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# Chrismons and Crosses on the Late Antique Mosaic Pavements from Bulgaria

## Bulgaristan'dan Geç Antik Mozaik Döşemelerinde Krismonlar ve Haçlar

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### Abstract

*The article examines the cases of placing of the Early Christian Christograms/Staurograms and crosses in diverse iconographies and different number on the Late Antique mosaic pavements from the ancient provinces of the present-day Bulgarian lands/ mostly in the Central and Eastern Balkans. The history and the criteria of the cross in Late Antiquity are traced in the Early Christian liturgy, decoration and art, the official and tacit regulations, laws and bans in that aspect, the exceptions and the reasons causing them.*

**Keywords:** *The Early Christian Christogram (Chi-Rho sign), the Early Christian cross, iconographies, laws and regulations.*

### Öz

*Makale, çoğunlukla Orta ve Doğu Balkanlar bölgesinde yer alan günümüz Bulgar topraklarının antik vilayetlerden Geç Antik dönem mozaik döşemeleri üzerine farklı ikonografilerde ve farklı sayılarda Erken Hristiyanlık Kristogramları/Staurogramları ve haçların yerleştirilmesini incelemektedir. Geç Antik Çağ'da haçın tarihçesi ve kriterleri, Erken Hristiyanlık ayininde, dekorasyon ve sanatta, resmi ve zımni düzenlemelerde, bu yöndeki kanun ve yasaklarda, istisnalar ve bunlara neden olan sebeplerde izlenebilmektedir.*

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** *Erken Hristiyan Kristogramı (Chi-Rho işareti), Erken Hristiyan haçı, ikonografiler, kanunlar ve düzenlemeler.*

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In the recent decades there appeared several articles devoted to the pavement mosaics, dealing with the problem of the official prohibition of representations of crosses (either by some emperors, or by the decisions of the Church Councils) on the floors (Habas 2015; Habas 2018, with references, esp. note 5; Popova 2018). The studies have proved that in some of the areas of the Eastern Mediterranean there are exceptions, in spite of the official regulation, while in the Balkans, for instance, the crosses are generally missing on the floors.

Several purposes will be aimed in our article: first, to trace when the Christogram and the cross are to be met on the Late Antique mosaic pavements of Bulgaria; what kind of iconography was used for them; where namely they have been placed in the mosaic composition; finally, is the official prohibition valid for these lands, are there exceptions and what should be the explanation for them. In this aspect, we should remember that the classification of the kinds and forms of crosses is not all contemporary to the mosaics, but much later and sometimes even modern, so we cannot rely on it as true criteria instrument. Instead, we should reveal what role is playing the cross or the pseudo-cross in the whole mosaic composition, is it single or numerous, is it distinguished and underlined in a special way, does it look like some real, for instance liturgical cross, etc. The number of represented crosses has to do with the scene of the Crucifixion and with the numbers considered as sacred in the Early Christianity; also with the role and importance of the representation, since the multitude diminishes and equalizes them; or, on the opposite, in other beliefs increases the strength of action and its influence.

The appearance and representation of the Christogram and the Early Christian Cross in the liturgy, culture and art of Antiquity has been a subject of special interest in scientific literature for many centuries.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, there is no need to remind of its relatively late appearance in Late Antique art and of its very limited usage in the written sources of 2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> century. The 4<sup>th</sup> century and the Constantinian period marked a significant change in this aspect due to several important events and historical circumstances. First, these were the two visions/dreams of Constantine the Great of the Chi-Rho sign, after which he ordered the sign to decorate the military standards and shields, and won with its help the battle at the Milvian bridge. Immediately this kind of Monogrammatic cross (=staurogram) appeared on the coins of many Late Antique and Early Byzantine emperors, on liturgical objects and relics, architectonic decoration (chancel screens, capitals, ambo, etc.), wall paintings, pavement and wall mosaics, sepulchral decoration, lamps, jewellery etc. In 4<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> century, the Christogram was mainly a sign of a military and religious triumph, of the victory over the death, of the Resurrection, of Christ and the Christian religion, and of the everlasting life in the Paradise of the faithful Christians. Only later, since the second half of 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> century, the Cross of Golgotha and the Crucifixion began to be represented, and up to the Medieval period to obtain the passionate character of pain, torment and slow death, replacing the previous picture of the flourishing and joyful Paradise. The mosaic pavements from the Balkans are still full of namely this flourishing picture and adoration of the Cross as triumph and victory.

The other important event for the widespread of the cross in various forms, kinds and techniques was the finding of the True Cross by Helena in Jerusalem around the middle of 4<sup>th</sup> century, the miracles happening with it, the partition

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<sup>1</sup> Except the literature mentioned in my note 1, on the history of the Early Christian cross see mainly Marucchi 1908; Sulzberger 1926; Frolow 1961; Dowley 1977: 56; Cotsonis 1994.

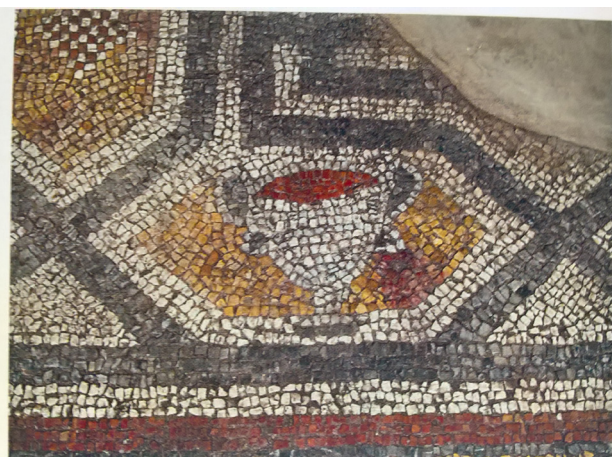
into thousands of small pieces, even 'atoms' of this Holy Relic, sending such parts and nails of the Cross of the Crucifixion to Constantine the Great, the treasuries of basilicas, baptisteries and churches, to some of the popes, bishops, monasteries, and many emperors and empresses. The processional cross called *stationalis* was used in the stational liturgy, and carried by a clergy man, called *draconarius*, by that reminding the Lord on His way to Golgotha. This cross was made of bronze, silver or gold/or gilded, but in 5<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> century also can be decorated with precious stones, enameled or in the *cloisonnée* technique (Jensen 2017). Such holy parts of the Wood of the Cross and of many other Early Christian relics have caused the appearance of the *encolpia* and *pectoralia* crosses for private use, especially in everyday Christian rituals and as pilgrimage objects made of simple materials.

