

GENIUS LOCI

LASZLOVSZKY 60

edited by
Dóra Mérai
and

Ágnes Drosztmér, Kyra Lyublyanovics,
Judith Rasson, Zsuzsanna Papp Reed,
András Vadas, Csilla Zatykó



ARCHAEOLOGIA

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The Ambiguity of Heritage Interpretation: A Late Roman Tomb in Brestovik, Serbia

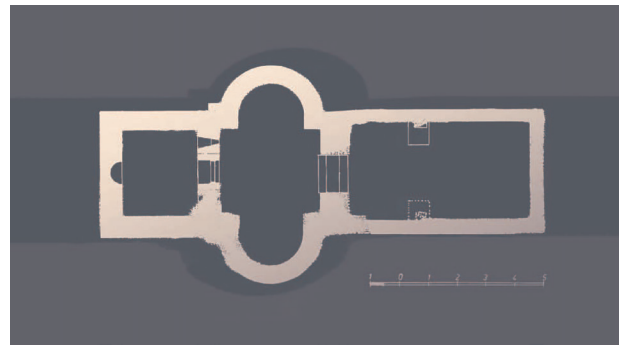
ALEKSANDAR PANTIĆ*

The archaeological site “Late Roman Tomb in Brestovik” is officially classified as a “monument of high cultural heritage significance”.¹ The main reason for such a classification lies in the specific character of the monument, that even today, some 120 years after its discovery, still challenges scholars and researchers. Still, some critical questions about the monument remain unanswered. The Brestovik tomb has been a part of the heritage package commonly offered in local tourism for decades. This paper briefly discusses the various scholarly interpretations of the site and their impact on the popular heritage discourse about the monument.

Present form of the monument

The monument features the well-preserved remains of a late Roman period funerary architectural structure with accompanying fresco decoration and related finds of sculpture.² Recent research has dated the tomb to the transitional period between the AD third and fourth centuries.³ The architectural structure and the fresco display some unique features without analogies on the territory of present-day Serbia.⁴ The tomb belongs to the ensemble of the archaeological remains of an ancient Roman rural villas⁵ located near the route (Via Militaris) running along the Danube River on the outskirts of present-day Belgrade.⁶

The first scientific examination of the tomb was conducted by the then-famous Serbian archaeologist and historian, Mihailo Valtrović, a few months after the accidental discovery of the site in 1895.⁷ According to the original excavation report by Valtrović, the tomb had already been partly ruined and looted by that time and the



► Fig. 1. The ground plan of the tomb. Source: Zoran Simić, *Kasnorimska grobnica u Brestoviku* [Late Roman tomb in Brestovik] (Belgrade: Zavod za zaštitu spomenika kulture grada Beograda, 2009), available online at <http://beogradskonasledje.rs/publikacije/katalozi/katalozi-2009>.

painted surfaces had been damaged. Valtrović also listed several interesting pieces of sculpture found at the site, but he did not mention any skeletons or funerary items from the three sarcophagi found in the tomb, constructed of brick. Due to the turbulent historical events in the Balkans in the twentieth century and the inconsistent safeguarding and archival practices around heritage in the period, only the sculpture attributed to the founder of the tomb has been preserved to date from among the finds.⁸

Some essential conservation interventions have been conducted at the site since it was discovered. The tomb is situated on private property, but it is open to the public during the day. Unfortunately, the site is not equipped with information panels,⁹ and there are no visitors' guides working there permanently. With the exception of a few valuable and interesting internet presentations and promotions of the tomb,¹⁰ all other internet, mass-media, public, and touristic presentations of the monument are marginal, confusing, and sometimes even contradictory and sensationalistic. Thus, the number of visitors at the site is relatively modest.¹¹ In contrast, a dozen serious academic papers have been published about the tomb.

* Artist, alumnus of the Cultural Heritage Studies MA Program at Central European University, Budapest, and the Belgrade University of Arts



► Fig. 2. Longitudinal section drawing (Source: Simić, *Kasnorimska grobnica u Brestoviku*)

Interpreting the monument

Scholarly interpretations offered about the Brestovik monument can be classified into three groups. The main differences lie in the religious interpretation of the tomb and its historical classification.

1. Late Antique Syncretism

Most recently the tomb was researched by Gordana Milosević,¹² Dragana Rogić, Emilija Nikolić and Jelena Anđelković Grašnar,¹³ who offered a thorough and comprehensive overview of the monument. They point out the unique architectural plan of the tomb, taking into consideration its dating to the AD third to fourth century.¹⁴ These four scholars agree that the Brestovik tomb is an important example of funerary architecture from the transitional period between the Classical/imperial and early Christian (early Byzantine) styles. The fresco decoration in Brestovik is the only one known from present-day Serbia that displays a painted structure of horizontal wooden beams (Fig.4). Rogić, Nikolić and Anđelković Grašnar interpreted these painted architectural elements as a decorative pattern, illusionistic carriers of the vault, and a symbolic representation of the Garden of Eden.¹⁵ They also pointed out the significance of the site in the history (and heritage) of archaeology as a science as one of those first targeted by systematic and scientific archeological research in Serbia.

