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CONTENT

PRESENTATION	15
NECROLOGY: NORMAN HERZ (1923-2013) by Susan Kane	17
1. APPLICATIONS TO SPECIFIC ARCHEOLOGICAL QUESTIONS – USE OF MARBLE	
Hermaphrodites and Sleeping or Reclining Maenads: Production Centres and Quarry Marks <i>Patrizio Pensabene</i>	25
First Remarks about the Pavement of the Newly Discovered Mithraeum of the Colored Marbles at Ostia and New Investigations on Roman and Late Roman White and Colored Marbles from Insula IV, IX <i>Massimiliano David, Stefano Succi and Marcello Turci</i>	33
Alabaster. Quarrying and Trade in the Roman World: Evidence from Pompeii and Herculaneum <i>Simon J. Barker and Simona Perna</i>	45
Recent Work on the Stone at the Villa Arianna and the Villa San Marco (Castellammare di Stabia) and Their Context within the Vesuvian Area <i>Simon J. Barker and J. Clayton Fant</i>	65
Marble Wall Decorations from the Imperial Mausoleum (4 th C.) and the Basilica of San Lorenzo (5 th C.) in Milan: an Update on Colored Marbles in Late Antique Milan <i>Elisabetta Neri, Roberto Bugini and Silvia Gazzoli</i>	79
Sarcophagus Lids Sawn from their Chests <i>Dorothy H. Abramitis and John J. Herrmann</i>	89
The Re-Use of Monolithic Columns in the Invention and Persistence of Roman Architecture <i>Peter D. De Staebler</i>	95
The Trade in Small-Size Statues in the Roman Mediterranean: a Case Study from Alexandria <i>Patrizio Pensabene and Eleonora Gasparini</i>	101
The Marble Dedication of Komon, Son of Asklepiades, from Egypt: Material, Provenance, and Reinforcement of Meaning <i>Patricia A. Butz</i>	109
Multiple Reuse of Imported Marble Pedestals at Caesarea Maritima in Israel <i>Barbara Burrell</i>	117
Iasos and Iasian Marble between the Late Antique and Early Byzantine Eras <i>Diego Peirano</i>	123

Thassos, Known Inscriptions with New Data <i>Tony Kozelj and Manuela Wurch-Kozelj</i>	131
The Value of Marble in Roman <i>Hispalis</i> : Contextual, Typological and Lithological Analysis of an Assemblage of Large Architectural Elements Recovered at N° 17 Goyeneta Street (Seville, Spain) <i>Ruth Taylor, Oliva Rodríguez, Esther Ontiveros, María Luisa Loza, José Beltrán and Araceli Rodríguez</i>	143
<i>Giallo Antico</i> in Context. Distribution, Use and Commercial Actors According to New Stratigraphic Data from the Western Mediterranean (2 nd C. Bc – Late 1 st C. Ad) <i>Stefan Ardeleanu</i>	155
<i>Amethystus</i> : Ancient Properties and Iconographic Selection <i>Luigi Pedroni</i>	167
2. PROVENANCE IDENTIFICATION I: (MARBLE)	
Unraveling the Carrara – Göktepe Entanglement <i>Walter Prochaska, Donato Attanasio and Matthias Bruno</i>	175
The Marble of Roman Imperial Portraits <i>Donato Attanasio, Matthias Bruno, Walter Prochaska and Ali Bahadır Yavuz</i>	185
Tracing Alabaster (Gypsum or Anhydrite) Artwork Using Trace Element Analysis and a Multi-Isotope Approach (Sr, S, O) <i>Lise Leroux, Wolfram Kloppmann, Philippe Bromblet, Catherine Guerrot, Anthony H. Cooper, Pierre-Yves Le Pogam, Dominique Vingtain and Noel Worley</i>	195
Roman Monolithic Fountains and Thasian Marble <i>Annewies van den Hoek, Donato Attanasio and John J. Herrmann</i>	207
Archaeometric Analysis of the Alabaster Thresholds of Villa A, Oplontis (Torre Annunziata, Italy) and New Sr and Pb Isotopic Data for <i>Alabastro Ghiaccione del Circeo</i> <i>Simon J. Barker, Simona Perna, J. Clayton Fant, Lorenzo Lazzarini and Igor M. Villa</i>	215
Roman Villas of Lake Garda and the Occurrence of Coloured Marbles in the Western Part of “Regio X Venetia et Histria” (Northern Italy) <i>Roberto Bugini, Luisa Folli and Elisabetta Roffia</i>	231
Calcitic Marble from Thasos in the North Adriatic Basin: Ravenna, Aquileia, and Milan <i>John J. Herrmann, Robert H. Tykot and Annewies van den Hoek</i>	239
Characterisation of White Marble Objects from the Temple of Apollo and the House of Augustus (Palatine Hill, Rome) <i>Francesca Giustini, Mauro Brilli, Enrico Gallochio and Patrizio Pensabene</i>	247
Study and Archeometric Analysis of the Marble Elements Found in the Roman Theater at Aeclanum (Mirabella Eclano, Avellino - Italy) <i>Antonio Mesisca, Lorenzo Lazzarini, Stefano Cancelliere and Monica Salvadori</i>	255