This new development of the cult of the Cross received a special Church Feast in the East and West Church, widely reflected in the decoration with the Cross of the wall and vault mosaics in the official Christian monuments and in the private sepulchral ones in the whole Mediterranean (Jensen 2017). Up to the end of 4<sup>th</sup> century, the Christians freed from the restraint to use the cross as a sign of torment and shameful pagan death, and with no fear to be any longer ridiculed. The cross since 5<sup>th</sup> century is shown either as the central element on the crowns and the coins of the Early Byzantine emperors and empresses, or as the so-called stepped cross, or with the addition of the letter C(H), a shortening probably for the Greek word 'golden', or associated with the golden coin known as *solid* (Pillinger et al. 2016: 125-130; Popova 2016b: 62). In these two centuries the cross can be met already in the sacerdotal vestments on the wall paintings and wall mosaics, and on pavement mosaics, and in the chains with lighting hanging from above together with the lamps and the apocalyptic *A* and *Ω*. Thus, the cross became the glorious emblem of Our Lord and the Redemption; it not only entered and dominated entirely the official and private culture, it penetrated deeply also the folk beliefs as a talisman instead of the previous apotropeions. Such use of the cross was strongly criticized by the Christian fathers and caused the appearance of the official imperial attitude, the adequate laws of Valentinian I and Theodosius II, and almost constant discussions and issue of special rules of the Church councils (Habas 2015: 55 note 18). According to them, the Christians should not worship the material cross itself as it happens with the pagan idolatry, but to do it in favour only of the Christian spirituality and notions.

One of the first appearance of the cross in the early 4<sup>th</sup> century on the floor in the ancient provinces in the present-day Bulgarian lands is the pavement of the urban house (*domus*) in Augusta Traiana-Beroe, probably from the Late Tetrarchic - the Early period of Constantine' I rule together with Licinius I (Pillinger et al. 2016: 125-131). The composition represents a cosmogonic picture, with the Paradise and God, symbolized by the Fountain of Life; with the land and water spheres represented by the adequate seasons as chasing animals and combats, and the flora and fauna around the piscine, including nereids, fishes and different kind of fruits and vegetables as *xenia*. The cross *patée*, a form with equal arms with flaring ends, and unusual dark middle band (*nielo* ?), met for the first time in the period, and the *cantharos* with wine (Figs.1-2) are placed in one of the outer borders. In the whole composition these Early Christian liturgical objects and symbols are at the same time somehow hidden, not so obvious, which can be understood in the light of the end of the period of the strongest persecutions of the Christians, with the first ever Edict of Tolerance issued by Galerius in 311 in *Serdica*<sup>2</sup>, and the Edict of Milan of Constantine the Great and Licinius I from

2 On the edict of Galerius see Ando 2014, with references.





313. The small dimensions, the place of the cross (and of the other Christian symbols as well) and the concrete colour of the representations show that the purpose is discretely to reveal the Christian belonging of the owner of the domus. The example from the domus in Augusta Traiana-Beroe is not only the earliest from the period of both Edicts of Tolerance, but also interesting for the concrete iconography, type and decoration of the cross used probably officially in the liturgy and the other Christian rituals in that part of Thrace.

The other important circumstance is that the cosmogonic composition of the mosaic, the abundance of representations, scenes and Early Christian symbols find close parallels in Asia Minor monuments, which gave the base to consider at least the mosaicist coming from this area (Popova 2016a: 173-174). The trade and professional connections of the cities in Thracia, and generally in the Balkans with Asia Minor craftsmen and its artistic, cultural and theological milieu is well witnessed in scientific literature (Popova 2016b: 62, 70, 75; Petrova 2020: 65-67, 69). Also very important is the fact that the pavement mosaic from Augusta Traiana-Beroe is earlier than the ones in Asia Minor, establishing earlier ties and presence of mosaicists from there in Thracia, a new fact in the artistic and theological life of the province and the Eastern Mediterranean. And the last observation is that not only the Central and Eastern Balkans have given a great number of martyrs during the Tetrarchic persecutions, but also immediately after the end of them, with the Edict of Galerius, and later of Constantine I and Licinius, the official Christianity was openly demonstrated, since this house near the supposed agora of Augusta Traiana demonstrates freely, although still not on the most important part of the composition, the Christian liturgical cross and the symbols of the new religion.

The pavement mosaic from the House of Felix in Serdica (Sofia) is also taught to contain a very modest and small Greek cross (Fig. 3), (Ivanov 2016: 188). hidden in the abundance of geometric schemes, motifs and colours, but shown with 'golden' central cube and arms in turquoise, maybe also resembling the cross of precious metal decorated with precious gem or stones. As a whole, it is a very small cross with dimensions 4.5x4.5 cm, represented only with 5 tesserae (one in the centre and two pairs for the arms) The date of this mosaic is the middle - the beginning of the second half of 4<sup>th</sup> century. The coins found in that building and the stylistic of the mosaic coincide chronologically. The archaeologist supposes that this sign has been laid additionally, but in my view it may be done from the very beginning exactly in order to denote the Christian belonging of the house, together with the special imperial diadem, revived in art during the Constantinian period in the form of a golden wreath with golden

Figure 1

Cross pattée. Detail from the outer border of the pavement mosaic of the domus on Ruski str. in Augusta Traiana-Beroe. After Pillinger et al. 2016.

Figure 2

The Eucharistic cantharos with wine. Detail from the outer border of the pavement mosaic of the domus on Ruski str. in Augusta Traiana-Beroe. After Pillinger et al. 2016.



Figure 3

The small Greek cross from one of the non-figural panels of the mosaic in the House of Felix in Serdica. Detail. After Ivanov 2017.



leaves decorated with precious stones (emeralds and amethysts) and falling red reniaie/ribbons (Fig. 4) (Popova 2016a: 159-160). By that it is underlined the connection of the room with the Constantinian house.

