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### **The Early Christian Episcopal Seats on the Territory of Serbia**

**Abstract:** *Foundation of the cities on the territory of today's Serbia started with the arrival of Romans. After Roman conquest was gradually carried out Romanization and urbanization. With the development of Christianity, new city quarters were formed, where objects of Christianity cult were stored. In the last phase of their development the antique cities became episcopal seats. During Justinian's reign many cities were built or restored, and new epoch started in the military, administrative and church view. The Emperor Justinian I built Caričin grad, i.e. Justiniana Prima, near his place of birth, Taurision, in Southern Serbia. Caričin grad served as the metropolitan seat of the Archbishopric of Justiniana Prima, that had jurisdiction over the provinces of the Late Roman Diocese of Dacia in central parts of the Southeastern Europe. The invasion of Gots, Huns, Avars and Slavs brought the break in development of the city life of Roman type. During the Early Middle Ages appeared the Serbian Principalities with new church organization.*

**Key words:** *Roman cities, Christianization, episcopal seats, baptisteries, territory of today's Serbia.*

Foundation of the cities on the territory of today's Serbia started with the arrival of Romans. After Roman conquest was gradually carried out Romanization and urbanization. With the development of Christianity, new city quarters were formed, where objects of Christianity cult were stored. The physical evidence for fourth-century church architecture in today's Serbia is quite meager. There are several reasons for this. None of the churches belonging to this earliest period of official Christian building actually survives. They were all destroyed, and were most often replaced by new churches built over their foundations or in the vicinity. Under such circumstances the remains of older structures are difficult to detect, even by carefully conducted archaeological investigations. An even more significant reason for our limited knowledge of fourth-century ecclesiastical architecture seems to be the plain fact that comparatively few such buildings were actually built. After the Edict of Milan in 313 AD the architectural patronage of Constantine and his successors was

largely focused on secular buildings, mainly fortifications, palaces and villas, in sharp contrast to their activities in other regions of the Empire. Not only the number, but apparently also the size of individual churches, the quality of their design, and their construction, were all considerably below the standards employed elsewhere.

In the last phase of their development the antique cities on the territory of today's Serbia became episcopal seats, such as Sirmium, Bassianae, Singidunum, Viminacium, Margum, Horreum Margi, Naissus, Remesiana, Turres, Ulpiana, Aquis, Gradina on Jelica, Felix Romuliana and Iustiniana Prima. [1, p. 9-25] Many episcopal centers are known only on the basis of written sources, and lists of bishops who participated in synods, but the remains of some episcopal basilicas have been archaeologically researched.

Even the smallest of cities were characterized by the prominent construction of churches, whose dimensions commonly seem to have been out of proportion to the probable population size [4, p. 77-84]. Equally important in the context of this period was the sense of urban presence that ecclesiastical buildings acquired. No longer tucked away in remote corners of urban conglomerations, fifth-century churches appeared prominently positioned within older cities, occupying sites previously reserved for temples and secular public buildings. Typological variety betrays not merely creative fervor among fifth-century builders, but rather an increasing complexity and sophistication in the planning of buildings that accommodated an expanding range of functional needs, reflecting the growing status of the Church [3, p. 23-52]. The dominant presence of churches on the urban scene of most cities during the fifth century cannot be denied, but factors other than the active Christianization of cities must not be ignored. The great emphasis on baptistery building in the course of the fifth century demonstrates the determination and rigor which the Church pursued the process of conversion among the indigenous population [2, p. 21-41]. The basilicas with baptisteries appeared in urban centers, and in the rural areas. The massive introduction of churches with accompanying buildings into the existing urban centers left an undeniable imprint on their character and their future urban development. A distinctive category of buildings combining

military with other functions made its appearance in this period due to the barbarian invasions. Thus, characteristic forms of fortification architecture quite commonly began to appear in conjunction with residential, ecclesiastical, and monastic buildings, while fortification architecture in its own right underwent a major decline. At times, these forms had a distinctly symbolic significance, but most often they were built with strictly military intent in mind.

