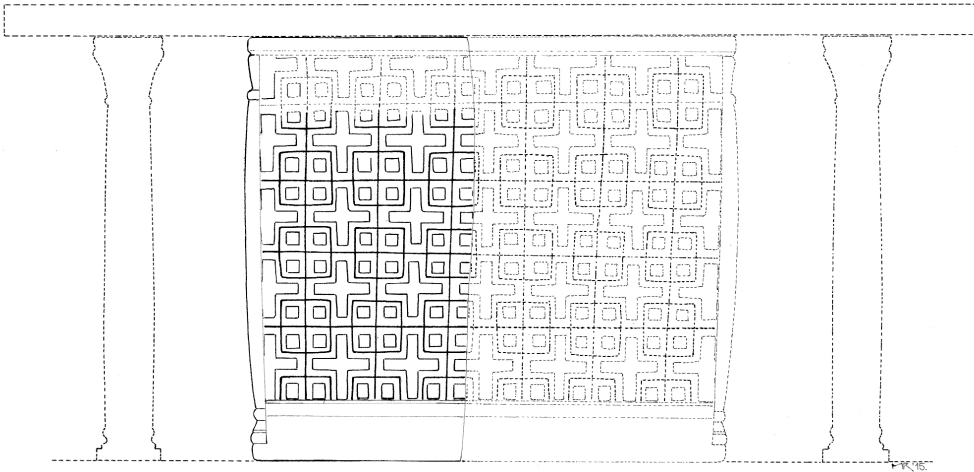


Fig. 18.  
Rab, Monastery of St. Andrew – a proposal for the reconstruction of an altar installation with the fragmentary slab as a front (according to Mirja Jarak; drawing by Martina Rončević)

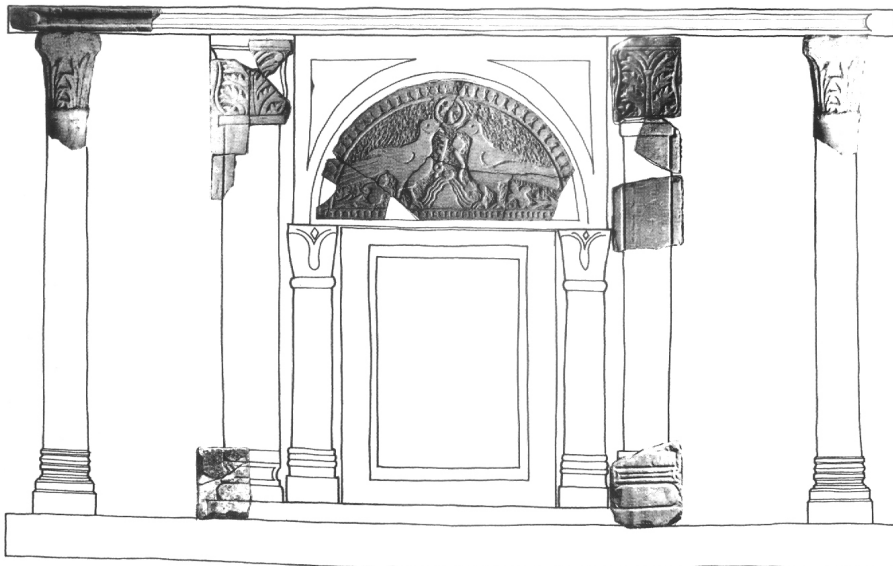


Fig. 19.  
Gata – reconstruction of the altar of the cippus type (according to Jasna Jeličić-Radonić)

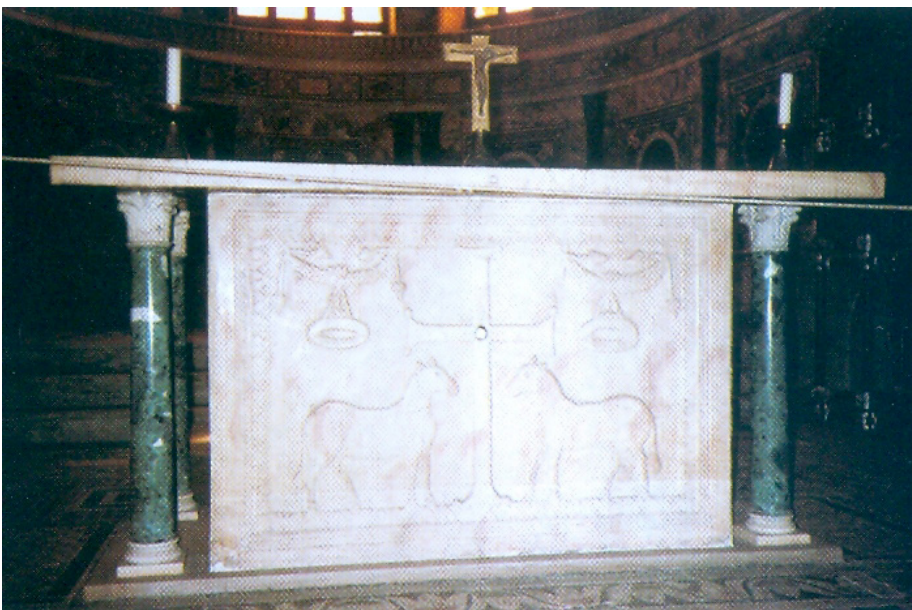


Fig. 20.  
Ravenna, S. Vitale – altar with frontal slab (after C. Rizzardi)

