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**MONUMENTAL BURIAL COMPLEX OF THE ROMAN AGE
FROM THE TERRITORY OF BULGARIA**

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Abstract

The article presents and analyzes one of the most interesting archaeological monuments on the territory of Southwest Bulgaria – the monumental tomb of the Roman age, discovered at the village of Krupnik, region of Blagoevgrad. During the Roman Age the area was within the endmost south territories of the province of Thrace. The burial complex is dated back to the second half of the 4th c. based on a coin of Emperor Procopius discovered in one of the premises. Having in mind the fact that the tomb is located under the terrain it could be considered a hypogeum. It consists of six vaulted rectangular chambers – one central and five surrounding of almost equal sizes – two at each side and one opposite to the entrance. Some parallels as it concerns plan could be found in the east Roman provinces. The tombs have one central chamber and the side premises are of smaller size and once performed the role of niches (loculi), in which the bodies of deceased were placed. This similarity in plan could be due to the presence of migrants on the valley of Struma from these lands. The plan of the tomb shows that the monument is not designed for a one-time use. It is a burial complex (probably family), although bones of buried deceased people have been found only in one of the lateral premises. It could be assumed that rituals were performed there related to necrolatry. Although the tomb is pertained to the period of initial enforcement of Christianity on these lands, there are no data defining it as an early Christian one. It is a sample of the Roman provincial burial architecture and is an indicator of the presence of a wealthier stratum of the local population.

Keywords

Roman age – Archaeological monument – Tomb – Burial complex – Hypogeum

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Introduction

The subject of this text is one of the most interesting archaeological monuments on the territory of Southwest Bulgaria – the monumental tomb, discovered at the village of Krupnik, region of Blagoevgrad. During the Roman Age the area was within the endmost south territories of the province of Thrace. The purpose of this article is to present and analyze this monument in the context of the monumental burial complexes of the Roman Age.

On the territory of the village of Krupnik there is a variety of archaeological monuments found. In the east part of the village, near the river of Struma the remains of a settlement of the late Roman Age were established on the ruins of which during the Middle Ages a necropolis was located¹. “Gradishteto” Fortress is located 2.5 km to the southwest of the village, it is dated back to the period of 4th–6th c., and on its remains a medieval fortress was built-up (13th–14th c.).² The fortress had military and strategic functions in controlling the northern approach to the gorge of Kresna along which the central communication artery in the district passed. Remains of a road were found 1.5 km to the west of the village, a road running to the direction of the fortress. Its remains can be traced approx. 500–600 m with some interruptions³.

Archaeological excavations on the territory belonging to the village of Krupnik contributed to the exploration of an ancient building (1985)⁴, determined to be a “Roman villa” and a necropolis of the 1st–2nd c. in the area of Beglika (1988)⁵. According to Ventsislav Dinchev, the identification of the building cannot be a categorical one as the presence of the nearby “Late antique settlement” means that apart from being the core of *villa rustica*, this architectural complex in question might also prove to be a household of a wealthy inhabitant of *vicus*⁶.

During an archaeological detour of the terrain of the area of Drene a large settlement of the Roman Age was registered evidenced by significant archaeological remains – stone bases, columns, architraves, etc., proving the existence of large public buildings⁷. The known triconchal episcopal church was studied that is located approx. 600 m to the southeast of the center. A Christian necropolis of the period of 12th–14th c. was excavated around the church⁸.

The burial complex that makes the subject of this text was found accidentally in year 1934 at the area of Sv. Georgi. It had been opened and most probably robbed in ancient times just like the majority of the monumental tombs. The slab covering the entrance was not at its place when the complex was found out and this way the steps leading downwards

¹ S. Stanchev, “Trikonhalna tsarkva v s. Krupnik, Blagoevgradsko”, *Arheologiya* num 3 (1960): 43–44.

² I. Petrinski, “837–1395 g. Srednostrumskiyat ukrepen rayon: elementi na sistemata”, *IIMBI* num 3 (2003): 51.

³ Ts. Dremsizova-Nelchinova, *Arheologicheski pametnitsi v Blagoevgradski okrag* (Sofiya, 1987).

⁴ Yu. Bozhinova, “Spasitelni razkopki na antichna sgrada v s. Krupnik, Blagoevgradski okrag”, *AOR prez num 1985* (1986).

⁵ Yu. Bozhinova, “Rimski nekropol v m. Beglika, s. Krupnik, Sofijska oblast”, *AOR prez num 1988* (1989): 89–90.

⁶ V. Dinchev, *Rimskite vili v dнешnata balgarska teritoriya* (Sofiya, 1997).

⁷ Yu. Bozhinova, “Novi dannii za poselishtniya zhivot po dolinata na Sredna Struma prez antichnostta”, *IIMBI* 3 (2003): 45–46.

⁸ S. Stanchev, *Trikonhalna tsarkva...*

might be seen. The monument was revealed at a depth of approx. 0.50–0.60 m below the surface which is the reason for the sunken vault.