Figure 4

The emblem with the imperial diadem. Drawing of the Mosaic of Felix in Serdica. After Ivanov 2017.





The next in time mosaic with crosses (Figs. 5-6) probably belongs to a Late Antique building in Pautalia (now Kyustendil in Southwestern Bulgaria), and has received in literature different dates: 3<sup>rd</sup> century and the first half of 4<sup>th</sup> century (Pillinger et al. 2016: 394-399). In fact, the mosaic is a little bit amorphous from stylistic point of view, nevertheless it is surely Late Antique, in my opinion from the Constantinian period – the Valentinians. The composition and the separate motifs are inherited from the earlier Roman art, except one important novelty – the small red Greek cross, placed inside a square. The cross configuration is repeated several times around the central red cross, increasing the dimensions to the outside, and changing the colours of the background, with dominating golden one in the second outer frame of the squares. The golden colour gives lustre to the whole composition and together with the red cross' colour accents namely on the latter. Ten such crosses are shown in the reconstruction, and the central medallion probably contained also a cross, instead of the habitual pagan Medusa. The presence of so many obvious Early Christian crosses and the late Antique parallels for the composition with central cross in a medallion point namely to a basilica, and not to a private dwelling of a Christian.

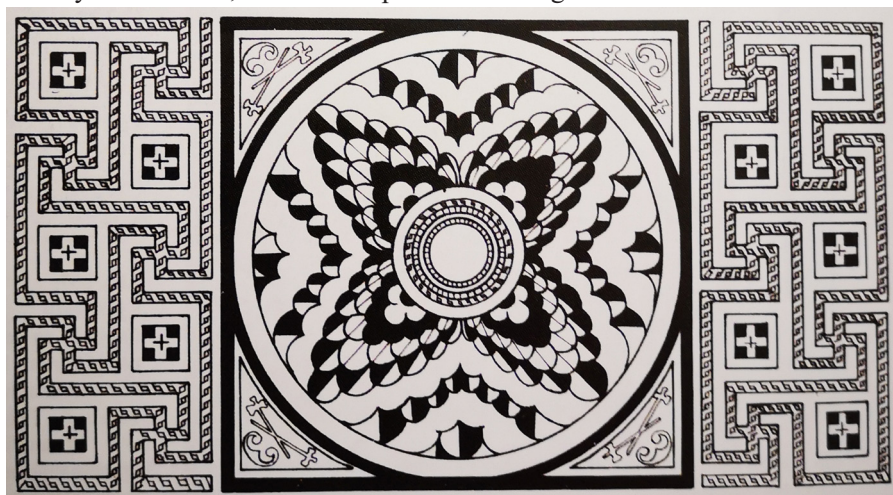


Figure 5

The reconstructed scheme of the mosaic of the supposed Early Christian basilica in Pautalia. After Pillinger et al. 2016.



Figure 6

Detail of the Greek cross in the mosaic composition of the supposed Early Christian basilica in Pautalia. After Pillinger et al. 2016.

A very long and unusual monumental inscription found also in Pautalia is speaking of the worship of the cross. According to K. Markov, the inscription reveals the Arianic worship of the Cross in Pautalia, probably erected in some of its Early Christian basilicas (Марков 1995: 79). It can be imagined, after his proposal, the cross together with the inscription installed at its base probably in this basilica. Of course, we should provide in this case for the earlier Arianism in the Balkans, due to the influence of the official Christianity of the Constantinian and Valentinian dynasties, with its Arianic trend and hesitation between it and the Nicean creed. The Orthodox period of Theodosius I should be taken as t. a. q. for the end of the earlier Arianism in the central and Eastern Late Antique provinces of the Balkans and for the mosaic with the crosses from Pautalia. It should be confessed that such a scheme with many crosses is not only rare but also the only one so far in such a colour and size treatment, reminding probably the real liturgical crosses made of silver and gold. The cross in the aforementioned monuments from Augusta Traiana and Serdica are not in the focus of composition, but a single one, identifying the Christian belonging. Already in 4<sup>th</sup> century different kind of crosses are represented, the most important of them feature the liturgical ritual of the Eucharist accompanied by a real metal cross, the blessing and the cross sign of the bishop and the faithful Christians. However, the numerous small Greek crosses in the supposed basilica of Pautalia seem to be rather an exception explained by the Arianic worship of the Cross.

The next period of the wide spread of Arianism in the Balkans was a sequence of the massive Gothic invasions and settlement, especially after 378 and during the whole 5<sup>th</sup> century (Stanev 2014: 66-86). The Goths were foederati of the Early Byzantine imperia, guarding in well-invented defending systems the main roads, fortresses, passes, the accesses to the big centres, harbours etc., while their families were living in small enclaves in the villages in the same areas. A very unusual composition with Chrismons is shown in the small basilica No 1, rather church, unearthed at the beginning of last century in the locality 'Kailuka' near Storgosia/Pleven in Central North Bulgaria (Figs. 7-8) (Pillinger et al. 2016: 80-86). Unfortunately, the mosaic is lost, as well as its drawings, except several old and bad photoes. The staurograms are probably five in number, occupying a whole row in the middle of the very small surface of the nave. A row with tabula

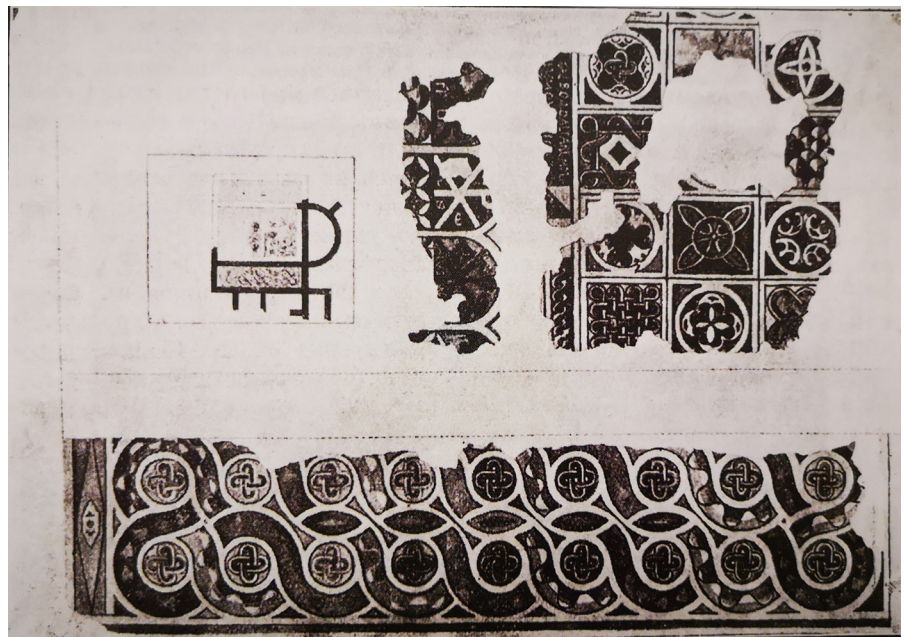


Figure 7  
Drawing of the basilica/church No 1 at  
Kailuka in Storgosia. After Pillinger et al.  
2016.