Still, even this most recent research on the Roman period tomb in Brestovik has left a number of questions unanswered. Who erected the tomb is unknown, also the patron's religious affiliation, and when the tomb was looted. There is no information on the original painted decoration

in the western niche of tomb nor on that in the western vault of the burial chamber. The fact that the three sarcophagi differ in size also requires explanation, as well as why the head of the supposed portrait sculpture of the patron is missing and why the rest of the marble sculptures were found damaged and shattered. Why no skeletons or other burial remains were found in the sarcophagi is also an open question. Due to these unanswered questions, the official standpoint of the Institute for the Protection of Cultural Monuments of the City of Belgrade is to present the factual knowledge about the tomb and to refrain from providing any definite historical narrative about the monument in the hope of further research.

2. Late Roman Imperial Culture

Some archaeologists and specialists of Classical Antiquity consider the Late Roman tomb in Brestovik no more than a somewhat provincial and low-budget product of Late Roman imperial culture.¹⁶ This was also the initial interpretation of the monument offered by Mihailo Valtrovic¹⁷ and it is mainly based on two arguments. One concerns the style and symbolism of the sculptural finds from the tomb as well as the fresco decoration, which displays some features characteristic of the late Roman imperial period, such as the genii of death, the lying figures of lions, full-size portrait representations, and painted *opus sectile* decoration on the walls. The other argument stresses to the lack of any explicit Paleo-Christian or early Christian symbols. Both arguments have been challenged, however, by pointing out the highly syncretistic



► Fig. 3. Present state of the monument (Source: Simić, *Kasnorimska grobnica u Brestoviku*)



► Fig. 4. The western wall of the burial chamber (Source: Simić, *Kasnorimska grobnica u Brestoviku*)

character of late Roman culture, especially in the provinces and along the Limes. In addition, the architectural plan of the monument is not typical for the Late Roman imperial style, and since the critical parts of the fresco decoration have been damaged it is not possible to determine what was depicted as an explicit expression of the religious affiliation of the patrons.¹⁸

3. Early Christian culture

An interpretation introduced by several historians and archaeologists affiliated with the Faculty of Theology in Belgrade proposes that the tomb was the burial place of the first Christian martyrs of Belgrade: Saint Hermylus and Saint Stratonikus.¹⁹ They argue that according to the hagiographic records, the dating of the tomb corresponds to the time of the martyrdom of the two saints and their burial place mentioned in the documents can be located more or less where the tomb is situated.²⁰ Since the burial chamber in the tomb was constructed with the eastern wall as the façade with two windows flanking the door, it allows for interpretation as an early Christian martyrium.

Several factors contradict this interpretation, however. First of all, the tomb contained three sarcophagi and not two. Second, the geographical distance between the tomb and remains of Roman Singidunum, where the two saints were martyred,

is 32 km, that is, more than 18 Roman *stadia*.²¹ Third, the decoration as it is known today does not display any specific Christian symbols. Fourth, no relics were found in the tomb that would confirm such an interpretation nor do the sculptural finds suggest any obvious relation to the two martyrs. The fifth argument concerns the source value of hagiographic records, since they cannot be considered fully reliable historical sources.²²

The interpretation of the Late Roman tomb in Brestovik in Serbian popular and mass media

The total number of results of a Google search on the phrase “Roman Tomb in Brestovik” is surprisingly low, only 37, and a search on the Serbian equivalent of the term is not much more productive, with only 72 results. None of the web sites of the official tourist information service of Serbia, Belgrade, or any of the foreign tourist information services offer any information on the site.²³ Aside from this, about one third of the results were published by official heritage services or they are scholarly articles that deal with the tomb, or mention it in a side comment or reference.²⁴ A second group are wiki-type articles and information about the monument.²⁵ The main source for these, are the official presentation of