The tomb was published in a short announcement back in year 1935 made by the architect Aleksandar Rashenov who visited the place being delegated by the then Archaeological Museum in Sofia⁹. Since then it has not been a subject of a particular study and has only been mentioned within the context of other studies. In year 1973 the monument was entered into the Archaeological Monuments list of the Committee of Arts and Culture in the region of Blagoevgrad, and in year 1987 – into the catalogue of Tsvetana Dremsizova-Nelchinova¹⁰.

Based on the typology of the burial facilities of the Roman Age in Southwest Thrace developed by the author the tomb at the village of Krupnik belongs to type VII, 3 – tombs of complex plan (monumental burial complexes)¹¹. This type includes the solid one-chamber and multi-chamber tombs with a complex layout built-up with bricks or stones. Typical examples are the tomb at Stroevo, region of Plovdiv¹², the tomb of Pomorie, region of Burgas¹³, the tomb at Babovo, region of Ruse¹⁴, some of the tombs of the city necropolis of Odessos, etc.

The tomb of Odessos with its octagonal plan of the central chamber presents a particular interest¹⁵. It is evident from the examples that such burial complexes are met both in the tumulus and the flat necropolises. At some of them syncretism is clearly observed typical for the burial architecture during the Roman Age on the Thracian lands.

The tomb at the village of Krupnik is a monumental complex consisting of six vaulted chambers – one central and five surrounding it (figs. 1–3). The access is through a staircase consisting of five stairs built of bricks. The staircase leads to a central rectangular room with the following size: length – 2.30 m, width – 1.75 m and height – 1.60 m.

The other five rectangular chambers are located around that central room – two at each side and one opposite to the entrance. They are almost of the same size – length – 1.50 m, width – 1.30 m and height – 1.25 m. In Architect Rashenov's opinion there were two more rooms under the stairs¹⁶.

⁹ A. Rashenov, "Grobnitsa pri s. Krupnik", IBAI num 8 (1935): 434–438.

¹⁰ Ts. Dremsizova-Nelchinova, Arheologicheski pametnitsi...

¹¹ M. Georgieva, Pogrebalni praktiki v Yugozapadna Trakiya prez rimskata epoha (I–IV vek), Avtoreferat (Blagoevgrad, 2009).

¹² D. Tsonchev, "Trakiyska mogilna grobnitsa v Stroevo", GNAMP num 4 (1960): 101–120.

¹³ T. Petrov; I. Venedikov y B. Kuzupov, Antichnata grobnitsa kray Pomorie (Sofiya, 1960).

¹⁴ D. Ivanov, "Grobnitsata-mavzoley kray selo Babovo i neynite drevnotrakiyski paraleli", TAB num 3 (1988): 99–105.

¹⁵ M. Mirchev, Pametnitsi na grobnata arhitektura v Odesos i negovata okolnost, In Izsledvaniya v chest na akad. Dimitar Dechev po sluchay 80-godishninata mu. (Sofiya, 1958).

¹⁶ A. Rashenov, Grobnitsa...

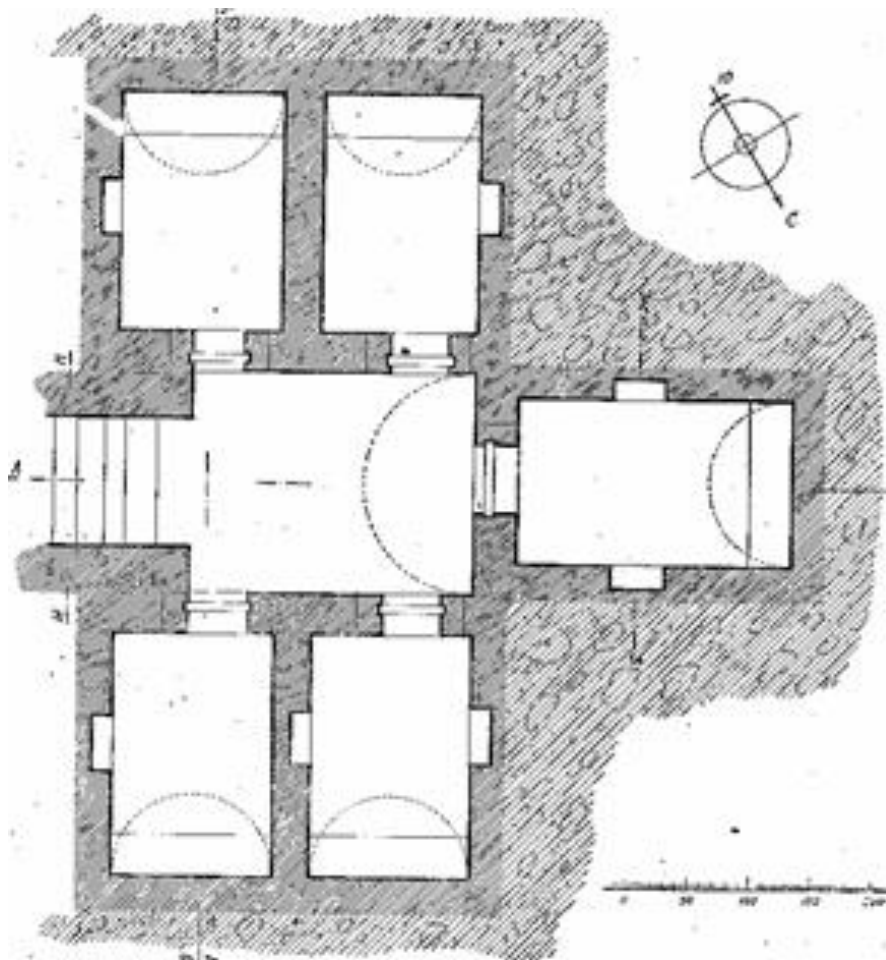


Fig. 1

Plan of the monumental burial complex at the village of Krupnik, region of Blagoevgrad (after A. Rashenov, Grobnitsa..., 434, fig. 246)