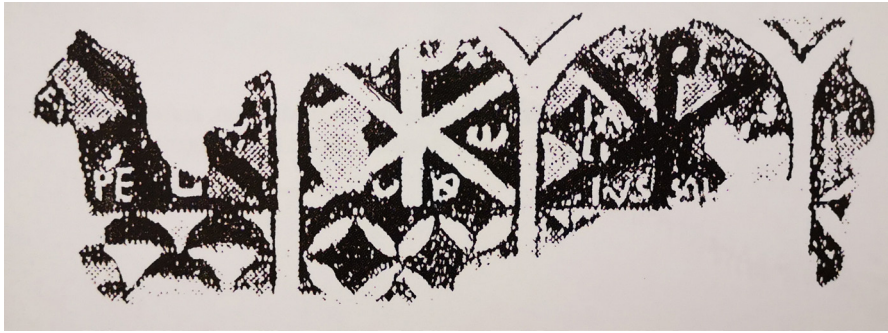


Figure 8  
Enlarged drawing of the row with Chrismons and the tabula ansata with the liturgical psalm of text 42.1. After Pillinger et al. 2016.

ansata, citing the first two verses of psalm 42,1 of the Saint Liturgy in Latin, is occupying the front row before the Chrismons. They are alternately shown either in white or in black arcades, accompanied by Alpha and Omega and the letters of a text, which V. Gerassimova reads (with the help of computer enlargement of the photoes) as the name of the mosaicist, a part of the name of the donator and the surface of the laid mosaic according to the usual formula for this action: '50 steps has laid Lalius on the order of Sal..' (Герасимова 2002). The placing of such information around each Chrismon is quite unusual and non-canonical, together with the big number of such figures and its place in the western part of the nave, maybe because this was a very small church. That's the reason to be sure that at least the clergy was stepping over the holy signs during the liturgy and the other rituals, since they are not isolated in the chancel or the apse, or in any other special way because of the lack of the usual enormous space of the basilica. Nevertheless, it is obvious the adoration of the cross, and the general desire to make a whole symbolic wall of Monogrammatic crosses, protecting the church building, the ecclesia as community and every single Christian soul.

The date proposed for this mosaic is not firmly established so far, including the second half of 4<sup>th</sup> - the first quarter of 5<sup>th</sup> century. Comparing with the later pavements mosaics of the middle and the second part of 5<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>3</sup> it can be proposed a new date in the second half of 5<sup>th</sup> century, not long after the law of Theodosius II with the prohibition of putting the sacred representations on the floor. Storgosia at that time was a small fortress with many villas and farms around (Stanev 2014: 65-67, with references). The Goths are known to guard and dwell the area, as well as the fact, that being Arians, they worshiped and represented mainly and only the Cross and the Bible. This may be one of the most possible explanation for the unusual multiplication of the holy sign up to five in number, by that underlying the cult of the cross, and strengthening its effect of protection and holiness. The dimensions of the small church, also met in other Gothic churches in North Bulgaria,<sup>4</sup> as well as the Latin for the Bible psalm citing, and the multification of the Chrismons also support the explanation concerning the Gothic congregation in this settlement.

The two examples from Pautalia and Storgosia demonstrate a different attitude towards the sacred Chi-Rho and the Early Christian cross, ignoring the tacit earlier and the official later law regulations and prohibitions. Again it should be underlined that the Arians of the Pautalian mosaic were from the local Late Antique Balkan Christian community under the influence of the ideas in the imperial courts of Constantine I, his heirs and the Valentinians, while the Arians from Storgosia were Goths-Arians. Their church rituals and art in the period

3 The left and right compositions flanking the nartex mosaic with peacocks of the Metropolitan basilica of Philippopolis, see Pillinger et al. 2016: Taf. 159 Abb. 413; the so-called upper mosaic under St. Sophia in Serdica, Pillinger et al. 2016: Taf. 241.

4 For instance, the small churches in the village Tsar Krum near Shumen (Stanev 2014: 69).

4<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> century probably also provoked additionally the issuing of the laws of Valentinian I and Theodosius II, although it is very doubtful that namely these Goths would and were in fact following the official regulations. Nevertheless, the cross or the Chi-Ro was obligatory on the first place in the Early Christian art of the Goths.

Except the listed examples of wide and early usage of the Christogram and the cross, we should point to another important monument, the mosaics of the Cathedral basilica (No 4) in Parthicopolis/ in Macedonia I/ present-day Sandanski in Southwestern Bulgaria. The I building period usually relate the basilica and its adequate mosaics with terminus ante quem the Hunnic invasions in 447, and the II building and its mosaics with terminus post quem the second half of the same century. But on the ground of several arguments, the dates should be changed. These are: the architectural plans of the basilica and its baptisterium from both periods, the appearance of the ambo, the found coins, the iconography and style of the reliefs on the cancel screens of the I period, finely the iconography and the style of the pavement mosaics in the nave and the aisles (Popova 2022: 194 fig. 12a). They reveal that the I building period and the earliest mosaics of the south aisle and the nave should be placed in the second half of 4<sup>th</sup> century, with parallel the earliest mosaics in opus tessellatum from the Constantinian period in the Metropolitan basilica of Philippopolis in Thracia (Popova 2022: 188-190), while the II building period with the later mosaic of the nave date from the first half of 5<sup>th</sup> century, with terminus ante quem the mentioned invasions of the Huns in 447.