Two Imperial Monuments in Puteoli: Use of Proconnesian Marble in the Domitianic and Trajanic Periods in Campania <i>Irene Bald Romano, Hans Rupprecht Goette, Donato Attanasio and Walter Prochaska</i>	267
Coloured Marbles in the Neapolitan Pavements (16 th And 17 th Centuries): the Church of <i>Santi Severino e Sossio</i> <i>Roberto Bugini, Luisa Folli and Martino Solito</i>	275
Roman and Early Byzantine Sarcophagi of Calcitic Marble from Thasos in Italy: Ostia and Siracusa <i>Donato Attanasio, John J. Herrmann, Robert H. Tykot and Annewies van den Hoek</i>	281
Revisiting the Origin and Destination of the Late Antique Marzamemi 'Church Wreck' Cargo <i>Justin Leidwanger, Scott H. Pike and Andrew Donnelly</i>	291
The Marbles of the Sculptures of Felix Romuliana in Serbia <i>Walter Prochaska and Maja Živić</i>	301
Calcitic Marble from Thasos and Proconnesos in Nea Anchialos (Thessaly) and Thessaloniki (Macedonia) <i>Vincent Barbin, John J. Herrmann, Aristotle Mentzos and Annewies van den Hoek</i>	311
Architectural Decoration of the Imperial Agora's Porticoes at Iasos <i>Fulvia Bianchi, Donato Attanasio and Walter Prochaska</i>	321
The Winged Victory of Samothrace - New Data on the Different Marbles Used for the Monument from the Sanctuary of the Great Gods <i>Annie Blanc, Philippe Blanc and Ludovic Laugier</i>	331
Polychrome Marbles from the Theatre of the Sanctuary of Apollo Pythios in Gortyna (Crete) <i>Jacopo Bonetto, Nicolò Mareso and Michele Bueno</i>	337
Paul the Silentiary, Hagia Sophia, Onyx, Lydia, and Breccia Corallina <i>John J. Herrmann and Annewies van den Hoek</i>	345
Incrustations from Colonia Ulpia Traiana (Near Modern Xanten, Germany) <i>Vilma Ruppiniè and Ulrich Schüssler</i>	351
Stone Objects from Vindobona (Austria) – Petrological Characterization and Provenance of Local Stone in a Historico-Economical Setting <i>Andreas Rohatsch, Michaela Kronberger, Sophie Insulander, Martin Mosser and Barbara Hodits</i>	363
Marbles Discovered on the Site of the Forum of Vaison-la-Romaine (Vaucluse, France): Preliminary Results <i>Elsa Roux, Jean-Marc Mignon, Philippe Blanc and Annie Blanc</i>	373
Updated Characterisation of White Saint-Béat Marble. Discrimination Parameters from Classical Marbles <i>Hernando Royo Plumed, Pilar Lapeunte, José Antonio Cuchí, Mauro Brillì and Marie-Claire Savin</i>	379

Grey and Greyish Banded Marbles from the Estremoz Anticline in Lusitania <i>Pilar Lapuente, Trinidad Nogales-Basarrate, Hernando Royo Plumed, Mauro Brilli and Marie-Claire Savin</i>	391
New Data on Spanish Marbles: the Case of <i>Gallaecia</i> (NW Spain) <i>Anna Gutiérrez García-M., Hernando Royo Plumed and Silvia González Soutelo</i>	401
A New Roman Imperial Relief Said to Be from Southern Spain: Problems of Style, Iconography, and Marble Type in Determining Provenance <i>John Pollini, Pilar Lapuente, Trinidad Nogales-Basarrate and Jerry Podany</i>	413
Reuse of the <i>Marmora</i> from the Late Roman Palatial Building at Carranque (Toledo, Spain) in the Visigothic Necropolis <i>Virginia García-Entero, Anna Gutiérrez García-M. and Sergio Vidal Álvarez</i>	427
Imperial Porphyry in Roman Britain <i>David F. Williams</i>	435
Recycling of Marble: Apollonia/Sozousa/Arsuf (Israel) as a Case Study <i>Moshe Fischer, Dimitris Tambakopoulos and Yannis Maniatis</i>	443
Thasian Connections Overseas: Sculpture in the Cyrene Museum (Libya) Made of Dolomitic Marble from Thasos <i>John J. Herrmann and Donato Attanasio</i>	457
Marble on Rome's Southwestern Frontier: Thamugadi and Lambaesis <i>Robert H. Tykot, Ouahiba Bouzidi, John J. Herrmann and Annewies van den Hoek</i>	467
Marble and Sculpture at Lepcis Magna (Tripolitania, Libya): a Preliminary Study Concerning Origin and Workshops <i>Luisa Musso, Laura Buccino, Matthias Bruno, Donato Attanasio and Walter Prochaska</i>	481
The Pentelic Marble in the Carnegie Museum of Art Hall of Sculpture, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania <i>Albert D. Kollar</i>	491
Analysis of Classical Marble Sculptures in the Michael C. Carlos Museum, Emory University, Atlanta <i>Robert H. Tykot, John J. Herrmann, Renée Stein, Jasper Gaunt, Susan Blevins and Anne R. Skinner</i>	501
3. PROVENANCE IDENTIFICATION II: (OTHER STONES)	
Aphrodisias and the Regional Marble Trade. The <i>Scaenae Frons</i> of the Theatre at Nysa <i>Natalia Toma</i>	513
The Stones of Felix Romuliana (Gamzigrad, Serbia) <i>Bojan Djurić, Divna Jovanović, Stefan Pop Lazić and Walter Prochaska</i>	523
Aspects of Characterisation of Stone Monuments from Southern Pannonia <i>Branka Migotti</i>	537