The sixth century was a period of major landmarks in the history of the Christianized Roman Empire. Above all, the process of the Christianization of indigenous populations, begun two centuries earlier, was in some sense completed only then. History remembers Justinian's reign as the high point of the later Roman Empire. While secular architecture may be said to have led the way in creative expression during the fifth century, in the sixth century ecclesiastical architecture gradually took over the role. The architectural design of the age of Justinian reveals sophisticated advances emanating from earlier trends in late antique architecture, and introduction of domes into basilicas. During Justinian's reign (527-565) appeared two great Archbishoprics in Illyricum at the Balkan Peninsula, the Archbishopric of Salona under jurisdiction of the prefect of Italy, and the Archbishopric Justiniana Prima under jurisdiction of the prefect of Illyricum. Many cities were built or restored, protected with substantial circuits of wall, and new epoch started in the military, administrative and church view. The establishment of the Archbishopric Justiniana Prima is mentioned in Justinian's Novel XI from 535, when he promotes the metropolitan bishop to that of archbishop, independent from the Archbishopric of Thessalonica. After the fall of the Western Roman Empire the Archbishopric of Salona in Dalmatia recognized the supremacy of the patriarch of Constantinople [3, p. 23-52].

### *The Archbishopric of Justiniana Prima*

Sources mention that the Emperor Justinian I built Justiniana Prima, at a location known as Caričin Grad, near his place of birth, Taurisium, in Southern Serbia [5, p. 9-10]. Caričin grad served as the metropolitan seat of the Archbishopric of Justiniana Prima, that had jurisdiction over the provinces of the Late Roman Diocese

of Dacia in central parts of the Southeastern Europe. Iustiniana Prima is one of the most important sources of information on sixth century urbanism in Serbia.

The early Byzantine city is located near Lebane, about 28 km south of Leskovac. It was placed on an elevated and elongated plateau between two rivers, Svinjarička in the west and Caričinska in the east. It stretches for approximately 500 m in the northwest-southeast direction. Tsarica's city lies near the intersection of two important ancient roads. The north-south traffic artery that went through the Moravian-Vardar valley to Thessaloniki intersected with the Adriatic road.

The legend of the empress, after whom the city was named, is preserved in folklore. Most researchers believe that Justiniana I was there. The first Justiniana was the archbishopric seat of the entire northern part of Byzantine Illyricum. The names of three archbishops, Catellianus, Benenatus and Iohannes, are known.

No traces of life from the pre-Justinian era have been found in Caričin Grad. The city consisted of three distinctive entities: the acropolis with the episcopal complex, the upper town, and the lower town. [7, p. 7-86]. Each part is surrounded by special ramparts with towers, which provided favorable conditions for the defense of the city. Two long, parallel defensive trenches were dug in front of the southern rampart of Donji Grad.

Three phases of the city's development were established. In the first phase, the Upper and Middle towns with ramparts were built. They represent a unique urban entity. The Upper Town, i.e. the Acropolis, was built on the highest and almost completely leveled plateau. The rampart has an irregular polygonal shape. In the axis of Acropolis Street, on the eastern side, there is a gate flanked by semicircular towers. On the north side of the street is the architectural complex of the bishop's palace, and on the south is the episcopal church with a pool in the atrium and a baptistery. The Episcopal Church is a large three-nave and three-apsidal basilica with a narthex and an atrium, and north and south of the altar apse are the prothesis and diaconicon. The nave and narthex were decorated with floor mosaics.

In the central part of the atrium was a large piscina cut into the rock. Along the northern facade of the church, a number of rooms were attached, which primarily

communicated with the atrium. Alterations and adaptations were made in the church later. From the south aisle of the church, you enter the porch on the west side of the baptistery, so these buildings form one architectural unit. The baptistery has a square base, and the interior part of the building is tetraconchal. Conches are decorated with floor mosaics. In the central, circular space, on the place where the conchs were joined, four stone pedestals were found on which the pillars that supported the dome were placed. In the area under the dome was a piscina in the shape of a cross. The walls of the baptistery were decorated with frescoes and mosaics. The architectural complex next to the northern street portico of the acropolis consists of three buildings. The central building is the bishop's palace, which was richly decorated with frescoes and mosaics.

Around the Acropolis stretches the Middle Town, which, in its northern part, surrounds it almost in a circle, while in the south, towards the Lower Town, it sharply narrows. Gates flanked by towers were placed on the eastern and southern sides of the ramparts. The main streets intersect at the circular square. Fragments of a monumental bronze statue, most likely a standing figure of Justinian, were found in the middle of the square. Along the curb around the square, water drainage channels have been installed. Residential, commercial and craft complexes are arranged along the street square with porticoes. A basilica with a crypt was built to the northeast of the square. The basilica has three naves with an apse on the eastern side. The ground part under the church or "crypt" it is divided into several departments. In the middle part of the atrium, there is a paved channel. The church was decorated with frescoes and mosaics.

Baths and a triconchal church were discovered outside the city ramparts. There are thermal baths near the eastern gate of the Lower Town. Southeast of the Lower Town, a triconchal church was found, consisting of a single nave with an altar apse and side conchas, a narthex and an atrium. The church was decorated with frescoes and mosaics.