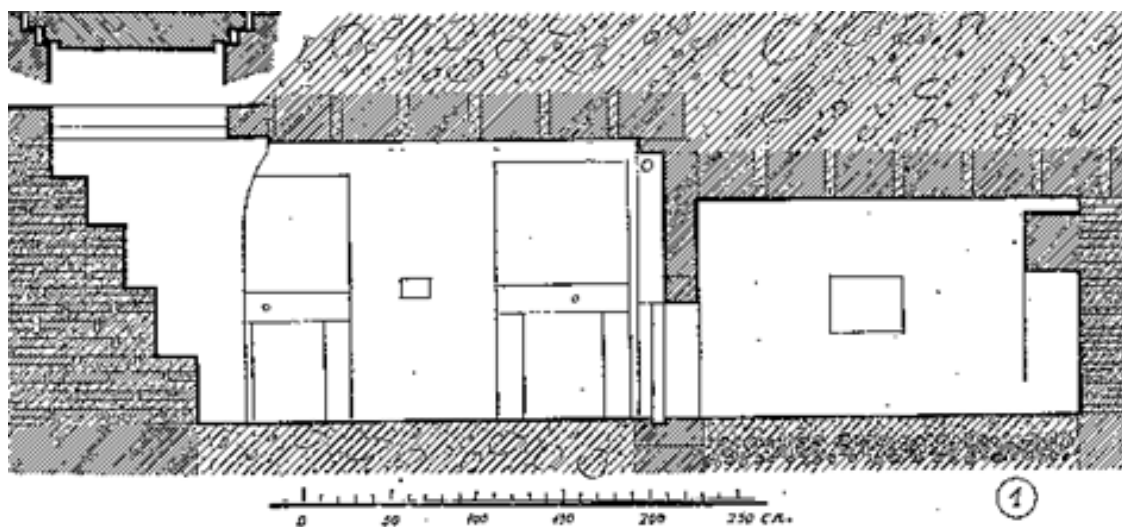


Fig. 2

Section of the monumental burial complex at the village of Krupnik, region of Blagoevgrad (after A. Rashenov, Grobnitsa..., 435, fig. 247, section AB)

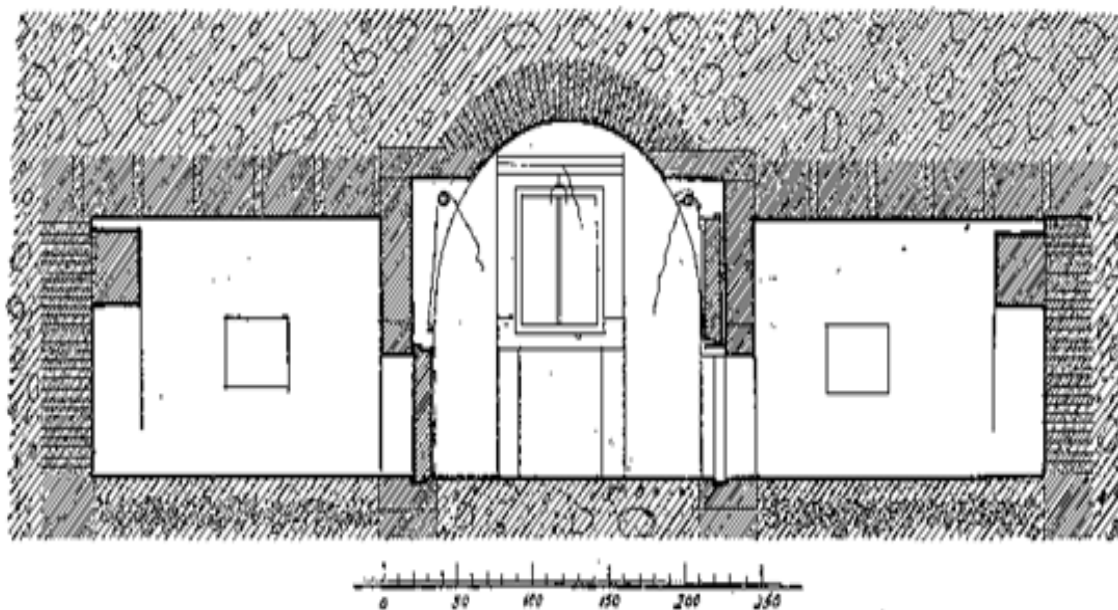


Fig. 3

Section of the monumental burial complex at the village of Krupnik, region of Blagoevgrad (after A. Rashenov, Grobnitsa..., 435, fig. 248, section BG)