The Budakalász Travertine Production <i>Bojan Djurić, Sándor Kele and Igor Rižnar</i>	545
Stone Monuments from Carnuntum and Surrounding Areas (Austria) – Petrological Characterization and Quarry Location in a Historical Context <i>Gabrielle Kremer, Isabella Kitz, Beatrix Moshhammer, Maria Heinrich and Erich Draganits</i>	557
Espejón Limestone and Conglomerate (Soria, Spain): Archaeometric Characterization, Quarrying and Use in Roman Times <i>Virginia García-Entero, Anna Gutiérrez García-M, Sergio Vidal Álvarez, María J. Peréx Agorreta and Eva Zarco Martínez</i>	567
The Use of Alcover Stone in Roman Times (<i>Tarraco, Hispania Citerior</i>). Contributions to the <i>Officina Lapidaria Tarraconensis</i> <i>Diana Gorostidi Pi, Jordi López Vilar and Anna Gutiérrez García-M.</i>	577
4. ADVANCES IN PROVENANCE TECHNIQUES, METHODOLOGIES AND DATABASES	
Grainautline – a Supervised Grain Boundary Extraction Tool Supported by Image Processing and Pattern Recognition <i>Kristóf Csorba, Lilla Barancsuk, Balázs Székely and Judit Zöldföldi</i>	587
A Database and GIS Project about Quarrying, Circulation and Use of Stone During the Roman Age in <i>Regio X - Venetia et Histria</i> . The Case Study of the Euganean Trachyte <i>Caterine Previato and Arturo Zara</i>	597
5. QUARRIES AND GEOLOGY	
The Distribution of Troad Granite Columns as Evidence for Reconstructing the Management of Their Production <i>Patrizio Pensabene, Javier Á. Domingo and Isabel Rodà</i>	613
Ancient Quarries and Stonemasonry in Northern Choria Considiana <i>Hale Güney</i>	621
Polychromy in Larisaeon Quarries and its Relation to Architectural Conception <i>Gizem Mater and Ertunç Denктаş</i>	633
Euromos of Caria: the Origin of an Hitherto Unknown Grey Veined Stepped Marble of Roman Antiquity <i>Matthias Bruno, Donato Attanasio, Walter Prochaska and Ali Bahadır Yavuz</i>	639
Unknown Painted Quarry Inscriptions from Bacakale at <i>Docimium</i> (Turkey) <i>Matthias Bruno</i>	651
The Green Schist Marble Stone of Jebel El Hairech (North West of Tunisia): a Multi-Analytical Approach and its Uses in Antiquity <i>Ameur Younès, Mohamed Gaied and Wissem Gallala</i>	659
Building Materials and the Ancient Quarries at <i>Thamugadi</i> (East of Algeria), Case Study: Sandstone and Limestone <i>Younès Rezkallah and Ramdane Marmi</i>	673