It is clear that the fragmentary slab from the St. Andrew's monastery had a function in the frame of early Christian church furniture. Besides its possible function as a specific pluteus of an altar screen, the slab should be analysed in the context of early Christian ambos and altars. Some typological variants of them are decorated with half-columns or pilasters with capitals and bases. Monumental ambos with lateral parts framed by columns or pilasters have been preserved, for example, in Ravenna.<sup>19</sup> Not too far from Dalmatia, there are very important Greek ambos preserved in a great number of examples.<sup>20</sup> If we want to illustrate similarities with other ambos, we can compare, for example, the slab from Rab with lateral parts of the ambo from the Ravenna church of Spirito Santo.<sup>21</sup> Our slab is similar to the upper parts of that Ravenna ambo. But the similarity is very general, and only the existence of the monumental Ravenna type of ambo in Dalmatia could testify to the possible function of the Rab monument. Because early Christian ambos in Dalmatia were not as monumental as the Ravenna examples and differed morphologically, the Rab monument cannot be interpreted as a part of an ambo installation.

Of the monuments decorated with columns (half-columns) and pilasters, altars deserve a special attention. The height of the Rab slab might be appropriate for the frontal side of an altar, especially if we suppose the existence of an altar base of about 10 centimetres. A frontal slab decorated in this way might belong to an altar support (*stipes*) and, consequently, to an elaborate type of the so-called altar table (Fig. 18). A simple altar-table, with four corner columns, bearers of the mensa, is almost exclusively the type of altar in early Christian Dalmatia. Many fragments of simple altar tables were found at Dalmatian localities. At the same time, the findings of possible more elaborate forms of altar are extremely rare. One rare example comes from Gata, from the early Christian church dated to the 6<sup>th</sup> century (Fig. 19). The Gata altar belongs to the so-called *cippus* type.<sup>22</sup> It

is similar to the Euphrasius altar in Poreč and examples from Ravenna and other places in Italy.<sup>23</sup> The frontal slab of the altar – *cippus* has decorative columns and pilasters, which have always been carved on the main side of the slab and never on the thin lateral sides. So, their position differs from the preserved lateral column of the fragmentary Rab monument. The frontal position of the decorative columns and pilasters is typical in the case of other forms of altar. Those made of interconnected slabs, known as the box type, often have columns on the frontal sides.<sup>24</sup> Lateral carved columns, as on the Rab slab, open questions concerning the modelling of the altar.

On the back side and bottom surface of the Rab slab there are no visible traces of it being affixed to the neighbouring altar slab or altar base. Naturally, because of the partially preserved length of the slab, it is possible that a groove for affixing it to the altar base was on the lost part. The slab was, perhaps, leaning onto the support (*stipes*) of an altar. It could serve as a frontal decorative slab, panelled to the altar support. Decorative panels on the altar façade are known from Italy (*paliotto d'altare*) and they have different measures varying in height, length and thickness (Fig. 20). In recent literature, similar panels have been recognized in Dalmatia, too.<sup>25</sup> The fragmentary monument from Rab has a thickness of about 10 cm. One early medieval altar revetment from Ravenna, decorated with cross and interlace, has a thickness of as much as 14 cm.<sup>26</sup> Most altar revetments are, however, thinner and have thickness of about 6 cm. With regard to their measures, revetments could have been affixed in different ways. Whether the Rab slab had the function of an altar revetment must stay unsolved mostly because of the lack of other elements of the hypothetical altar installation. As isolated relief work with specific morphological features, the Rab slab can be interpreted in the context of different groups of early Christian liturgical furniture. The precise determination of limestone of which it has been made could not solve the question of its function, but it would contribute to a possibly precise identification of its workshop origin, which has been discussed in this article only on the basis of ornamental decoration.

19 ANGIOLINI MARTINELLI 1968, 25-31.

20 JACOBS 1987, *passim*.

21 ANGIOLINI MARTINELLI 1968, 26.

22 JELIČIĆ-RADONIĆ 1991, 5-18; JELIČIĆ-RADONIĆ 1994, *passim*; JELIČIĆ-RADONIĆ 2005, 19-28. Of the existence of some other altar types in Dalmatia there are only scarce information in the literature. Possible examples from the older excavations at Kapljuč and Marusinac mentions J. Jeličić-Radonić in the quoted works. In recent archaeological excavations were also found some structures interpreted as remnants of masonry altars. Such elements have been found at Ivinj and described by ZORIĆ 2001, 34.

23 Of the Euphrasius altar with quoted older works see TERRY 1988, 43-44. Of the Ravenna altars see new monograph: SOTIRA 2013, *passim*.

24 BRAUN 1924, *passim*. *Kastenaltar* represents the type made of 4 interconnected slabs.

25 VEŽIĆ 2005, 172; BURIĆ 2001, 169, 184-185; BURIĆ 2010, 227-256.

26 SOTIRA 2013, 78.

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