Each of the lateral chambers is accessible through a hole with dimensions – width of 0.45 m and height of 0.60 m. They are covered with stone slabs. From the doors opening and closing facilities it can be concluded that the chambers were intended for use although no signs of use have been found (like wear of the grooves and the parts of the slabs inserted into them). The construction is solid built of bricks and stones. The walls and vaults are brickwork, and the frames and doors of the side chambers, as well as the entrance door – stonework. The bricks are 0.33 x 0.35 x 0.04 m in size cemented with mortar mixed with broken bricks and gravel. The floors of the lateral rooms are covered with an approx. 0.10 m layer of the same mortar as the one used in the building. Below the mortar layer there is one more layer of small gravel with a thickness of approx. 0.15 m. The floor of the middle room is directly on the earth. Over the stone covering the tomb a layer of mortar of 0.30 m thickness was found, too. According to Aleksandar Rashenov there was such a layer over the entire tomb. The complex is coated with white plaster on the inside and traces of mural decoration were not found on it. There are small rectangular niches in the wall, built-up 0.45 m above the floor, with sizes: width – 0.40 m, height – 0.32 m, depth – 0.15 m. A smaller rectangular alcove is found in the middle room (0.17 m in width, 0.10 m in height, 0.19 m in depth; 0.70 m above the floor). No evidence of funeral equipment was established in the tomb. The only finding is a copper coin found in one of the lateral chambers where scattered human bones were also found. The coin is determined by Todor Gerasimov from the time of the Roman Emperor Procopius (365–366 AD)¹⁷.

The closest examples of monumental burial complexes in the district are the discovered tombs at the town of Sandanski and at the village of Drenkovo, municipality of Blagoevgrad. Two monuments originated from the antique city at Sandanski (province of Macedonia) and they are determined as tomb-mausoleums. One of them is dated back to the end of the 3rd c. – the first half of the 4th c., and the other – to the 2nd–3rd c., it was used after adoption of Christianity, too. The two complexes are located to the west where one of

¹⁷ A. Rashenov, Grobnitsa...

the necropolises of the ancient city is situated¹⁸. The tomb at the village of Drenkovo (province of Thrace) consists of three separate premises – one antechamber and two chambers of trapezium shapes and is pertained to the end of the 4th c. based on the coins found therein. On the territory of Southwest Thrace the facility to tumulus 3 of the necropolis at Nevestino, region of Kyustendil can be accepted as a monumental burial complex, it consists of a tumulus, a platform in front of the tumulus with compartments dug into under it. A masonry vaulted grave is located in one of the premises. A monumental burial building was also found at the suburban necropolis of Pautalia with graves in the underground part¹⁹.

The plan of the tomb at the village of Krupnik is the only one found as of nowadays on the territory of Bulgaria. Similar tombs in terms of plan are, for example, the tombs at Kochagovo (nowadays Stariya izvor), region of Pazardzhik²⁰ (fig. 4), the eastern necropolis of Serdica²¹ (fig. 5), the city necropolis of Augusta Traiana²² (fig. 6).

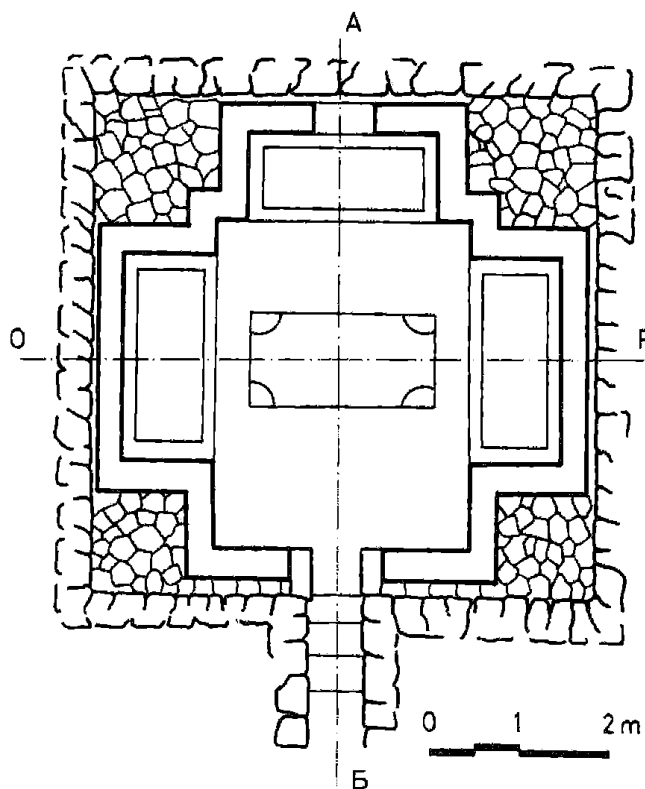


Fig. 4
Plan of the tomb at Kochagovo, region of Pazardzhik
(after K. Shalганov, *Mnogokamerna grobnitsa...*, 76, fig. 4)

¹⁸ M. Georgieva, *Nekropolite na antichniya grad pri Sandanski*, In *Studia archaeologica universitatis serdicensis. Suppl. IV. Stephanos Archaeologicos in honorem Professoris Ludmilli Getov*, edited by K. Rabadzhiev. Sofiya: Universitetsko izdatelstvo „Sv. Kliment Ohridski”, 2005.