Figure 9a

The Cathedral basilica (No 4) in Parthicopolis, south aisle, general view of the mosaic pavement from I building period. Archaeological museum in Sandanski.

Figure 9a

Detail of 9a, the pavement of the south aisle of basilica No 4 in Parthicopolis. Archaeological museum in Sandanski.

The pavements of the south aisle from the I period (Fig. 9a) and of the nave from the second period (Fig. 10a; Fig. 13) are abundant in small Greek crosses in several forms, colours and sizes, and are included in diverse mosaic schemes and its borders. The first type (Fig. 9b) is consisting of six cubes, and each arm – of nine ones four central tesserae, and each arm is also made of the same number



of tesserae. The centre is alternatively changing from black to white or red, and all these colours are repeated in the also cross-form outlines from the outside. The identical configurations or alternations and colours can be followed in the diagonal rows. The second type of Greek cross in the same mosaic panel is X-like oriented (Fig. 9a), like the cross of St. Andrew, but one should also have in mind the four central tesserae changing to some extent the impression of such a cross. The third already thinner type of cross is shown in one of the borders in the





nave of the II-period mosaic (Fig. 13). It may be entirely white or even entirely pink-reddish, alternating with a red cross, outlined with black, with one central cube and arms of also one (instead of four) cubes. The fourth most interesting and already monumental form of a cross (Fig. 10; Fig. 14a) is also with equal arms, but the tesserae are placed in oblique position, standing on one its corner, and in several rows. Inside the central row of white cubes is followed by a row in brownish ones outlined from the outside by black specially prepared triangle tesserae, thus generally achieving the sculptural three-dimensional effect of a sharp-pointed backs of a wooden stick. It should be also paid attention to the fact that there are depicted three such crosses, maybe allusion of the three crosses of Golgotha. Still the only parallel I have found as a slide<sup>5</sup> shows a medallion with

Figure 10

Basilica No 4 in Parthicopolis, nave, mosaics from II period, general view. Archaeological museum in Sandanski.

Figure 11

Basilica No 4 in Parthicopolis, nave, mosaics from II period, panel with swastika-meander scheme and Greek crosses, detail. Archaeological museum in Sandanski.



the same kind of an engrailed cross (Fig. 14b), while for the other three ones could be supposedly copied real liturgical crosses and forms, and also personal jewellery (encolpia and rings, see Fig. 14c). In this sense, the nave pavements of the Episcopal basilica (No 4) in Sandanski is the richest example of Greek crosses, the climax of its number and variety of the configuration and colour treatment among the monuments from Bulgaria. We can suppose that namely crosses are represented having in mind the parallel from the House of Felix in Serdica (Fig. 3), the personal ring in the same form (Fig. 15), the allusion to the three wooden crosses on Golgotha, the liturgical chalice represented in the aisle (Fig. 14c), the symbolic battle between the forces of God and Evil in the form of a bird and a snake (Fig. 13), as well as the extremely richness of diverse configurations and colouring of these mainly Greek crosses. They are

Figure 12

Basilica No 4 in Parthicopolis, aisle, mosaics from II period, panel with birds, detail. Archaeological museum in Sandanski.

Figure 13

Basilica No 4 in Parthicopolis, aisle, mosaics from II period, one of the borders mainly in pink. Archaeological museum in Sandanski.

<sup>5</sup> Google, without any data for the provenance, but it seems to be Late Antique monument.





Figure 14a  
Basilica No 4 in Parthicopolis, aisle, mosaics from II period, panel with the 'wooden crosses', detail. Archaeological museum in Sandanski.



Figure 14b  
Medallion with engrafted /wooden cross. After Google.

Figure 14c  
Mosaic representation of a liturgical chalice with wine from the aisle of basilica No 4 in Parthicopolis. Archaeological museum Sandanski.

not occasionally represented, but on purpose, although not so obvious among the schemes and the other numerous motifs.

It can be observed one important trend in the development of the Late Antique mosaic schemes and its separate motifs, connected in one or another way with the cross. Some traditional schemes and motifs are consciously compared and likened to crosses, but the process is made in a delicate and not direct way. Inevitably, the problem of identifying a Christogram and a real cross arises, since in the Roman and Late Antique mosaic art there are traditional schemes and figures similar to the cross, which in fact are not connected with or originating from the Early Christianity. Such is the Chrismon-like figure (the so-called 'double cross'), appearing several times in two modifications in the mosaic panels of the Late antique villa in Filipovtsi (Figs. 16a-16b), now a quarter of Sofia (Pillinger



Figure 15  
Early Christian ring in the form of a Greek cross. After Google.



Figure 16a  
Villa at the village of Filipovtsi near Serdica. The exedra. Detail with the 'Double cross'. After Pillinger et al. 2016.

Figure 16b  
Villa at the village of Filipovtsi near Serdica. The exedra, colour reconstruction of the panel with the 'double cross'. After Pillinger et al. 2016.

et al. 2016: 320-325). In spite of the strong resemblance with the Chi-Ro sign, they don't have the letters Ro, Alpha and Omega<sup>6</sup>. In the same way, because of the numerous cross-configurations, for instance bare crosses in the general scheme, this figure from the episcopal basilica in Marcianopolis (Fig. 17) is still not a Christian cross, but inherited from the traditional Roman pagan mosaics. Another mosaic from Augusta Traiana-Beroe (Fig. 18) has the same kind of a cross, but this time filled in alternation in two ways: with guilloche and with elements of 'the rainbow style'. In one Transjordan's funerary chapel (Habas 2015: fig. 13) the single cross is filled also with a guilloche, but in Augusta Traiana they are numerous, not single. The observations on the other fillings of this pavement show that other kinds of crosses have been also included in the octogons, among them cross with the Greek type, but with doubled arms

<sup>6</sup> We don't know if the mosaic was found in a good state or these letters were really absent; or the designer has not noticed the letters or its remnants.



