

MORAVIA'S HISTORY RECONSIDERED:
THE TOMB OF ST. METHODIUS AND
THE CHURCH OF OUR LADY AT MOROVIC (YUGOSLAVIA)

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Scholars are well advised to refrain from far-reaching judgments on works in disciplines other than their own. But it is a duty of any historian, in whatever branch his expertise may be, to bring forward evidence which may have some bearing on the problems outside his own area of study. This brief note is exactly that: a piece of evidence deduced from my work as a historian of medieval art supplied in the hope of helping the discussion opened by Imre Boba's book *Moravia's History Reconsidered: A Reinterpretation of Medieval Sources*.¹ I have no intention of making any categorical or sensationalist claims, but I believe I can demonstrate that there is a place, within what Boba considers to be the Moravia of the Cyrillo-Methodian mission, where it would not be at all futile to look for the tomb of St. Methodius.

As a scholar involved for some fifteen years with the early medieval art of the Southern Slavs, I am fully aware of the problems one encounters in assessing historical and cultural developments between the Carpathians and the Adriatic before the end of the first millenium A.D. Boba's localizing of the Moravia of the Cyrillo-Methodian mission to the south of the Danube, more exactly in the Southeasteru corner of the Pannonic plain, between the Sava and the Danube rivers, around the ancient city of Sirmium to which Methodius was appointed archbishop and in the cathedral of which city he was hurried, as radical as it is, is a significant step forward in the badly needed discussion and reexamination of the early medieval history of Eastern Central and Southeastern Europe.² If Boba's interpretations are accepted, some previously unacceptable concepts and sources start to make sense. They restore some credibility, for example to the *Ljetopis Popa Dukljanina* (Chronicle of the Priest of Dioclea), a twelfth century Southern Slavic wrnk rejected as a pack of nonsense by most modern Yugoslav historiaus who could not forgive the Dioclean's identification of

Sventopolk who "we all know" was a ruler in Moravia to the north of the Danube with a Slavic ruler in the Western Balkans.³ Placing the corner of the Cyrillo-Methodian activity in the southeastern corner of the Pannonic plain may explain the stubborn persistence of glagolitic script in the Central and Western Balkans, especially in Croatia with its c. 1200 years of unbroken tradition of glagolism; it also seems to square with the research of John Fine into the problem of the so-called Bosnian church which this scholar convincingly explains as a Catholic church in schism with Rome and using Slavic language in liturgy rather than being a heretical "Bogumil" church;⁴ the Bosnian church may be another outcome of the Cyrillo-Methodian tradition radiating from just across the Sava and surviving unmolested in Bosnia, a territory less accessible to romantization. A strong center on Yugoslav territory in Pannonia or, more exactly, in its South-eastern part known as Srijem (around the ancient Sirmium, today Srijemska Mitrovica) can better account for all these developments than the arrival of a few disciples of the Saintly Brothers after they had been expelled from the Moravia in the Carpathian Mountains, far away in the North.

But it is not my intention to debate those and similar issues which anybody trained in history and Slavic linguistics can do much better. Let me just say that I am very glad Boba's work reopens the much needed discussion, and proceed to my main point—a piece of art-historical evidence for the reconsideration of "Moravia's" history.

Inre Boba believes that the city of Morava or Marava was the ancient Sirmium, Srijemska Mitrovica of today.⁵ However, to the best of my knowledge, archeology does not support the existence of a major agglomeration there in the ninth century, the time of the Cyrillo-Methodian mission. Although one may, as is often the case, blame the Tartar invasion (1242) and the two centuries of Turkish wars (c. 1500-c. 1700) for the massive disappearance of medieval monuments in Pannonia, one is somewhat surprised that no significant early medieval discoveries were made during the systematic excavations of Antique and Late Antique Sirmium. As things stand now, after the city was vacated by the Byzantine troops in 581, it seems to have ceased to play a role of a major center.⁶