The Local Quarries of the Ancient Roman City of <i>Valeria</i> (Cuenca, Spain) <i>Javier Atienza Fuente</i>	683
The Stone and Ancient Quarries of Montjuïc Mountain (Barcelona, Spain) <i>Aureli Álvarez</i>	693
<i>Notae Lapidinarum</i> : Preliminary Considerations about the Quarry Marks from the Provincial Forum of <i>Tarraco</i> <i>Maria Serena Vinci</i>	699
The Different Steps of the Rough-Hewing on a Monumental Sculpture at the Greek Archaic Period: the Unfinished Kouros of Thasos <i>Danièle Braunstein</i>	711
A Review of Copying Techniques in Greco-Roman Sculpture <i>Séverine Moureaud</i>	717
Labour Forces at Imperial Quarries <i>Ben Russell</i>	733
Social Position of Craftsmen inside the Stone and Marble Processing Trades in the Light of Diocletian's Edict on Prices <i>Krešimir Bosnić and Branko Matulić</i>	741
6. STONE PROPERTIES, WEATHERING EFFECTS AND RESTORATION, AS RELATED TO DIAGNOSIS PROBLEMS, MATCHING OF STONE FRAGMENTS AND AUTHENTICITY	
Methods of Consolidation and Protection of Pentelic Marble <i>Maria Apostolopoulou, Elissavet Drakopoulou, Maria Karoglou and Asterios Bakolas</i>	749
7. PIGMENTS AND PAINTINGS ON MARBLE	
Painting and Sculpture Conservation in Two Gallo-Roman Temples in Picardy (France): Champlieu and Pont-Sainte-Maxence <i>Véronique Brunet-Gaston and Christophe Gaston</i>	763
The Use of Colour on Roman Marble Sarcophagi <i>Eliana Siotto</i>	773
New Evidence for Ancient Gilding and Historic Restorations on a Portrait of Antinous in the San Antonio Museum of Art <i>Jessica Powers, Mark Abbe, Michelle Bushey and Scott H. Pike</i>	783
Schists and Pigments from Ancient Swat (Khyber Pukhtunkhwa, Pakistan) <i>Francesco Mariottini, Gianluca Vignaroli, Maurizio Mariottini and Mauro Roma</i>	793
8. SPECIAL THEME SESSION: „THE USE OF MARBLE AND LIMESTONE IN THE ADRIATIC BASIN IN ANTIQUITY”	
Marble Sarcophagi of Roman Dalmatia Material – Provenance – Workmanship <i>Guntram Koch</i>	809

Funerary Monuments and Quarry Management in Middle Dalmatia <i>Nenad Cambi</i>	827
Marble Revetments of Diocletian's Palace <i>Katja Marasović and Vinka Marinković</i>	839
The Use of Limestones as Construction Materials for the Mosaics of Diocletian's Palace <i>Branko Matulić, Domagoj Mudronja and Krešimir Bosnić</i>	855
Restoration of the Peristyle of Diocletian's Palace in Split <i>Goran Nikšić</i>	863
Marble Slabs Used at the Archaeological Site of Sorna near Poreč Istria – Croatia <i>Đeni Gobić-Bravar</i>	871
Ancient Marbles from the Villa in Verige Bay, Brijuni Island, Croatia <i>Mira Pavletić and Đeni Gobić-Bravar</i>	879
Notes on Early Christian Ambos and Altars in the Light of some Fragments from the Islands of Pag and Rab <i>Mirja Jarak</i>	887
The Marbles in the Chapel of the Blessed John of Trogir in the Cathedral of St. Lawrence at Trogir <i>Đeni Gobić-Bravar and Daniela Matetić Poljak</i>	899
The Use of Limestone in the Roman Province of Dalmatia <i>Edisa Lozić and Igor Rižnar</i>	915
The Extraction and Use of Limestone in Istria in Antiquity <i>Klara Buršić-Matijašić and Robert Matijašić</i>	925
Aurisina Limestone in the Roman Age: from Karst Quarries to the Cities of the Adriatic Basin <i>Caterina Previato</i>	933
The Remains of Infrastructural Facilities of the Ancient Quarries on Zadar Islands (Croatia) <i>Mate Parica</i>	941
The Impact of Local Geomorphological and Geological Features of the Area for the Construction of the Burnum Amphitheatre <i>Miroslav Glavičić and Uroš Stepišnik</i>	951
Roman Quarry Klis Kosa near Salona <i>Ivan Alduk</i>	957
Marmore Lavdata Brattia <i>Miona Miliša and Vinka Marinković</i>	963
Quarries of the Lumbarda Archipelago <i>Ivka Lipanović and Vinka Marinković</i>	979

Island of Korčula – Importer and Exporter of Stone in Antiquity <i>Mate Parica and Igor Borzić</i>	985
Faux Marbling Motifs in Early Christian Frescoes in Central and South Dalmatia: Preliminary Report <i>Tonči Borovac, Antonija Gluhan and Nikola Radošević</i>	995
INDEX OF AUTHORS	1009

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.¹ 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 5th century. The fragments, however, can be dated to the second half of the 6th 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.² The