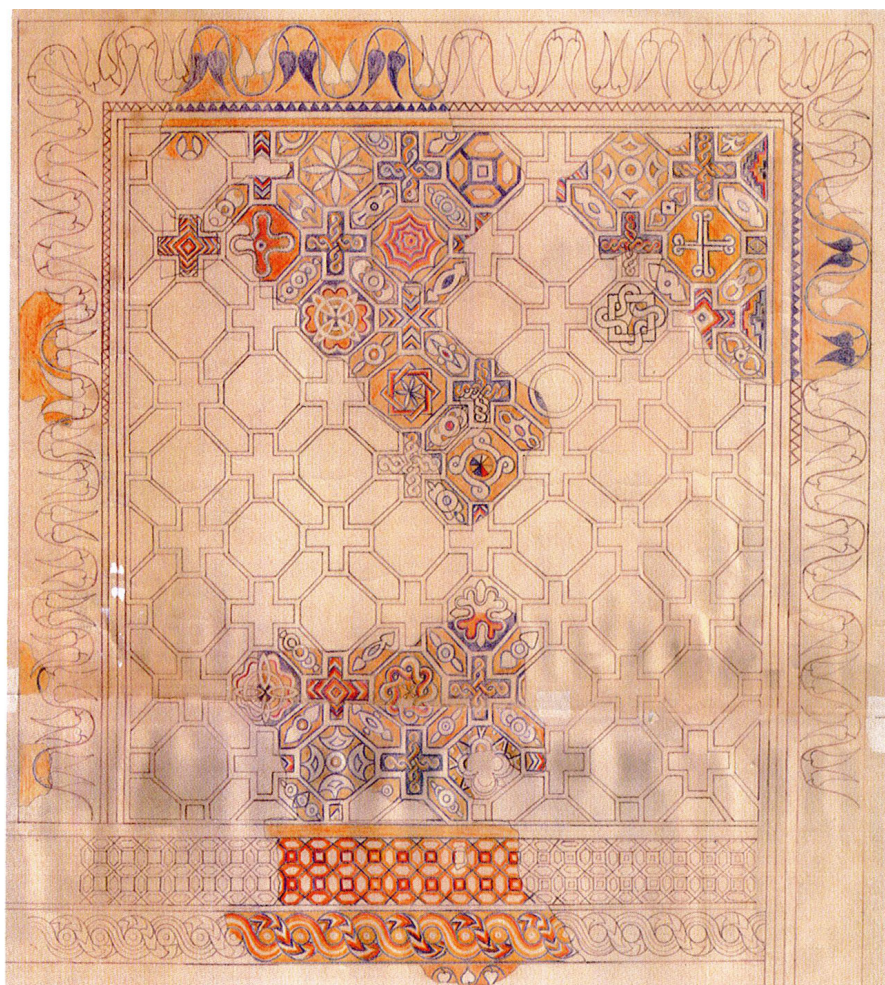


Figure 17  
The Episcopal basilica in Marcianopolis/  
Devnya, detail of the cross-configuration of  
the mosaic scheme.

Figure 18  
Mosaic pavement of the bath of the building  
of the crossing of Graf Ignatiev str. and Ruski  
bul. in Stara Zagora. Drawing of K. Kalchev.  
Regional Historical Museum Stara Zagora.

and rounded and plaited in their ends; also small crosses inside a compound rosette; x-like cross, etc. In this case the inherited pagan scheme is to some degree Christian inserting the Early Christian notion in many repeated forms and decoration of the Greek cross. All they are either equal by size, or very similar, also with inserted contemporary 'fashionable' colouring and design. In that sense the monument from Augusta Traiana-Beroe is very dualistic: it copies the pagan scheme, but gives a tendentious Christian turn. However, its decorativeness and bright colours both mask and balance the effect of the crosses, which only distantly remind the liturgical and the personal ones.

The criteria for a cross in the usual, non-Arianic milieu or non-heretical one depends on the configuration, distinguished by the colour or the size of the contour; by the metal colour/s (bronze, silver and gold); by the number of repetitions of the cross; by any technical, iconographic or colourist accents distinguishing this element from the others, and by the whole repertoire, including the Early Christian symbols and its general message, revealing the main trend of the adequate period. This may be checked on the examples of the compound rosette, so often shown on the Late Antique pavements from 4<sup>th</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> century: usually they are very veristic and artistic representations of the botanic elements, but not Christian crosses (Pillinger et al. 2016: Taf. 139, Abb. 362; Taf. 169, Abb. 435; Taf. 269, Abb. 645). The only certain cross representation is shown in one rosette from the Episcopal basilica on 'Khan Krum' str. in Varna/Odessos (Fig. 19), (Pillinger et al. 2016: 25-36) where the cross-like central configuration is with 'flourishing ends'. The cross form is repeated several times in diminishing size to the centre, and in the change of the colour and the





Figure 19  
Mosaic detail from the Episcopal basilica of Odessos. Compound rosette with the cross in the centre. After Pillinger et al. 2016.



Figure 20  
The so-called Small basilica of Philippopolis in Thrace. The ringed mosaic cross, detail. After Pillinger et al. 2016.

background. As a real cross should be also identified the single represented motif of the so-called ringed cross (placed in a circle, or nimbus, or sun-cross) from the Small basilica of Philippopolis (Fig. 20) (Pillinger et al. 2016: 227-238). It is very well underlined/distinguished by its design, colour, and repetition of the configuration, very distinctively and plastically treated by its general dimensions and the large-scale elements of the guilloche in comparison to the other figures. The increasing number of the dominant Greek cross and other kinds of crosses and Chi-Ro signs, and the general trend to liken some traditional inherited forms to the Christian cross in the pavement mosaics most probably caused the official reaction. It was expressed both by the church and the Early Byzantine emperors, namely in the appearing of the laws of Valentinian I and Theodosius II with the ban of putting the cross on the floor, worshipping it like idolatry representation and using as apotropeion. That's why these signs could be used according to the new regulations only on the walls, vertical surfaces, of the liturgical furniture and objects, cancel screens, and only as exclusion on the floor in the cancel and the altar. The Christogram was placed in the apse of the stibadium of the urban houses and villas already in the Constantinian period and it remained in the apse of the basilicas, martyria and churches till the end of Late Antiquity, seen also from basilica No 1 in Mikrevo, not far from Sandanski (Figs. 21-22) (Pillinger et al. 2016: 382-384). The remnants east of the staurogram reveal that there were more representations and symbols in the compositions, unfortunately not preserved in that part of the mosaic composition. The rich, but very formal and unclearly represented motifs flanking the Chrismon aside remind to some



Figure 21  
The remnants of the Chi-Rho sign in the apse of basilica No 1 in Mikrevo, After Pillinger et al. 2016.