Its destiny appears to have resembled that of its Dalmatian counterpart, Salona, which, once evacuated in c.612 and devastated by the Slavic and Avar invaders, was never systematically repopulated. The lack of early, and for that matter of any considerable later medieval materials from Sirmium, does not, however, deny the fact that one of the few identifiable earlier medieval centers of cultural activity in Pannonia lay in Srijem, the region around which used to be Sirmium. Angela Horvat has discussed a number of reliefs of interlace sculpture from the territory of Srijem and concluded

that the earlier ones, not however datable before 1000, show eastern, Byzantine influence, a characteristic also found elsewhere within the Pannonian plain (*Fig. 1*).⁷ In Vinkovci, in the Croatian part of Srijem, divided today between the Socialist Republic of Croatia and the Autonomous Region of Vojvodina, archeologists have discovered foundations of an aisleless church, typologically not dissimilar from a number of Pre-Romanesque buildings in the coastal region. The church is datable to around 1100 on the basis of the Hungarian, Arpadian, coins found within.⁸ The tradition of building in durable material continues in Srijem and the region has preserved a number of twelfth through fourteenth-century buildings, otherwise a real rarity in the Yugoslav portion of Pannonia; to list a few: the twelfth or early thirteenth-century churches of St. Mary (*Fig. 2*) at Bapska and St. Bartol at Novi Mikanovci, the ruins of the church at Ledinci and Rokovci, monumental fragments of Romanesque through early Gothic period from Ilok, Banostor, and Srijemska Mitrovica and, finally, the largest among the essentially modest rural churches, St. Mary or Our Lady at Morovic (in the AR Vojvodina), the main object of our discussion.⁹

The church, surrounded by what seems to be an early Slavic "gradiste" (burgwal), is an aisleless building with a square presbytery and a rounded apse, preceded by a tall tower, square at its base and octagonal above (*Figs. 3, 4*). There is a "secret" chamber on top of the vaulted presbytery, accessible through a narrow, corridor-staircase between the presbytery and the sacristy. The chamber is provided with two loopholes and the tower with openings suitable for deployment of bows and arrows. All this gives the church the character of a fortress. The problems I identified and the answers I gave when I reexamined the medieval monuments in Srijem in 1968 can be summarized as follows:¹⁰ 1. Was the church built in one campaign or in several successive campaigns? Earlier scholarship favored the latter hypothesis, mainly on the basis of the dissimilarity between the form of the openings on the presbytery and apse (roundheaded) and those of the nave (somewhat pointed).¹¹ By an extensive analysis of comparative material consisting of rural churches in Northern, Central and Eastern Europe, especially in the lands in and around the Pannonic Plain (Hungary, Slovakia, Transylvania), I believe I have demonstrated that there is no reason to see the presbytery and nave as two chronologically distinct entities. The mixture of elements (if the slightly pointed arches of the nave can be taken as evidence at all) of Romanesque and Gothic styles is typical of the thirteenth and fourteenth century rural architecture of Southeastern Europe. The measures of the church show striking consistency (for example, the length of the nave is twice the length of the presbytery, the width of the nave is one third more than the width of the presbytery), and they are all based on the Zagreb foot of 1272 (294 mm) which was the base of the

measuring system in Croatia and other parts of Southern Pannonia for centuries.¹² I believe that the church was built in one campaign, c. 1300. 2. Was the tower contemporary to the rest of the church? This question, very vaguely touched upon by previous scholarship, I answered affirmatively. Again, exhaustive comparative material shows that the presence of a tower in front of rural medieval churches in Southeastern Europe before the Gothic is no rarity. The openings of the tower were built with the use of medieval bows and arrows in mind (a point of a medieval arrow was found at the bottom of the tower!)¹³ and the tower thus forms a defensive counterpart, at the western end, to the chamber above the presbytery. Fortified towers in front of churches are again, no exception in Pannonic and para-Pannonic regions.¹⁴ In general, the brick masonry of the nave, the presbytery and the tower is consistently unchanged throughout the structure and no caesurae appear between the three main units. 3. The third question, crucial for our discussion, can be answered only hypothetically. It is the question of the sacristy. Awkwardly attached to the northern wall of the presbytery, rather than in the corner between the presbytery and the nave, it is an unvaulted chamber with a rounded apse pointing eastwards, one would say a sort of a short chapel attached to the presbytery. Its form is that of an eastern end of a church. Its floor consists of enormous bricks found nowhere else within the building, bricks which earlier scholars, I believe correctly, identified as Roman.¹⁵ The absence of vaults may indicate that it is an adaptation of an earlier, ruined building. My conclusion in 1968 was: "The position of the sacristy at the northeastern corner of the presbytery and not in the corner between the presbytery and the nave indicates that the sacristy may be a portion of an earlier building. The presence of the "secret" corridor in the northern wall of the presbytery indicates that the sacristy was at least contemporary to the presbytery. The apsidal termination of the sacristy is totally unique. I would not exclude the possibility that the sacristy is a part of an earlier church which served, after having been destroyed by the Tartars in 1242, as the foundation of the new building."¹⁶