► Fig. 5. Wall paintings on the ceiling of the burial chamber (Source: Simić, *Kasnorimska grobnica u Brestoviku*)

the monument published by the Belgrade Monument Protection Institute,²⁶ with some information added from other academic papers. The last third of the Google search results are various internet articles referring to the cultural heritage of Belgrade or its history in the Roman period, created outside the academic or official heritage-related sphere. Most of these articles are based on the Early Christian interpretation of the tomb. This situation may have influenced a strange social incident. Several years ago a group of Orthodox Christian radicals made an attempt to appropriate the monument to meet the liturgical service needs of the local Serbian Orthodox Church parish of Brestovik.²⁷ Recalling the interpretation of the monument as the Saint Hermylus and Saint Stratonikus martyrrium, they held a religious procession and a liturgical service at the monument itself. The local authorities and the Belgrade Monument Protection Service responded almost instantly. They suspended this kind of practice as something that is counter to laws related to heritage protection, which also endangers the interests and principals of monument protection. The epilogue of this whole story was that soon after the incident the local municipal authorities passed a decree to assign a state-owned parcel in Brestovik village for a new local Orthodox parish chapel to be built.²⁸

Conclusion

The case of the Brestovik tomb and its findings reveal a common phenomenon of cultural heritage interpretation. Our knowledge, representation, and understanding of the past and its cultural heritage are not absolute and fixed. The less we know about a monument, the greater are the chances for diverse heritage interpretations to surface. The interpretation of heritage is also affected by different ideological or political positions, and/or the actual cultural needs and interests of the community or group(s) who use it. Therefore, the cultural heritage value of a monument does not necessarily correspond strictly to the historical or scientific importance of a site, but is formed in the context of the particular monument and its value for a community or culture at a given time, under specific circumstances.

Notes

- ¹ The classification of monuments based on their significance is an official cultural heritage preservation and management tool used in the process of establishing the Central Register of Tangible Cultural Heritage by the Serbian National Cultural Heritage Service, see the website of “Републички завод за заштиту споменика културе – Београд” [National Agency for Cultural heritage Protection, Serbia], accessed October 30, 2018, <http://www.heritage.gov.rs/cirilica/index.php>; and “Споменици Културе у Србији.” [Cultural Monuments in Serbia], Digital catalog of protected monuments in Serbia, Joined project, Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts and UNESCO, Accessed November 3, 2018. <http://spomenikukulture.mi.sanu.ac.rs/spomenik.php?id=747>.
- ² Zoran Simić, *Kasnorimska grobnica u Brestoviku* [Late Roman tomb in Brestovik] (Belgrade: Zavod za zaštitu spomenika kulture grada Beograda, 2009); zavod. “katalozi 2009 | Завод за заштиту споменика културе града Београда.” Accessed November 3, 2018. <http://beograd-skonasledje.rs/publikacije/katalozi/katalozi-2009>.
- ³ Gordana Milosevic, “Funerary Sculpture from the Brestovik Tomb,” in *Les ateliers de sculpture régionaux: techniques, styles et iconographie. Actes du Xe Colloque International sur l'Art Provincial Romain, Arles et Aix-en-Provence, 21-23 Mai 2007*, ed. Vassiliki Gaggadis-Robin, Antoine Hermay, Michel Reddé, and Claude Sintès (Arles: Centre Camille Jullian, Musée départemental Arles Antique, 2009), 741–751.
- ⁴ Emilija Nikolić, Dragana Rogic and Jelena Anđelković Grašar, “Architectural Space in the Wall Painting of the Roman Tomb in Brestovik,” in *Vivere Militare Est. From Populus to Emperors – Living on the Frontier*, vol. 2, ed. Snežana Golubović and Nemanja Mrđić (Belgrade: Institute of Archaeology, 2018), 195–268.
- ⁵ Lynda Mulvin, *Late Roman Villas in the Danube-Balkan Region* (Oxford: British Archaeological Reports, 2002), 232, 236.
- ⁶ Stefan Pop-Lazic, Snežana Golubovic, Nemanja Mrđić, and Gordana Jeremic, ed., *Roman Limes in Serbia* (Belgrade: Institute of Archaeology, 2014), online available at “Der Römische Limes in Österreich,” accessed October 28, 2018, https://www.univie.ac.at/limes/FRE_DOWNLOADS/Roman_Limes_Serbia.pdf.
- ⁷ Mihailo Valtrović, “Rimska grobnitsa Brestoviku” [Roman tomb in the Brestovik], *Starinar* 7 (1895): 130–136. According to the excavation report, the tomb was accidentally discovered in 1895 by a local farmer.
- ⁸ Miodrag Tomović, *O jednoj gornjomezijskoj skulptorskoj predstavi tetarhijskog cara* [About an Upper Moesia Sculptural Depiction of an emperor of the Tetrarchy], in *ANTIΔΩPON, Uzdarje Dragoslavu Srejoviću* [Dedicated to Dragoslav Srejovic], 17 (Belgrade: Univerzitet u Beogradu, Filozofski fakultet, 1997), 419–426.; On late Roman sculpture in Upper Moesia, see Miodrag Tomović, *Roman Sculpture in Upper Moesia* (Archaeological Institute, Belgrade, Monograph 24, 1993).
- ⁹ Only a bronze plaque is installed that states that the monument is under the legal protection at the national level and by the city of Belgrade.
- ¹⁰ The two most serious, yet popular (non-academic) online presentations of the monument are Simić, *Kasnorimska grobnica*, and “Grobница u Brestoviku,” UNDERGRAD (blog), accessed June 23, 2014. <http://undergrad.rs/grobница-u-brestoviku/>.
- ¹¹ I do not know of any visitors’ survey, but based on the oral communication of the owner of the plot, it seems that a few organized groups visit per week, and a few individ-

