

THE SPREAD OF CHRISTIANITY IN DARDANIA AFTER THE ISSUANCE OF EDICT OF MILAN (313)

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The Christianity in Dardania may be tracked back to as early as the beginning of the second century AD, where we find the names of first Dardanian martyrs. However, the issuance of Edict of Milan by Constantine the Great in 313 in Dardania, created favourable conditions for the spread of Christian religion, for building legal facilities for Christian believers and for development of church hierarchy in Dardania. The participation of a Dardanian bishop in Council of Nicaea in 325 is yet another evidence of quick spreading of Christianity in Dardania and of a development of church hierarchy in Dardania, only 12 years after the issuance of Edict of Milan (313).

Although the beginnings of Christianity in Dardania go back to the first centuries of the new age, due to the lack of written documents it is very difficult to follow the development of Christianity in Dardania until the fourth century, since during the first four centuries of our era there were only intermittent concrete evidence which were mainly limited to the data of ancient authors and on the epigraphic, respectively, onomastic materials, that were widely spread all over the Dardanian lands.

The first three centuries of Christianity were characterized by numerous sanguinary persecutions by the roman emperors. And indeed, many Dardanian Christians suffered from such persecutions.

In order to mark the deaths of these martyrs, clerics, firstly for their own needs and then for the needs of the people and religious community, established a liturgical calendar which later became the Martyrology Calendar¹.

Thus, in the second century we have the Dardanian martyrs *Flori* and *Lauri*, whose names are written in *Martirologium Romanum* on august 18, where it is written that these two stone-masons, *Flori* and *Lauri*, were the first attestors of Christianity in Ulpiana².

The challenge of Christianity power lied primarily on the rejection to submit to the demands of the state. This rejection was also due to the conviction that all people were equal before the Creator. Thus, the Christians willingly positioned themselves outside the so-called *pantheon of the state* and preached for the coming of a more just power under which the word freedom would mean much more than the state apparatus of the Roman Empire could ever imagine.

In political and social aspect, Christianity preached brotherhood, love and equality among people: *You shall love your neighbour as yourself*³. This motto would best describe the entire activity of the new doctrine apostles and would be the driving force for all submitted people, since the leader should be at the service of those who are submitted to him⁴.

For the Christianity, both the divine and terrestrial were represented in one single person, the Christ.

¹ Fasani 1983, p. 288.

² Mirdita 2000, p. 44.

³ Mirdita 2001, p. 153.

⁴ Mirdita 2001, p. 153 –154.

Constantine the Great lived in the Diocletian palace where he learned about persecutions of Christians⁵. Soon after the “Edict on banning salaries and rewards” through which Diocletian was hoping to overcome the economic crisis which had shaken off the Empire for several decades, began severe persecutions of Christians and this time it did not only mean persecution of Christian people but also the confiscation and destruction of Church properties together with all its existing books and archives⁶. This persecution⁷ for “complete extermination of Christians” brought to the disintegration of tetrarchy and antagonisms and civil wars, which resulted in the creation of Biarchy of *Licinius* and *Constantine*, which eventually ended up with the Constantine as the only ruler⁸.

In 312 AD in collaboration with Licinius, Constantine declared against Maxentius, marched into Rome and on 28 October Maxentius encountered him in a duel near the Milvian Bridge where Maxentius lost the battle and his life.⁹ Constantine’s support for Christians became visible just before this battle when he ordered the delineation of Christ’s monogram in all his soldiers’ shields¹⁰.