I will return to the evidence of architecture after having reviewed the meager but interesting information about Morovic from the Middle Ages. First of all, the place possessed certain distinction. It was a seat of a branch of the Hungarian noble family of Gut-Keled, the branch itself known, since 1296, as "de Maroth." (Hungarian name for Morovic). The ruins of their castle still stand. Morovic also had some prominence in ecclesiastical matters. It was a seat of an archdeacon at least as of 1239 when sources mention an archdeaconry "de Marchia" in the diocese of Pecs.¹⁷ In 1414 Morovic was made a center of a *praepositura*, as a bulwark in the fight

against heretics—since Srijem was at that point exposed to both heretical (or schismatic) teachings radiating from Bosnia, and the ideas of Wycliffe coming from the North.¹⁸ At that date the church of Morovic was exempted from the jurisdiction of the Bishops of Pecs. During Turkish occupation, in 1581, Morovic was chosen as the meeting place of a council of the Catholic parish priests of Srijem.¹⁹

At a well-protected spot at the confluence of the Studva and the Bosut, Morovic emerges as a place of importance by at least the thirteenth century. But the most interesting information is an old tradition recorded by the visitation of the parish in 1729, namely, that Morovic was founded by St. Methodius! The Hungarian conquest of Srijem in 927 must have blurred this tradition, to which another one was added, namely, that the church was built (rebuilt?) by King St. Stephen. However, the parallel, Methodian tradition survived into the eighteenth century!²⁰ The struggle of the clergy of Morovic to escape from under the jurisdiction of the bishops of Pecs may indicate that there existed a tradition that Morovic was, once, a cathedral city itself. Imre Boba's reinterpretation of sources thus finds corroboration in the local tradition and one is allowed to postulate the following working hypothesis: St. Methodius was the Archbishop of Sirmium but his seat was actually in Morava/Marava—Morovic. In the same way the archbishops of Salona, after the destruction of the city and several centuries of vacancy, returned not to Salona, but to Split, which, behind the safe walls of Diocletian's Palace, developed into an important center during the vacancy and they still reside there today.²¹ The distance between Split and Solin (Salona) is c. 10 kilometers; the distance between Sirmium and Morovic c. 30. The territory around the old and the new center of the Dalmatian archdiocese remained attractive to the new, Slavic, settlers, and, by a somewhat lengthy digression we will demonstrate that in all likelihood the same was true of the ecclesiastical centers in Pannonia. In the ninth century the center of the early medieval Croatian state was around Split and Solin; the ruler had his *curtis* at Bijaci and Rizinice, within 25 kilometers from Split and even closer to Solin (Salona); one of their seats was the fortress of Klis, overlooking Salona and Split from the first range of the mountains. It is unfortunate that so little is known about the early urbanization of either Slavonia—the continental part of the medieval kingdom of Croatia—or about that of the Southeastern corner of Pannonia, under direct Hungarian control. No systematic investigation of early medieval "gradista" has ever been carried out and our conclusions have to rest on the meager and incomplete sources and a few pieces of stone. Yet some conclusions can be drawn. The center of political and cultural activity in the Southwestern corner of Pannonia was Sisak, the ancient Siscia. It was the seat of Ljudevit, Duke of *Pannonia Inferior*, who successfully battled