¹⁹ M. Georgieva, *Pogrebalni praktiki...*

²⁰ I. Velkov, “Novootkriti starini”, *IBAI* num 4 (1927): 317–318.

²¹ K. Shalганov, *Mnogokamerna grobnitsa ot iztochniya nekropol na Serdika*, In *Serdika. Arheologicheski material i prouchvaniya. Tom II*. Sofiya, 1989, 74–77.

²² K. Kalchev, *Pogrebalni praktiki v nekropola na Avgusta Trayana /II–IV v./*, In *Parvi mezhdunaroden simpozium “Sevtopolis”. “Nadgrobnii mogili v Yugoiztochna Evropa”*. Kazanlak, 4–8 yuni 1993. Tom I. Veliko Tarnovo, 1994.

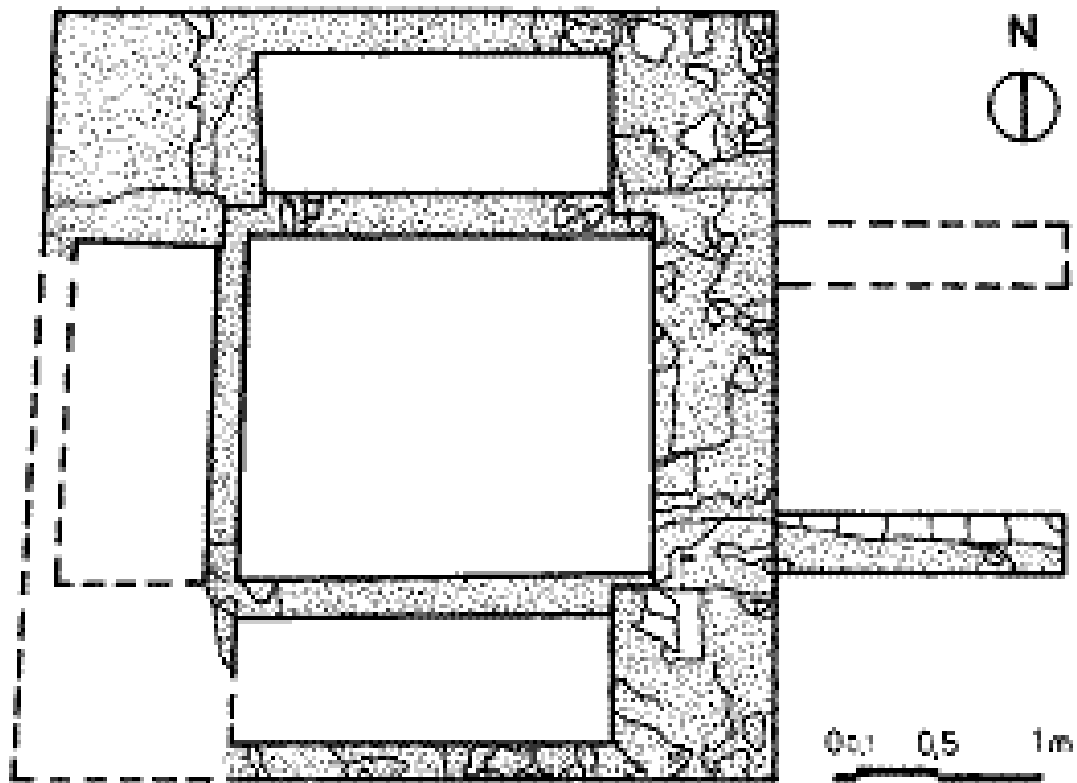


Fig. 5
Plan of tomb of the eastern necropolis of Serdica
(after K. Shalganov, *Mnogokamerna grobnitsa...*, 75, fig. 2)