The war of Constantine the Great against Maxentius has also been described by the well-known chronicler of ecclesiastical historiography *Eusebius*. According to *Eusebius*, a bishop from *Caesarea* and biographer of Constantine, everything begins with the appearance of a sign in the sky: “Around midday he looked up to the sun and saw a cross of light above it, which read: Through this sign [thou shall] conquer. When Constantine fell asleep, the Christ appeared to him and ordered him to make a sign similar to the one he had seen in the sky and carry it with him in every battle against his enemies. Constantine obeyed and delineated a golden cross with precious stones and forced his legions to hold that at the forefront. Then he marched towards Rome, where Caesar of Roman Empire was Maxentius, Constantine’s main opponent”¹¹. In this war, Maxentius’ soldiers fled over the bridge, while Maxentius drowned in the River Tiber just like a stone and Constantine triumphed¹². After entering into Rome victoriously and as the only ruler of the west, Constantine began to promote understanding and to end the persecution done by the Roman Empire¹³.

The Emperor Constantine, who was rightfully named *Constantine the Great* (*Flavius Valerius Constantinus*, 280–337)¹⁴, in the year 313 AD issued an edict recognizing the Christian religion. However, it should be stated that despite the fact that Constantine the Great through Edict of Milan of 313 gave liberty to Christianity, he himself continued to be a worshipper of solar deity, as it may be seen on his coin depicting the subscription “*Claritas et Soli Invicto*”¹⁵.

⁵ Lexikon 1990, 1453.

⁶ Fasani 1983, p. 282.

⁷ The most terrible mass persecution and massacre against Christians ever known in the history of Rome occurred under the Diocletian rule, Murzaku, Mullai, Sala 2003, p. 18.

⁸ Fasani 1983, p. 282.

⁹ Lexikon 1990, 1453, Collins, Price 2000, p. 58; Kanlif 1980, p. 284.

¹⁰ Collins, Price 2000, p. 58.

¹¹ Dersin 1998, p. 16.

¹² Dersin 1998, p. 16.

¹³ Collins, Price 2000, p. 58.

¹⁴ There are different data related to the year in which Constantine the Great was born. For example, Hafner 2001, p. 162 states that Constantine the Great was born in 280 AD; according to the Lexikon 1990, 1453, Constantine the Great was supposedly born in 285 AD; Kanlif 1980, p. 284, claims that Constantine the Great was born in 290 AD.

¹⁵ Mirdita 2000, p. 44.

The beginning of the spread of Christianity in the ancient world also marks the beginning of triumph of monotheistic over the pagan doctrines¹⁶.

Under the ruling of Constantine the Great, which had a developed sense for architectonic constructions, many cities changed their look and a large number of basilicas were built similar to the case of earlier profane constructions¹⁷. Constantine¹⁸ gave gifts and properties to the Christian church, including the St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, he used Christian symbols in making roman coins and emblems, then he declared Sunday to be a public holiday and replaced weekly celebration of Mithra¹⁹. Those basilicas were decorated with mosaics and sculptures so much as if man wanted to turn the house of God into a palace of Divine Triumphant, as a sign of triumph of church over the state.²⁰ Church was often used by rulers to discipline their people²¹. The struggle for power and permanent tendencies of the church to become independent caused big periodic conflicts²². The church accepted the emperor as its protector and attributed to him a divine inspiration; however, the emperor would only remain within the church and would not be considered as its leader²³.

Constantine the Great, one of the most well-known emperors of the Roman Empire, born in Naissus of Dardania, was great supporter of Christianity. The true institutional development of Christianity in Dardania began only after Dardania fell under his rule.

The recognition of Christianity created favourable conditions for the construction of legal buildings for Christian believers and for development of the church hierarchy.

The best and historically most important example of the influence of Christianity on Roman state at the time of Constantine was the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD, the first in a series of ecumenical councils which laid the dogmatic and canonical foundations of the Christian Church²⁴.

Participation of Dardanian bishop, *Dakus Dardaniae*, in the Council of Nicaea (325 AD)²⁵, is proof of a genuine development of church hierarchy in Dardania in the fourth century. Therefore, when we take into consideration the Edict of Milan (313), development of church hierarchy and construction of many Christian buildings at the time of ruling of Emperor Constantine, the fourth century may be called "Golden Age of Christianity in Dardania".