the Franks between 810 and 823. We know that the Patriarch of Grado sent him masons to help fortify Sisak, and fragments of interlace sculpture (datable between the ninth and the eleventh century), testifying to the presence of stone-built churches, were found there.²² But after Ljudevit's demise the place seems to have lost its prominence. When the church organization was finally reestablished in Southwestern Pannonia, the seat of bishopric became Zagreb (1094), farther away from rivers and roads, on the promontory of the Medvednica Mountain, c. 50 kilometers to the Northwest of Sisak. Zagreb could have rivalled Sisak even earlier. Archeological findings indicate a fairly dense early medieval population on the territory covered today by the almost one million-person city and the well-protected fortress in which Ljudevit hid after his defeat by the Franks may well have been Zagreb.²³ A capital datable to before 1100 was found within the foundations of the Romanesque cathedral of Zagreb, itself ruined by the Tartars in 1242 and replaced by the present Gothic structure.²⁴ The Romance element survived in Dalmatia and provided the first teachers to the Slavs in the art of monumental building in stone. Although the question has never been pursued the Romans must have survived also in the Sisak-Zagreb area. To the South of Sisak one finds, on a lonely, wind-beaten hill, the ruins of a large fortification known as Kiringrad (Kirin's Fort). Kirin is Croatian for Quirinus, and Quirinus was the name of the bishop-martyr of Siscia. The inhabitants of Kiringrad must have been Romans who fled Sisak and brought with themselves the cult, if not the relics of St. Quirinus. The ruins have been briefly investigated by myself in 1967 but no archeological works have ever been undertaken.²⁵

To the North of Zagreb on the Medvednica Mountain, one finds the meager and equally unexplored ruins of Kozelin, a Slavic rendering of the Romance "Castellione," evidently a place where some Romance-speaking people held out for a period after the Avaro-Slavic settlement in the sixth and seventh centuries.²⁶

It is, furthermore, not without significance that traces of early medieval building activity are found in Transmontane Croatia, behind the Medvednica, allowing for the possibility that some groups of the Romans survived and coexisted with the Slavic immigrants in this well protected and fertile area. Fragments of interlace sculpture were found at Lobar.²⁷ In my opinion, an opinion which at present I cannot substantiate, early medieval churches could have served as foundations for later buildings at Belec and Budinscina.²⁸

Bearing all this in mind, would it be too much to assume the presence of enclaves of Roman population around Sirmium, on the Frnska Gora Mountain, or in the marshes around the Sava and the Danube? After all the ruins of Cibalac (Vinkovci), Sirmium, Cuccium (Ilok) and Bononia

(Banostor) have served as building material almost until the present day. Thus the art of building in permanent material may not have been unknown in Srijem in the ninth century. It is not inconceivable that the "sacristy" of the church of Our Lady in Morovic is a part of a Methodian church and that St. Methodius rests somewhere underneath its Roman brick floor, or in the vicinity of the "sacristy."

As tenuous as our evidence may appear—the similarity of name (Morovic, Maroth, Morava-Marava), a few Roman bricks and, possibly, a fragment of an early medieval wall, the *gradiste* on which the church of Our Lady stands, the historic conditions not unfavorable to the development of early medieval architecture in stone, the tradition of Methodian foundation, and the struggle of the clergy of Morovic, possibly on the basis of this tradition, to escape the jurisdiction of the bishops of Pecs—this evidence should not be dismissed lightly.²⁹ After all, we are dealing with a period and an area in which practically all our reasoning rests on incomplete, ambiguous, and inconclusive evidence. I do not want to be accused of sensationalism and it is far from me to claim that present-day Morovic is the Morava of the Cyrillo-Methodian times, that the sacristy of the church of Our Lady is a part of the cathedral of St. Methodius, and that digging within or around the sacristy will uncover the tomb of St. Methodius. However, the evidence forces me to plead strongly for a serious archeological investigation in, around and underneath the present-day church. There is no certainty that anything of interest will surface. But there is a chance of major discovery and this, I believe, should not be neglected.