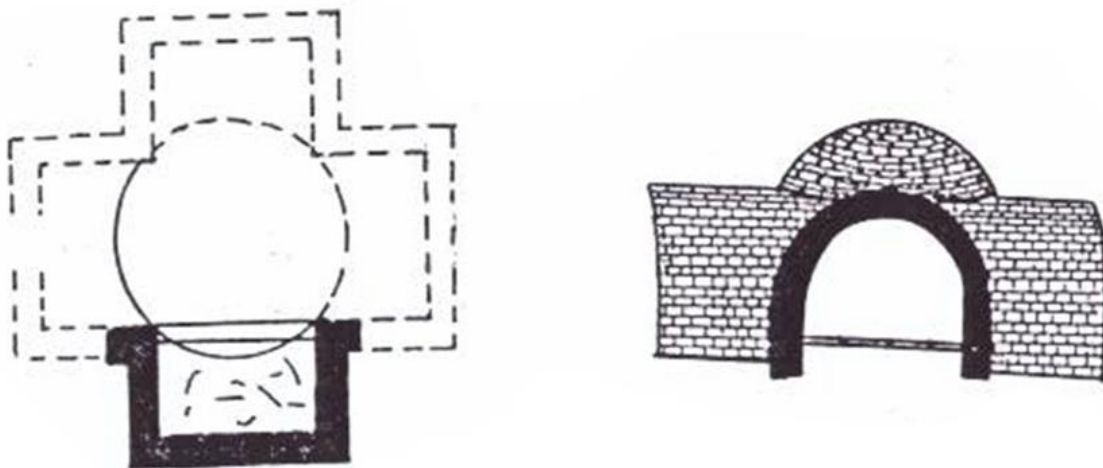


Fig. 6
Cruciform tomb of the necropolis of Augusta Traiana
(after K. Kalchev, *Pogrebalni praktiki...*, 213, fig. 3/2)

The tombs at Augusta Traiana and Serdica are dated back to the 4th c., and that at Kochagovo was initially dated back to the period of the 2nd–3rd c. (by I. Velkov), and later on – the 4th c. (by K. Shalغانov based on its plan). The tomb of the eastern necropolis of Serdica and that of Kochagovo are defined as “tombs of cross-shaped plan“. It is also considered that the tomb of the eastern necropolis of Serdica is a monumental surface mausoleum on two floors, with an underground burial space²³. The already mentioned tomb of Augusta Traiana can also be associated with that group, as it is also cross-shaped (fig. 6). Krasimir Kalchev indicates as an analogy of that tomb – the tomb of Weiden at Köln²⁴. However, the known Roman tomb at Köln (fig. 7) had been built up much earlier and is not related to the Christian symbolism in terms of plan. The complex at Köln is defined by J. M. C. Toynbee as a hypogeum-type tomb due to the fact that it is located under the ground. It was also used as a columbarium which is judged based on the large number of small niches on the side walls, in which urns with remains of cremation were placed. The tomb was used from the 1st/2nd c. up to the end of the 3rd c., and the latest small findings were dated back to the 4th c. Several generations of a wealthy Roman family were buried there²⁵.

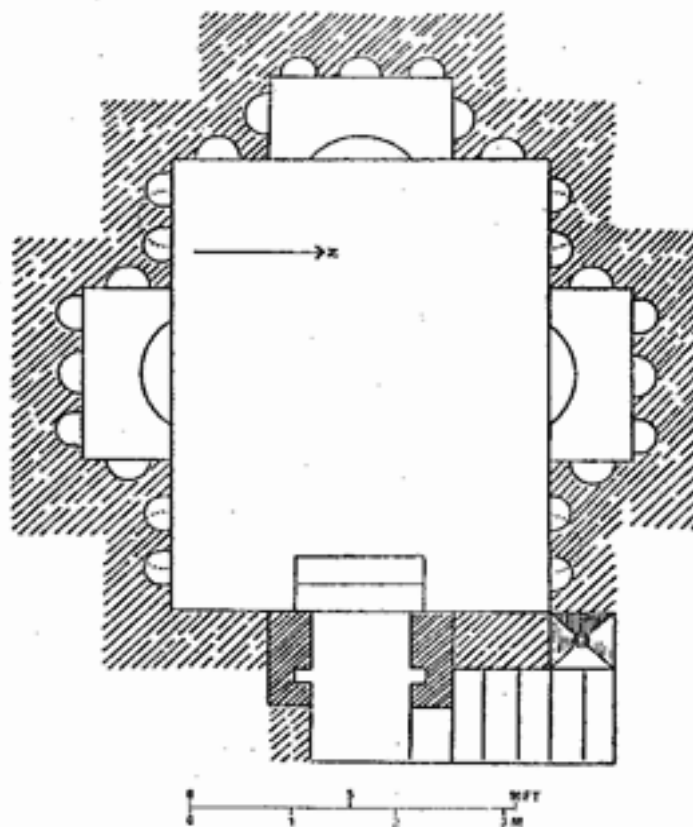


Fig. 7
Plan of the Roman tomb at Weiden, Köln (Germany)
(after J. M. C. Toynbee, *Death and Burial...*, 213, fig. 21)

²³ S. Boyadzhiev, *Serdika*, In *Rimski i rannovizantijski gradove v Bulgariya*. Tom I. Ivraj–Sofiya, 2002, 166–168.

²⁴ K. Kalchev, *Pogrebalni praktiki...*

²⁵ J. M. C. Toynbee, *Death and Burial in the Roman World*, Baltimore: John Hopkins Univ. Press, 1996, 212–216, fig. 21.

One of the monumental tombs of the necropolis of Durostorum has a cross shape of its inner room, it is dated back to the end of the 3rd – the beginning of the 4th c. The tomb has an octagonal plan with a cross inscribed into it (three arcosoliums around a square hall) and is related to the early Christian period in the region²⁶.

Georgi Atanasov describes it as a *martyrium*²⁷. Although some analogy in the layout could be found, the tomb at Krupnik is not close to that group – the tombs of cross-shaped plan.