In the period between fourth and sixth century, the organisation of church in Illyria was developed so much that only in Dardania were created 5–7 bishoprics.²⁶ Christianity in cities had a privileged position as official religion of the Empire, while outside the cities it was developed with more difficulties²⁷.

In the fourth century, when Christianity was spread throughout the empire as a state religion, Illyria and all territories of today's Albanian state were Christianized²⁸. It is important to stress the fact that Constantine the Great allowed Christianity, but did not outlaw paganism, as was done later by the Emperor Theodosius I (379–395 AD). Theodosius I was against any attack

¹⁶ Ferri 1999, p. 45.

¹⁷ Fasani 1983, p. 276.

¹⁸ As supporter of Christianity.

¹⁹ Collins, Price 2000, p. 58.

²⁰ Fasani 1983, p. 276.

²¹ Brunner, 2012, p. 98.

²² Brunner, 2012, p. 98.

²³ Gunther 1995, p. 118.

²⁴ Ostrogorski 1998, p. 29.

²⁵ Gjini 1982, p. 32.

²⁶ Drançolli 2002, p. 88.

²⁷ Collins, Price 2000, p. 59.

²⁸ Schmitt 1996, p. 73.

on the church and in 380 AD he declared Christianity as obligatory state religion²⁹. Later on in 391 he closed all pagan temples and ended all pagan rituals³⁰.

The spread of Christianity continued in parallel with strengthening of church organisation, where functions and competences had a significant hierarchical character³¹.

Taking into consideration that Christianity in Dardania in the period between fourth and sixth century was quite developed, which indicates that Dardania at that time was a very urban area otherwise Christianity would not have been spread so much. Whereas regarding the territorial spreading, Christianity was initially spread in most important cities, or capitals, and over time Christianity reached to smaller villages.

Even today in the territory that once comprised Dardania, there are remains of Dardanian churches. Thus, in village Studenica near Vrella (Kosovo) on the hillside, there are relics and an antique basilica with semicircular apse. This basilica, apart from the sacral building, indicates that there were some other accessory buildings: dining room, guest parlours, water butts and two brick constructed tombs covered with arches³².

The construction technique of the church in Studenica is "*opus mixtum*". The basilica was constructed during the fourth and fifth century, while based on the archaeological material that was found we may say that this location dates back even earlier.

A Paleochristian Basilica was discovered in village Korisha (Kosovo). The Basilica is aligned on east-west line. The apse faces the east and the entrance faces west. Basilica of village Korisha was 20.7m³³ long.

Another Paleochristian Basilica was also discovered in village Harilaq (constructed between fourth and sixth centuries)³⁴. Basilica of Village Harilaq, too, is aligned on east-west line. The apse faces east while the entrance faces west. Basilica has the central place in the ancient settlement of Harilaq.

The above mentioned basilicas are only some of many others that were discovered in the territory of ancient Dardania, the place where Emperor Constantine the Great was born, and who with the Edict of Milan (313) ended the earlier persecution of Christians.

List of pictures

Fig.1. Relicts of Studenica Church

Fig.2. View of the ancient Studenica

Fig.3. Korishe, Church plan

Fig.4. Relicts of Korisha Church

Fig.5. Harilaq, Church plan

Fig.6. Relicts of Harilaq Church

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THE SPREAD OF CHRISTIANITY IN DARDANIA AFTER THE ISSUANCE OF EDICT OF MILAN (313) (Abstract)

The first Dardanian churches began to be constructed at the time of Constantine the Great ruling (306–337 AD), when the Edict of Milan (313) recognized Christianity. Under the rule of Constantine the Great many churches were built throughout the Empire, inside and outside cities, which were built in the honour of many martyrs. So, immediately after the issuing of Edict of Milan, favourable conditions were created for construction of legal buildings for Christian believers and for development of church hierarchy. Therefore, the ruling of Constantine the Great is a period which not only saw the construction of worship buildings for Christians but also institutional organisation of the Church in Dardania.