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

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

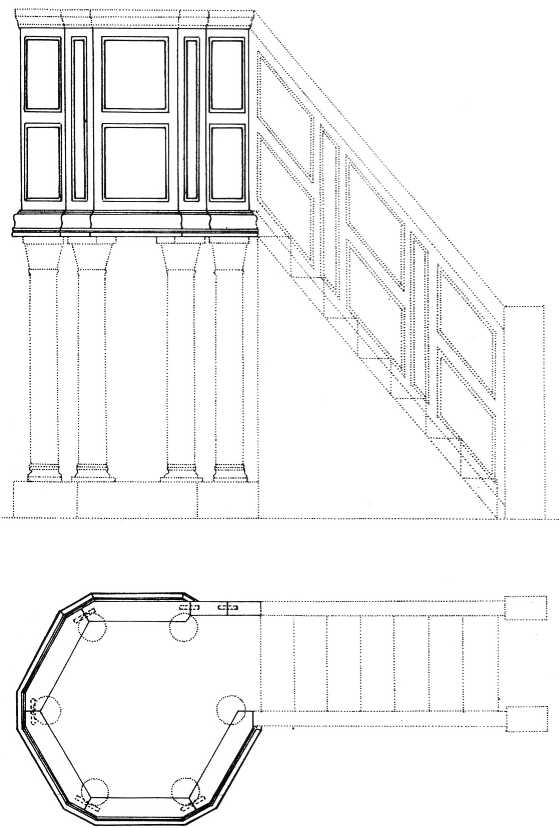


Fig. 1. Kapljuč – reconstruction of the ambo (according to Johannes Brøndsted and Ejnar Dyggve)

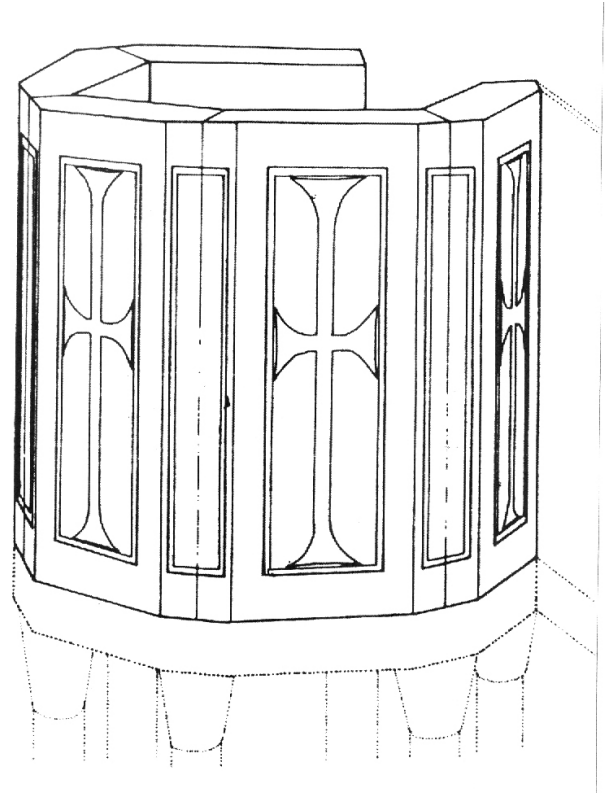


Fig. 2. Bijaći – reconstruction of the ambo (according to Pascale Chevalier)

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).³ 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.⁴ 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.⁵ 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.

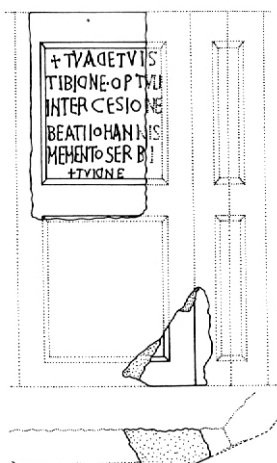


Fig. 3.
Marusinac – ambo
slab (according
to Jasna Jeličić-
Radonić)

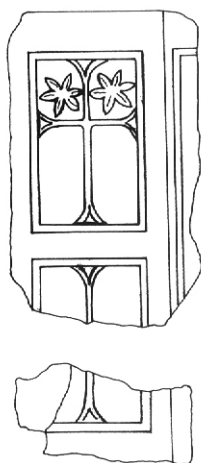


Fig. 4.
Manastirine
– ambo slab
(according to
Jasna Jeličić-
Radonić)

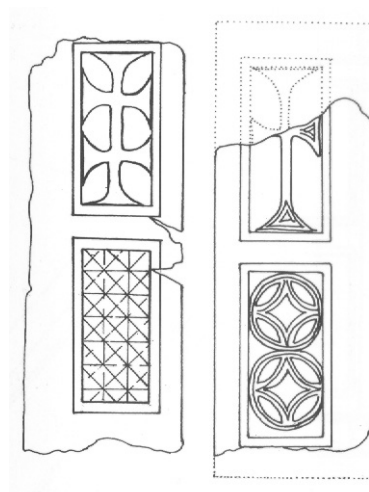


Fig. 5.
Klapavice – ambo
slabs (according
to Jasna Jeličić-
Radonić)

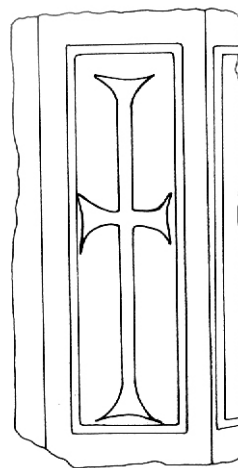


Fig. 6.
Bijaći – ambo slab
(according to Jasna
Jeličić-Radonić)

church.⁶ 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.⁷ 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 6th century. The later ambo, from the second half of the 6th 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.⁸ 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.