NOTES

1. Imre Boba, *Moravia's History Reconsidered: A Reinterpretation of Medieval Sources* (The Hague, 1971). The author would like to express his thanks to Dr. Christopher Spalatin who first drew his attention to Imre Boba's work; to Dr. Veronica Gervers-Molnar of the Royal Ontario Museum for a number of useful discussions concerning Boba's work and for the abstract of her article "Origins of Romanesque Rotundas in East-Central Europe," *Canadian-American Review of Hungarian Studies*, 2 (1975), 123-129, in which she reviews Boba's book; and to Professor John Fine of the University of Michigan for our ongoing dialogue concerning the medieval history of Southeastern Europe.

2. Boba, *Moravia's History Reconsidered*, passim, especially pp. 1-30, 156-157.

3. Boba, *Moravia's History Reconsidered*, pp. 17 and 105 ff. Nada Klaić, *Povijest Hrvata u ranom srednjem vijeku* (Zagreb, 1971), pp. 17-22, the most recent survey of the early medieval situation in the Western Balkans rejects the *Ljetopis* more or less completely. Professor Klaić has certainly made a worthy contribution by militating against too naive belief in historic sources; but her almost total rejection of information, while accepting what suits her theories, is equally naive.

4. Boba, *Moravia's History Reconsidered*, pp. 18-20. John Fine, *The Bosnian Church: A New Interpretation* (Boulder, 1975), passim.

5. Boba, *Moravia's History Reconsidered*, p. 12.

6. The few capitals of buildings of fairly monumental size found in Srijemska Mitrovica belong to the Late Romanesque/Early Gothic style, and are thus datable to the second half of the thirteenth or the early fourteenth century. See Angela Horvat, "Die Skulpturen mit Flechtband aus Sirmien." *Südost-Forschungen*, 18 (1959), 255.

7. Horvat, "Die Skulpturen mit Flechtband," pp. 253, 256 and 258 dealing especially with the fragments from Banostor and Rakovac. Byzantine influence is found, for example, in the sarcophagus of St. Stephen (c. 1040) from Szekesfehervar in Hungary. It is worth noting that when the area of Srijem was again raised to the status of a bishopric, in 1229, the seat of the bishop was at Kcu (today Banostor) and not in Sirmium (*ibid.*, pp. 262-263).

8. Stojan Dimitrijevic, *Rezultati arheoloskih iskopavanja na podrucju Vinkovackog Muzeja* (Vinkovci, 1966), pp. 45-50.

9. Horvat, "Die Skulpturen mit Flechtband," 249-264; Duro Szabo, *Umjetnost u nasini ladanjskim crkvama* (Zagreb, 1930), "Spomenici proslosti u Srijemu," *Savremenik* (1916), 43-50, "Morovic u Srijemu," *"Starobrvatska Prosvjeta"* 2 (1915), "Spomenici starije sredovječne arhitekture u Hrvatskoj i Slavoniji," in *Sisicev Zbornik* (Zagreb, 1929), pp. 549-554; Vladimir Gvozdanovic, "Crkva Majke Bozje u Morovicu," *Peristil* 12-13 (1969-70), 15-22 and "Kapela Sv. Marije u Bapskoj," *Arhitektura* 106 (1970), 64-68. My study on the church at Novi Mikanovci seems to be in press by the *Starobrvatska Prosvjeta*.

10. See Szabo's works listed in note 9. Also Milojc Milosevic, "Nekoliko arhitektonskih objekata iz proslosti Vojvodine," *Grada za proucavanje spomenika kulture Vojvodine*, 2 (1958), 65-71.

11. See the extensive comparative material on pages 18-21 of my study in *Peristil* 12-13; To list at least some comparable monuments from Pannonic and para-Pannonic zones: Chinar, Oaja, Crajunel, Chirpar, Rosia, Vurpar, Cismadie, Oltsakadat, Noul Sasesc, Vitacul Simeleului, Strei, Prejmer in Transylvania; Egregy, Oriszenpeter, Csemescopacs, Somogyvamos in Hungary. On the Zagreb foot see Zlatko Herkov, "Zabrebacka mjera trinaestog stoljeca-temelj hrvatskog sustava mjera kroz stoljeca," *Ljetopis Jugoslavenske Akademije* (1967), 187-226.