Institutionalisation of Christianity in Dardania following the issuance of Edict of Milan is best proven by the resources of Council of Niceae (325 AD), which was the first ecumenical council, chaired by the Emperor Constantine the Great himself, which was attended by the bishop of Dardania, *Dacus Dardaniae*. Participation of Dardanian bishops is recorded in other ecumenical councils in the period between fourth and sixth centuries. Period between fourth and sixth centuries saw a boost of Christianity in Dardania, which resulted with construction of many Dardanian churches, foundations of which may be found even today. This paper mentions only churches of Studenica, Korisha and Harilaq, but there are many more relics of Paleochristian churches throughout the Dardanian territory.

A great role in spreading the Christianity in Dardania was undoubtedly played by the Edict of Milan issued by the emperor Constantine the Great in 313 AD. Emperor Constantine the Great was born in Naissus of Dardania, so one should not be surprised with the fact that he paid special attention to his home land, Dardania.



Fig. 1 Relicts of Studenica Church



Fig. 2. View of the ancient Studenica

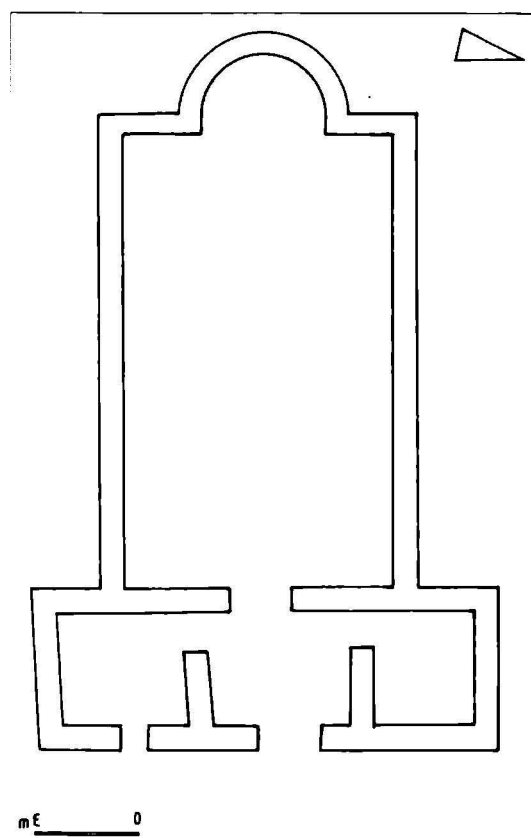


Fig. 3 Korishe, Church plan



Fig. 4 Relicts of Korisha Church

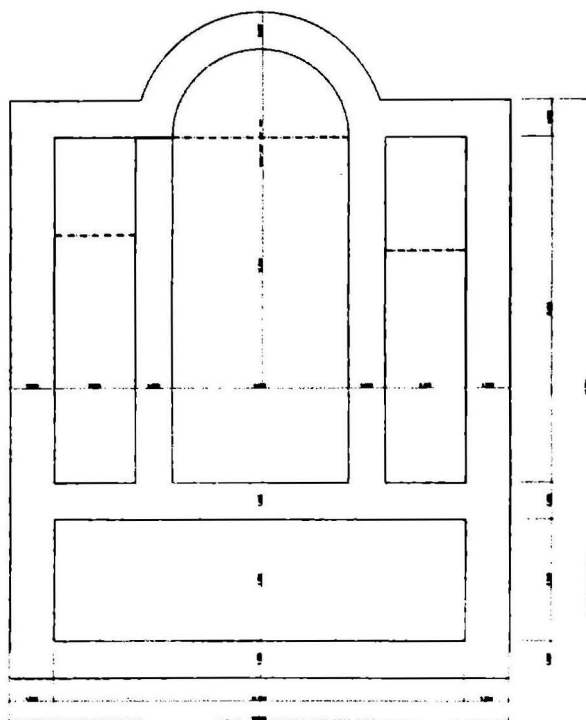


Fig.5 Harilaq, Church plan



Fig. 6. Relicts of Harilaq Church