uals (up to 5) per day. The typical visitors are organized groups (visitors of local festivals, hiking groups, school and university excursions). The individual visitors are mostly tourists, heritage and history enthusiasts, scholars, and professionals.

- ¹² Milosevic, Gordana. "Funerary Sculpture from the Brestovik Tomb," in Xavier Delestre et al., *Les ateliers de sculpture régionaux: techniques, styles et iconographie, Actes du X colloque international sur l'art provincial romain, Arles et Aix-en-Provence, 21-23 mai 2007* (Arles: Editions du Musée de l'Arles et de la Provence antiques, 2009), 741–751.
- ¹³ Nikolić, Rogic, and Anđelković Grašar, "Architectural Space."
- ¹⁴ All other Late Roman period tombs with similar architectural characteristics excavated in Serbia so far date from the second half of the AD fourth and fifth century; see *Ibid.*
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 256.
- ¹⁶ Jelena Anđelković Grašar and Emilija Nikolić, "Tomb with Cupids from Viminacium: A Contribution to Research of Construction, Iconography and Style," *Starinar* 63 (2013), 82–83.
- ¹⁷ Valtrović, "Rimska grobnitca u Selu Brestoviku," 128–130.
- ¹⁸ Nikolić, Rogic, and Anđelković Grašar, "Architectural Space," 255–257.
- ¹⁹ Radomir V. Popović, "Beogradski mučenici Ermil i Stratonik" [Beograd martyrs Ermil and Stratonik], *Bogoslovlje: Časopis Pravoslavnog bogoslovskog fakulteta u Beogradu* 35, No. 1-2 (1991), 69–81; Idem, "Ranohrišćanski Svetitelji na tlu istočnog Ilirika" [Early Christian saints on the territory of eastern Illyricum], *Bogoslovlje: Časopis Pravoslavnog bogoslovskog fakulteta u Beogradu* 72, No. 1 (2013), 80–92.
- ²⁰ "Vat.Gr.1613 Menologion of Basil II," DigiVatLib, Vatican Library, accessed October 30, 2018. https://digi.vat-lib.it/view/MSS_Vat.gr.1613/.

- ²¹ Popović, "Ranohrišćanski Svetitelji," 88.
- ²² Efthymos Rizos, "Martyrs from the Northwest Balkans in the Byzantine Ecclesiastical Tradition: Patterns and Mechanisms of Cult Transfer," in *Late Roman, Early Christian, Early Byzantine as Categories in Historical-Archaeological Research on the Middle Danube*, ed. Ivan Bugarski, Orsolya Heinrich-Tamáska, Vujadin Ivanišević, and Daniel Syrbe (Remshalden: Bernhard Albert Greiner, 2017), 195–214.
- ²³ Except for one short comment on the Trip Advisor: "Wild – Review of Grocka, Belgrade, Serbia," TripAdvisor, accessed November 3, 2018. <http://www.tripadvisor.com/ShowUserReviews-g294472-d554522-r138865100-Grocka-Belgrade.html>.
- ²⁴ e.g., "Kulturna dobre Beograda" [Cultural treasures in Belgrade] Accessed October 21, 2018, <http://beogradskonasledje.rs/kd/zavod/grocka/kasno-rimska-grobnica-u-brestoviku.html>.
- ²⁵ e.g., "Roman Tomb, Brestovik," Wikipedia, accessed September 20, 2018, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Roman_tomb_Brestovik&oldid=860387153.
- ²⁶ Simić, *Kasnorimska grobnica*.
- ²⁷ "Roman Tomb, Brestovik." Wikipedia.
- ²⁸ I. Nedić and D. Katanić, "Zavod za zaštitu spomenika poručio Gročanima: Ne možete da zidate crkvu na mestu rimske grobnice!" [The Belgrade Monument Protection Agency has announced to the citizens of Grocka municipality: "You cannot build the chapel over the Roman Tomb!"], Blic.rs., accessed November 3, 2018. <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/beograd/zavod-za-zastitu-spomenika-porucio-grocanima-ne-mozete-da-zidate-crkvu-na-mestu/es-9jbp1>.