Some parallels as it concerns plan could be found in the east Roman provinces in a wide chronological range. Such a planning scheme is typical of Jewish tombs of the first and second centuries CE²⁸.

Most of them were carved into caves. In the necropolises of Caesarea, they represent one of the common types of burial facilities characteristic of the Jewish community during the 1st c. CE²⁹.

Tombs with a similar plan are found in the necropolises of Beth Shean (Scythopolis) in Roman Palestine (figs. 8, 9)³⁰, Dura-Europos in Roman Syria (fig. 10)³¹ and others. The tombs have one central chamber and the side premises are of smaller size and once performed the role of niches (*loculi*), in which the bodies of deceased were placed.

Artefacts with Christian symbols have been found in some of the tombs in the northern necropolis of Beth Shean in Israel³². Similar tombs are found in the area and during the Early Byzantine period³³.

²⁶ P. Donevski, G. Miloshevich, "Kasnoantichni grobnitsi ot Silistra (Durostorum)", Dobrudzha 20 (2002): 43, табл. IV, 9, 10.

²⁷ G. Atanasov, "Za kasnoantichniya mavzoley-martiriy v Durostorum–Silistra i dorostolskite machenitsi Sv. Sv. Maksim, Dada i Kvintilian", Dobrudzha 20 (2002): 55–65.

²⁸ A. Nagorsky, "A Tomb from the Second Temple Period at Shoham", *Atiqot* 55 (2007): 43–49.

²⁹ Y. Porath, "Burials from the Roman and Byzantine Periods at Caesarea", *Atiqot* 55 (2007): 45–57, Plan 1.

³⁰ A. Emerson, "Life and Death at Beth Shean". *Expedition Magazine* 55.1 (2013): 28–32.

³¹ J. M. C. Toynbee, *Death and Burial...*

³² S. J. Fleming, *Roman Glass: Reflections on Cultural Change*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, 1999, 97–101.

³³ E. Kogan-Zehavi, "A Burial Cave of the Byzantine Period in the Nahalat Ahim Quarter, Jerusalem", *Atiqot* 54 (2006): 61–86.

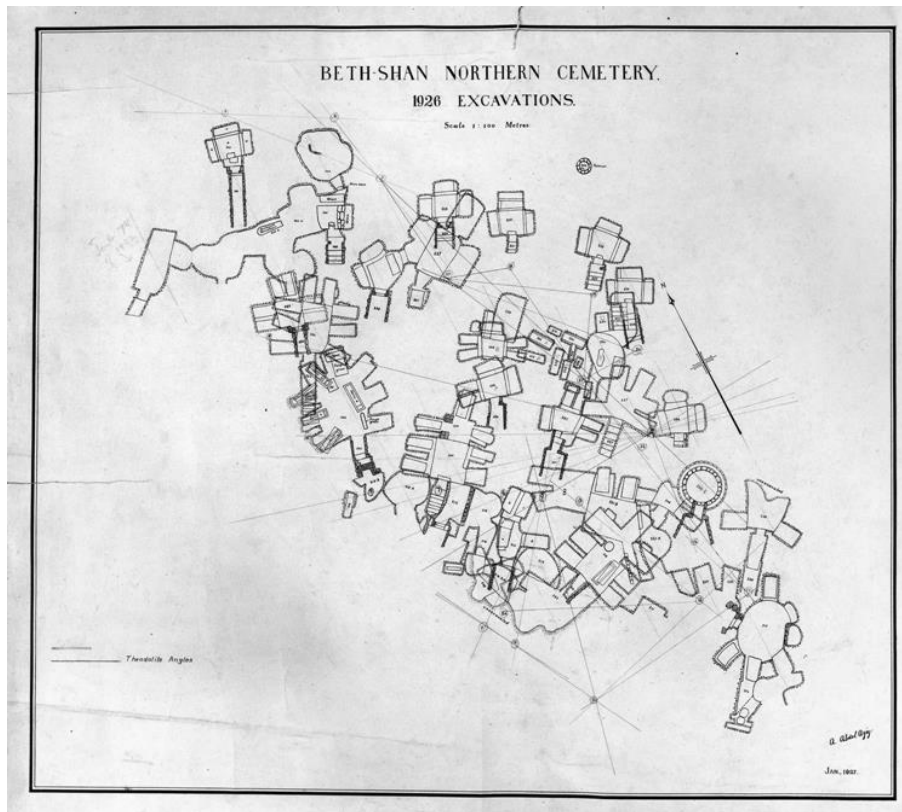


Fig. 8
Plan of the tombs excavated in 1926. Northern Cemetery of Beth Shean
(after G. M. Fitzgerald, „Excavations in..., 1922–1931)