12. See my study in *Peristil*, 12-13, p. 16.

13. *Ibid.*, pp. 20-21. Not far from Morovic one finds another example at Novi Mikanovci and, further to the West, at Brodski Drenovac, Bjelovarska Raca, Stupnik, Brdovec and elsewhere. There are about one hundred examples in Transylvania. The definitive study on the fortified churches in Croatia by Professor Sena Gvozdanovic-Sekulic of Zagreb University (Yugoslavia) is in press.

14. Gvozdanovic, "Crkva Majke Bozje u Morovicu," p. 16.

15. *Ibid.*, 21-22. I know of only one more example of this type, the sacristy of the church at Bilk, in Northern Germany, built in the eleventh and rebuilt in the thirteenth century.

16. Mirko Gasic, *Povijest zupe i mjesta Morovic* (Dakovo, 1937), pp. 109, 142-152.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 128. Also, Miroslav Brandt, "Susret viklifizma s bogumilstvom u Srijemu," *Starobrvatska Prosvjeta*, 3rd ser., 5 (1956), 33-64.

18. Gasic, *Povijest*, p. 156.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 116.

20. The exact date of the restoration of the Sec of Split is still unknown (opinions vary from the seventh to the tenth century). See Klaic, *Povijest Hrvata*, pp. 293-311.

22. Ibid., 208-212. Also, Angela Horvat, "O Sisku u starohrvatsko doba na temelju pisanih izvora i arheoloskih nalaza," *Starohrvatska Prosvjeta*, 3rd ser. 3 (1954), 93-104.

23. Klaić, *Povijest Hrvata*, p. 211. Zdenko Vinski, "Ranosrednjevjekovni arheoloski nalazi u Zagrebu i u njegovoj okolici," *Iz starog i novog Zagreba*, 2 (1960), 47-65.

24. Ana Deanović, "Zabrebacaka Katedrala u okvirima prvih iskapanja," *ibid.*, 3 (1963), 13-32.

25. Horvat, "O Sisku u starohrvatsko doba," pp. 95-96.

26. For the etymology Castellione—Kosljun, Kosljin, Kosljina, Kozljin, and consequently Kozelin, see Petar Skok, *Slavenstvo i Romanstvo na Jadranskim otocima*, 2 vols., (Zagreb, 1950), vol. 1, pp. 22, 27, 58, 70, 111.

27. Tihomil Stahuljak, "Naučno-istraživački rad Konzervatorskog zavoda u Zagrebu," *Historijski Zbornik* 3 (1950), 260.

28. At Belec I would especially like to investigate and dig underneath the northern wall of the Romanesque church of St. George; the strange elongated shape of the church of the Holy Cross at Budinscina may be an indication that an earlier church lies underneath (but the crude reliefs on the panels of the pulpit of the same church are only "pseudo-early medieval;" they are works in rustic Renaissance style).

29. The name Morava and related names occur with frequency on Southern Slavic territory. Three major rivers in Serbia bear that name (Great Morava, South Morava and West Morava); Moravce is the name of a village near Zagreb, and Moravice of several villages in the Croatian Highlands. The Great Morava meets the Danube not too far to the East of Morovic.

ILLUSTRATIONS

(All property of the author)

1. Zagreb. Archeological Museum. Capital from Rakovac.
2. Morovic. Church of Our Lady (groundplan)
3. Morovic. Church of Our Lady (from the Southwest).
4. Bapska. Church of St. Mary.



Figure 1. Zagreb. Archeological Museum. Capital from Rakovac.

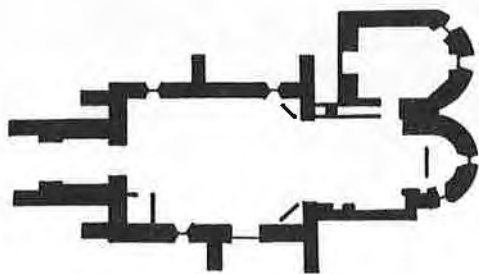


Figure 2. Morovic. Church of Our Lady (groundplan)



Figure 3. Morovic, Church of Our Lady (from the Southwest).



Figure 4. Bapska. Church of St. Mary.