Figure 22  
Reconstruction of the mosaic composition of the cancel and the apse with the Chi-Rho of basilica No 1 in Mikrevo. According to Pillinger et al. 2016.





Figure 23

The Hetoimasia. Wall mosaic in the Arian baptistery of Ravenna. After Google.

Figure 24

The mosaic of the baptisterium of basilica No 1 in Mikrevo. After Pillinger et al. 2016.

extent the Hetoimasia/Hetimasia/ Etimasia, the prepared Throne for Christ and the Last Judgement, shown on some Early Christian reliefs and on wall mosaics in Ravenna, Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome, etc. (Fig. 23). In this way, it seems that the apse mosaic pavement of basilica No 1 from Mikrevo is somehow influenced by the Italian wall compositions usually represented on the triumphal arc or on the walls of central-planned buildings. Additionally, the baptistery of the same basilica in Mikrevo (Fig. 24) is formed as cross with four petals, the flaring ends of each petal covered with four circles differently coloured as if precious stones in the bejewelled style. In this way, the architectural form of the cross of the baptistery contains mosaic decoration in the form of a special cross, i.e. cross in the cross. They both express here the death of the previous pagan soul, the birth of the neophyte for a new life in Christianity; the victory over death, the resurrection of Our Lord, the cosmic essence etc. Generally, this image reminds the form and decoration of the golden crosses, represented on the wall mosaics of the official monuments, known also from the refined liturgical processional crosses and personal Christian crosses (Fig. 25). The proposed date of the mosaic baptistery in Mikrevo is the second half of 5<sup>th</sup> century. Naturally, this baptisterium mosaic has been also stepped over during the ritual. Thus, when the ritual itself acquires the movement over the mosaic, the contradiction between the holiness of the cross and the stepping over it is decided in favour and compromise with the ritual.

In the Early Byzantine Parthicopolis, a long mosaic building inscription of bishop Ioannes has been excavated in the exonarthex of basilica No 2 (Figs. 26a-26b) (Pillinger et al. 2016: 356-370). The inscription begins with the Latin cross. The exonarthex was the first room (although at that I building period opened from the west with colonnade), sanctifying the space of the basilica with Christian holiness after the non-sacred atrium, the latter accessible both for Christians and non-Christians. The holiness is gradating, increasing from the entrance towards the chancel and the apse in horizontal direction, and from the floor to the ceiling/vault in vertical direction, according to the notions of gradation and holiness of the supreme spheres of Heaven, Paradise and God, after the preceding them lower levels of the Earth and the Ocean, comparing the church building to the cosmos structure. In this way, from the entrance all the members of the ecclesia taking part in the liturgy and the other rituals were passing through and over the inscription. However, the cross, being placed at the utmost left end of the inscription, remains unreachable, but readable. The mosaic inscription of bishop Ioannes is dated around 451, the year of the Chalcedonian Council, i.e. the last years of the rule of Pulheria and Marcian, or the immediate post-Theodosian period, very near to the date of issue of the

Figure 25

A gold cross with flaring ends, after Google.





Figure 26a  
The mosaic inscription of bishop Ioannes from the exonartex of basilica No 2 of Parthicopolis. Photo Archaeological museum Sandanski.



Figure 26b  
Detail from 26 a. Photo Svetla Petrova.

prohibition of Theodosius II on the cross' use on the floor.<sup>7</sup> The exception and regulation of such usage has been made namely for the bishop's inscriptions, for the cited texts with liturgical purposes from the Old and New Testament, for the decisions made in the name of the Christian God, and in the Christian tomb inscriptions; they all begin often with the cross denoting the religion, the church and the church institution issuing it. But in the case with the inscription of bishop Ioannes, the most important function was to sanctify the space, in order to form the hierotopia of the Christian temple, and also to confirm the authority of the bishop in the city of Parthicopolis by his building act (Lidov 2006). Another result of placing the inscription with the cross on the floor is that it becomes not only words of the speech, the Christian literature and the religion, but also a teaching material monument (Leathebury 2019: 205-220). The inscription is integrated fully in the material architecture, among the stones, the bricks, the mosaic tesserae (made of stone, brick and smalti), in the light of the candles, the sun rays piercing through the glass windows, the glittering of the bronze, silver and golden liturgical crosses etc. From the end of 4<sup>th</sup> – first half of 5<sup>th</sup> century, the Latin cross is also widely used and dominating in the wall paintings, tomb and mosaic inscriptions.

### Conclusions

In the historical development, the cross passes through several periods. For the moment, in the cited cases from Bulgaria, the reasons for placing the mosaic crosses on the floor each time were different. We can suppose that the explanations may be connected with some historical, liturgical and cultural circumstances in the Balkan provinces. During 4<sup>th</sup> century, the traditional mosaic schemes and motifs have been inherited but its symbolic changed in the spirit of Christianity: the swastika-meander protected already the church interior, the lozenge symbolizes the four-element-structure of the Christian Universe, the previous pagan fons vitae, place of dwelling of the river and ocean deities, and the Tree of Life connecting the land with the heaven, have gained new Christian

<sup>7</sup> The relating of the inscription to 6<sup>th</sup> century in some studies is not correct, because it has been laid during the first period in the middle of 5<sup>th</sup> century, see Leathebury 2019.



connotations and new topography in the Heavenly Paradise. The new cult of the Chi-Ro sign and the Christian cross since the Late Tetrarchic - Constantinian periods developed a lot of its new forms, iconographies and technique of making, especially under the influence and presence of mosaicists from the Eastern Mediterranean, with its very rich figural and liturgical repertoire, as in the case of the cosmologic mosaic in the domus of Augusta Traiana-Beroe. In this domus the appearance of the cross is due to the lack of any regulation at the moment of acknowledgement of Christianity as official religion equal to the existing pagan one. At the time of the Edicts of 311 and 313, there still were no rules and restrictions, except the secret and symbolic language developed in the Early Christian liturgy and art in the period 1<sup>st</sup> – 3<sup>rd</sup> century.