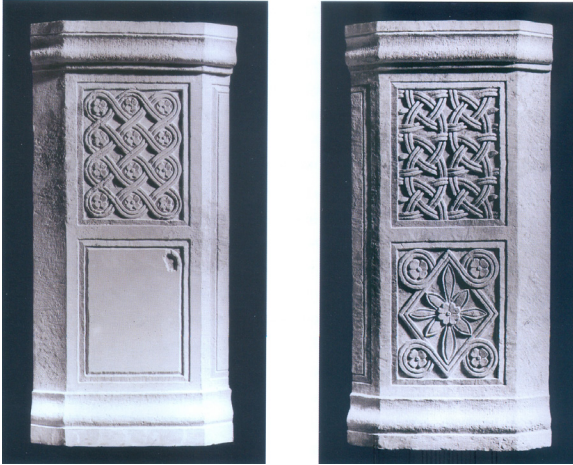


Fig. 7a. Srma – ambo slabs from the south church (after Zlatko Gunjača and Dražen Maršić)

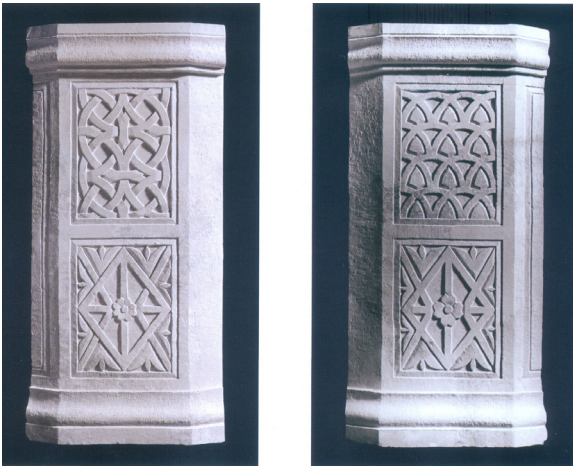


Fig. 7b. Srma – ambo slabs from the south church (after Zlatko Gunjača and Dražen Maršić)

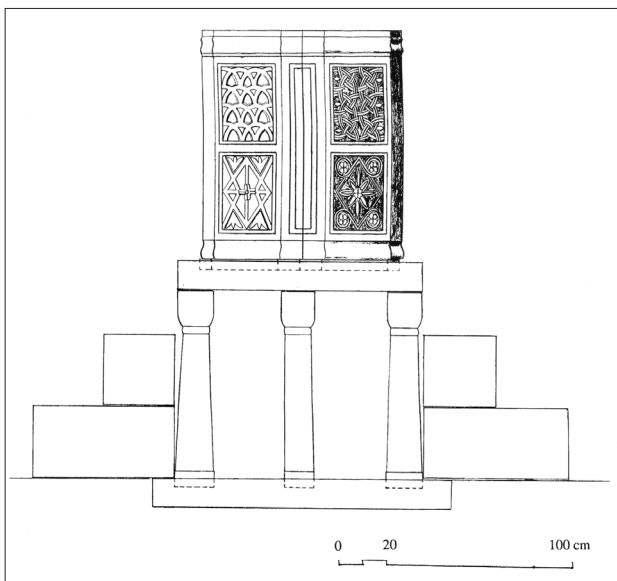


Fig. 8. Srma – reconstruction of the south church ambo (according to Dražen Maršić)



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



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

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

Besides these examples of early Christian ambos, we must reckon with others that have not been published or recognized.¹⁰ 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 squammas 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 squammas 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