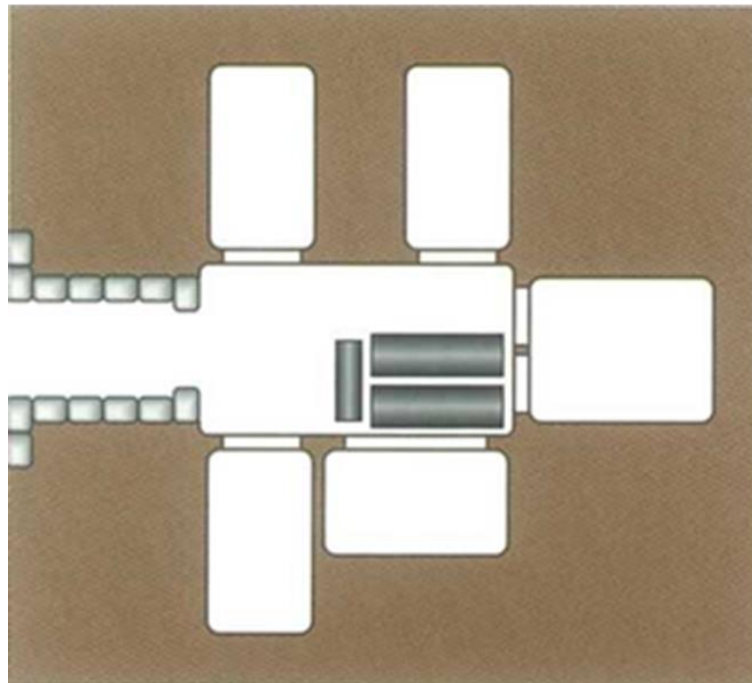


Fig.9
Plan of Tomb 295, Northern Cemetery of Beth Shean (Israel)
(after S. J. Fleming, Roman..., 99, fig. E. 46)

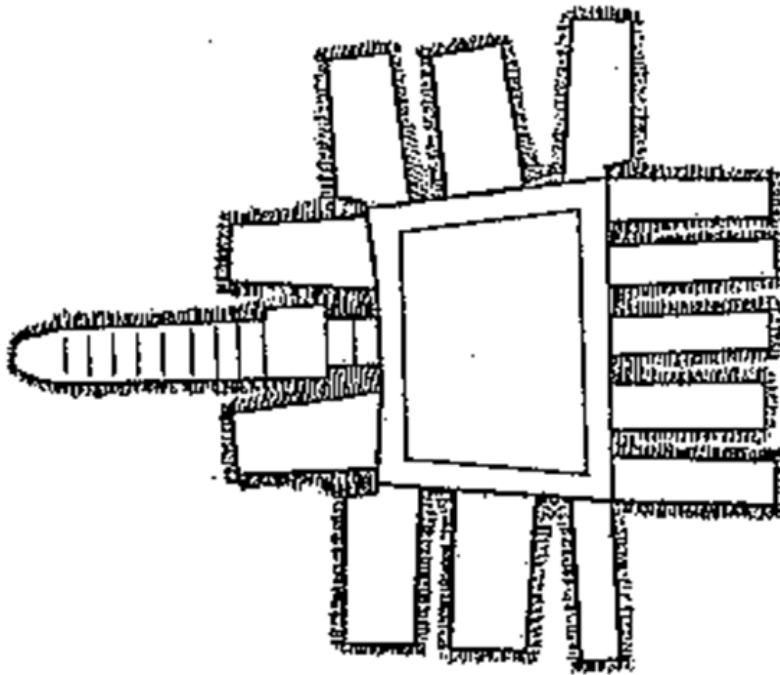


Fig. 10. Plan of Tomb 33, Group IX, at Dura-Europos (Syria) (after J. M. C. Toynbee, *Death and Burial...*, 222, fig. 25)

The similarity in the plan of the tombs of the eastern Roman provinces with the tomb of the village of Krupnik does not exclude the possibility of the presence of settlers along the Struma valley from these lands.

The plan of the tomb at Krupnik shows that the monument was not intended for a single use. Actually it is a burial complex (most probably a family one) in which burials were intended to be performed consecutively although bones were found only in one of the side premises. Having in mind the fact that the tomb is located under the terrain it could be considered a *hypogeum*³⁴. The possibility of performance of rituals related to the cult for the deceased cannot be excluded, too, although this tomb does not feature the representativeness of the hypogea in Palmira (Roman Syria)³⁵, for example, where some of the halls were used for cult purposes. It can be assumed that there was some marking of the monument on the surface, which is a common practice for the Roman burial complexes.

The monumental burial complex at Krupnik is an indicator of the economic and cultural prosperity of the region and of the presence of a wealthier stratum of local population evidenced by the archaeological discoveries. The coin from the time of Emperor Procopius (365–366) found in it, is of primary importance for its dating as it gives grounds to date it to the second half of the 4th c., and that is not contradictory to the manner of building.

Regardless of the fact that the tomb is dated to the period of initial imposing of Christianity on these lands, at the current stage there are no data allowing us to define it as early Christian (remains of mural decoration and artefacts with Christian symbols). It is a

³⁴ J. M. C. Toynbee, *Death and Burial ...*

³⁵ R. Amy, H. Seyrig, "Recherches dans la nécropole de Palmyre: I. L'hypogée de Iarhai fils de Barikhi, petit-fils de Taimarsô", *Syria* Vol: 17 num 3 (1936): 229–266.

representative of the Roman provincial burial architecture on the Thracian lands, for which a complete archaeological study in future shall bring further clarity.

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