The rare appearance of the cross as a symbol of Christ in the first half of 4<sup>th</sup> century on the mosaic pavements can receive a plausible explanation in the traditional paidea of the classification and significance of deities as supreme ones, or just as important either secondary ones, or as natural forces and personifications. It should be taken into consideration that even in paganism the supreme gods have been rarely represented on the floor, except in few large Late Antique cosmogonic compositions. Usually Zeus/Jupiter and Hera/Junona are shown mainly in monumental round sculptures in the interior and or as reliefs on the walls, but not on the floors, especially in the pagan temples. Preferred for the pavements are the secondary gods, personifications and the heroes and heroines 'suffering' in the myths from the supreme or important gods, but not the latter themselves in anthropomorphic form. For instance, more often Zeus in the myth of Ganimed is represented as eagle; Ariadna is often without Dionysos; Marsyas without Apollo, etc. Often the accent is on the breaking of the ban and the adequate punishment of the hero/heroine. This earlier classification of sacredness and tradition of piety to the supreme pagan gods was most probably continued in at the beginning of Late Antique times, however transformed and applied to the Early Christian God, to his main symbol the Cross, all the personalities from the Bible, the Christian narratives, the martyr stories etc. without a special law at the beginning, just as an inherited 'paidea' tradition in culture and art.

In 4<sup>th</sup> century, this revealing of the cross is still modest, it is still not dominating, except the Chi-Ro sign, introduced by Constantine I on the official level. From the very first appearing, this sign was considered as the main one, first in the official, and after that in the private art. The Chi-Ro was intended for the main decoration on the wall, and on the most important place in the basilica – the apse, accessible only to the clergy, and the sign free from profanation by putting it on the extremity of any composition and isolated from the walkers. The second exception has been made quite understandable also for the decoration of the baptismal fons, where the neophytes and the priest stay during the ritual. The multi-layered symbolic of the cross allowed this form to be doubled: in the form of the piscine itself and in its mosaic decoration.

From the middle of 4<sup>th</sup> century and probably almost up to the middle of 5<sup>th</sup> century a new trend has arisen to represent one or numerous small Greek crosses and the Chi-Ro sign in the basilicas, urban houses and the monuments created by the Arians, under the influence of the emperors-Arians or the Goths-Arians living in the Balkans. The issue of the regulation laws and prohibitions of several emperors was a reaction namely to the increasing number of the cross representations and the incorrect way of worshipping. But generally, from the analysis of the monuments it becomes obvious, that the crosses at that period are small-sized and mostly repeating elements, not especially underlined, looking like the other geometric and floral elements and fillings, and part of

the general mass repertoire. Another trend was to make some traditional cross-like pagan configurations similar to the Early Christian cross. For that reason, sometimes the firm determination of a real cross from them becomes impossible or doubtful. The similarity of some traditional cross-like elements to the cross is very discrete and made in the motifs, scattered among the other ones and the Early Christian symbols.

However, from the second half of 5<sup>th</sup> century onwards we can note a new trend of increasing the size of the cross on the important liturgical places and the Chi-Ro sign in the apse. In May 2022 a paper was read on the mosaic representations of crosses from 6<sup>th</sup> century found in the area of Hadrianopolis.<sup>8</sup> After the expected publication, it probably will become clear if this is due to the wide spread of the cross on the crowns of the emperors and empresses, on the coins etc., especially in the period of Justinian I, or to another reason. It is also an interesting problem why this happened only in the territory of Hadrianopolis.

It seems that the obvious trend of increasing the non-correct usage of the cross as a mean of magic and the inappropriate place and attitude to the cross caused the prohibitions of Valentinian I and Theodosius II. In spite of them, new non-announced tacit regulation was made concerning the official inscriptions of bishops, judging by the putting of the cross at the beginning of the Christian inscriptions made by the representatives of the church authorities, or citing the Holy Scripture, or sanctifying the church space, or praying for the dead, etc. Of course, the Christians would never step over the cross itself, placed on purpose at the extreme edge of the inscription. By this, the cross is well seen for grasping and reading, but not accessible for stepping over it and profanation.

But soon after the laws have been issued, no other mosaics pavements appeared in the ancient provinces of present-day Bulgaria with obviously shown crosses, except at the beginning of official and building inscriptions, and the cited monument from Storgosia supposedly Arianic. Finally, the Christogram from the very beginning has been inserted in the most holy and far from the laity and profanation places: in the chancel and the apse, on the chancel screens, ambo, capitals and imposts, on the walls and the vault, on the martyrs' relics, sacerdotal vestments etc.

In comparison to some Eastern provinces, in most of the lands of Thracia, Moesia, Scythia, Dacia and Macedonia the cross and the Chrismon, with the exception of basilica No 4 in Parthicopolis, were rarely put on the mosaic pavements as a single or numerous signs, following the tacit agreement they to be unreachable for walkers and only seen, but not stepped and profaned. Some sporadically and isolated monuments do not change the picture, especially after the laws have been issued, the further tacit regulations and the arising new tradition allowing in some liturgical cases and on special occasions the cross to be used on the floor too.

The observations show that most of the represented crosses in diverse iconographies are woven in the general composition, they don't play a leading role, and are equal in its significance to the other Early Christian symbols, and geometric or plant motifs. The spread of the cult of the cross has invoked the mild including of several types of crosses (cross patée, Greek crosses, cross with round ends, ringed cross, Latin cross, 'wooden' cross) in the schemes in a harmonious, not striking and discrete way. It should be noted that the Greek cross is dominant till the end of 4th century. The exceptions when the cross is

8 Ercan Verim, Ersin Çelikbaş. Cross Motifs on Mosaic Floors in Hadrianopolis. 6<sup>th</sup> Symposium on Mosaics, Mudanya, Turkey, 2022, Abstracts, p. 101.

bigger and underlined in a special way concerns the Chi-Ro sign or the cross at the beginning of a mosaic building inscription of the bishop. A strong influence and dependence of the cross representations from the real liturgical and personal crosses and encolpia can be found in the Late Antique mosaic pavements of Bulgaria.

The cross became the quintessence of the new Christian Orthodox religion and the piety to it was quite adequate including the prohibition of placing the cross on the pavement mosaics and the regulation of the exceptions in the rituals and in sanctifying use.

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