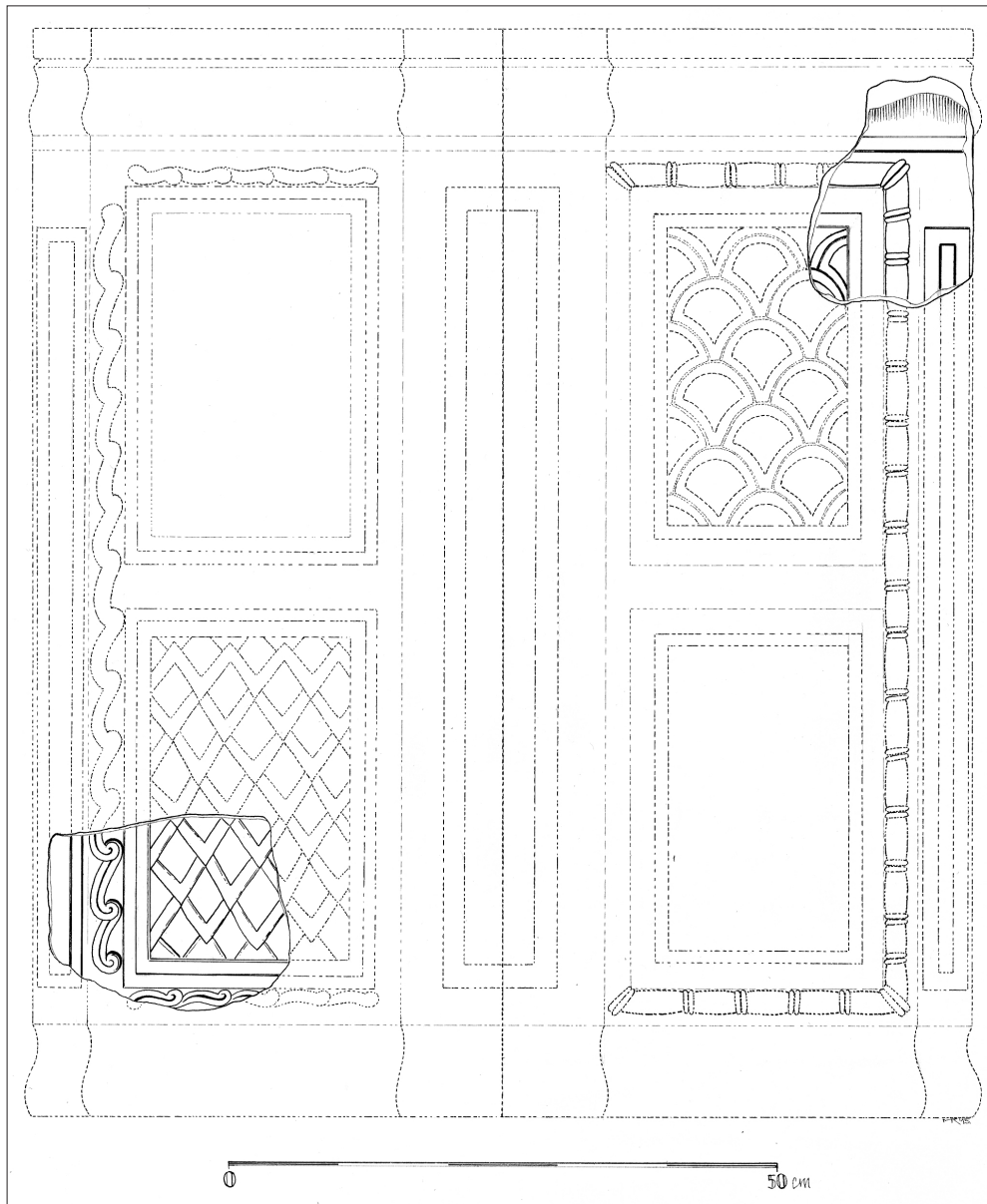


Fig. 13.
Novalja –
reconstruction of
supposed ambo slabs
(according to Mirja
Jarak; drawing by
Martina Rončević)

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 6th or even the beginning of the 7th 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.¹¹ 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.¹² 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 5th century, plutei with octagons and crosses were produced.¹³ 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.¹⁴ 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.¹⁵ Geometrically decorated stone monuments from the Zadar workshop originate from the second half of the 5th century or later. Therefore, the slab from St. Andrew's Monastery could be dated as early as the later 5th or the 6th 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.¹⁶ 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.¹⁷ 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.¹⁸ These nicely carved altar screens were of Proconnesian marble and are dated to the 6th 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.

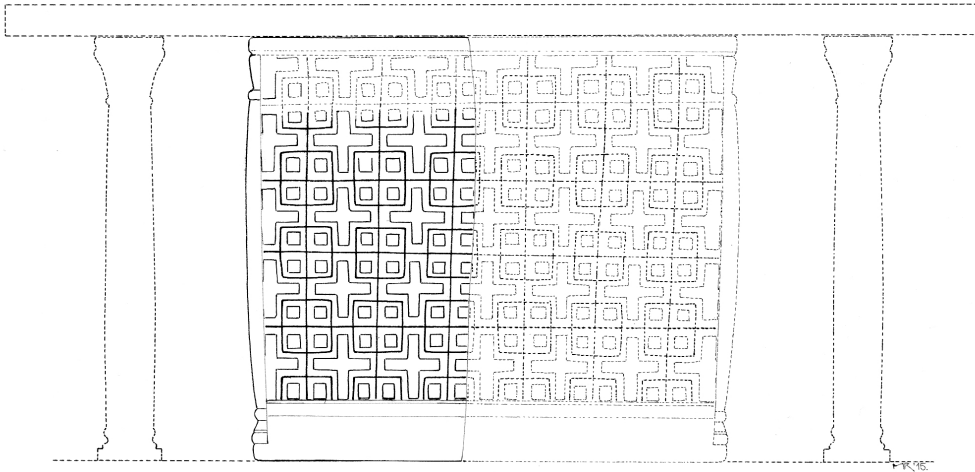


Fig. 18.
Rab, Monastery of St. Andrew – a proposal for the reconstruction of an altar installation with the fragmentary slab as a front (according to Mirja Jarak; drawing by Martina Rončević)

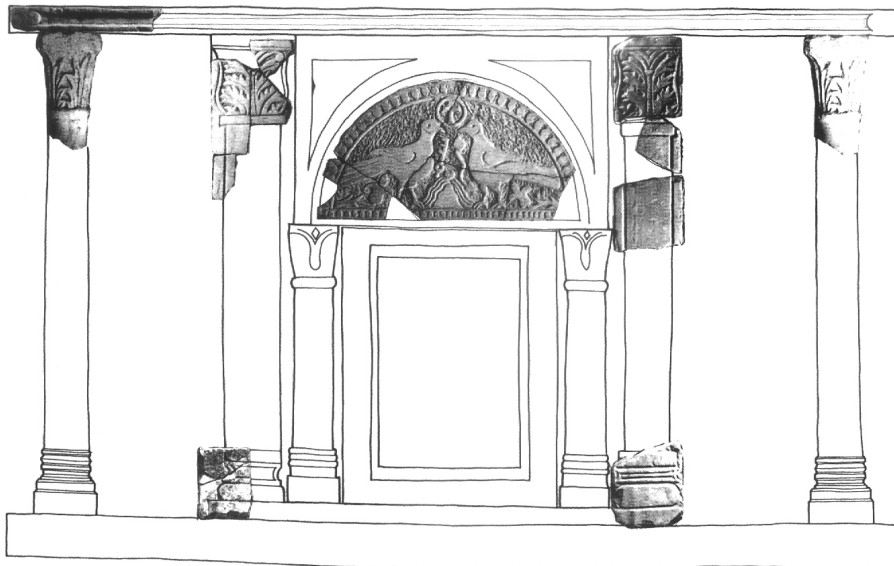


Fig. 19.
Gata – reconstruction of the altar of the cippus type (according to Jasna Jeličić-Radonić)

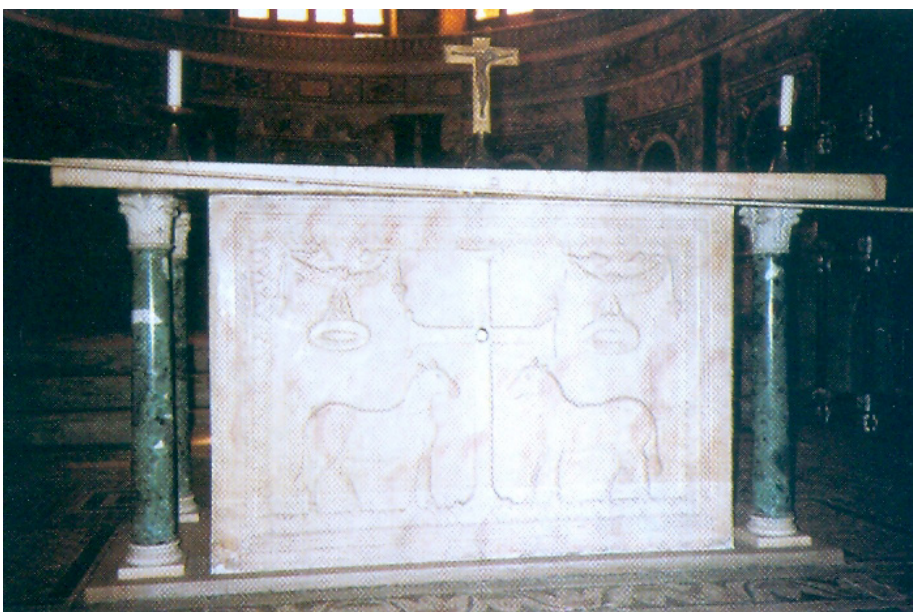


Fig. 20.
Ravenna, S. Vitale – altar with frontal slab (after C. Rizzardi)

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.¹⁹ Not too far from Dalmatia, there are very important Greek ambos preserved in a great number of examples.²⁰ 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.²¹ 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 6th century (Fig. 19). The Gata altar belongs to the so-called *cippus* type.²² It

is similar to the Euphrasius altar in Poreč and examples from Ravenna and other places in Italy.²³ 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.²⁴ 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.²⁵ 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.²⁶ 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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