The third construction phase is characterized by the reconstruction and adaptation of street porticos, as well as the settlement of free spaces between

buildings, ramparts and streets, in all city districts. In this period, wooden huts were built on the ruins of older buildings. The influx of the surrounding population led to the disintegration of the original urban structure. The city is gradually being ruralized.

Sirmium is located in the area of today's Sremska Mitrovica. It was created in the back of the Danube limes, on the large northern bend of the Sava. After Dioclesian's reforms, it became the capital of the province of Second Pannonia. From the 3-4th century, *colonia Sirmium* was the seat of the governor of the province, the seat of the military command for the wider area, occasionally the seat of the prefecture of Illyricum.

During the 4th century, Sirmium was gradually Christianized. This is evidenced by necropolises from the 4-6th centuries. Sirmium was the episcopal seat from Constantine until the ruralization of the city and the loss of its role as a religious center in the middle of the 5th century. In the middle of the 3rd century, the number of foreigners increased, so the basic Christian nucleus was made up of Greeks. Irenaeus, the first bishop of Sirmium, died in 304. The names of several martyrs from the same time are known, Demetrius, Synerot, Anastasius, Hermagor or Hermogen. The prefect of Illyricum Leontius built the martyrium of St. Demetrius in Sirmium, and there were two more martyrdoms dedicated to the martyrs of Sirmium, Synerotus and Irenaeus [9, p. 17-87]. There was also built basilica dedicated to St. Irenaeus [8, p. 259-263]. On the right bank of the river, in Macvanska Mitrovica, there is a partially preserved martyrium above which three medieval churches dedicated to Saint Irenaeus were built, and on the eastern outskirts of the city there is a martyrium and a chapel that are probably dedicated to St. Dimitri and St. Anastasia. The names of the bishops of Sirmium can be traced back to the Avar conquests. Among them, Bishops Photin (343-351), Germanius (351-376) and Domnus (325-335), the participants in the Council of Nicaea in 325, stand out. Church councils in Sirmium in 351, 357, 358, 359, 371 and 378 were recorded.

Basiana is located near the village of Donji Petrovci in Srem, in the locality "Gradina". In late antiquity it was an episcopal seat. There are two basilicas in the

northeastern city. The three-nave basilica with an apse in the east, which was built in the period from the 4th to the 6th century, was examined.

Singidunum is a Roman city at the confluence of the Sava and the Danube, today's Belgrade. The first inscription on which Singidunum is mentioned as a colony dates back to the year 287. It is known that it was an episcopal center. Ursacius, bishop of Singidunum, was very influential during the reign of Constantius II. On the ruins of the ancient city, a new Slavic urban settlement of Belgrade was created in the 9th century, which was an important spiritual center and seat of Bishop Sergius [12, p. 32-73]. The former bishopric was restored after two centuries and became a medieval church center [11, p. 115-117]. A fragment of Byzantine stone sculpture that stood as a column of the iconostasis, on the left side of the altar door, decorated with bas-relief decoration on three sides, with its stylistic characteristics confirms the existence of the Belgrade episcopal church from the 11th century. Analogies point to a three-nave basilica characteristic of the central Balkans from the 9th to the 11th century [1, p. 14-16].

Viminacium was the capital of the province of Upper Moesia and an important military center. Viminacium received the status of a colony under Gordian III probably at the end of 239. Within this city there was a bishopric. Two bishops are mentioned, Amantinus, who participated in the council in Serdica in 343. and Cyriacus who was at the council in 356. Bishops from the 5th century they did not play a significant role in the process of Christianization. In the 6th century under Justinian, the bishopric of Viminacium was restored. Findings of silverware with Christian markings indicate the importance of this bishopric in the 6th century.

Margum is a Roman town on the right bank of the Morava, near its confluence with the Danube, near today's Orašje, in the village of Dubravica. Municipium Margum was the seat of the bishop. A list of bishops who participated in the council in Serdica in 343 has been preserved. Bishop of Margum is mentioned among them.

Horreum Margi was located on the site of today's Ćuprija. Municipium Horreum Margi was the episcopal center, and it is mentioned in the list of participants at the council held in Serdica in the year 343.

Nais is located on the right bank of Nišava [15, p. 180]. In the late antiquity it was an episcopal seat. The names of several bishops are known. Bishops Cyriacus and Gaudentius are mentioned around 343, Bonosius around 391, Martianus around 409-414., Gaianus around 516, Proiectus around 553. In sources from the end of the 4th century, Nais is mentioned among the main cities where the relics of martyrs are kept.

The necropolis in Jagodina mala near Nais was explored, with a well-preserved tomb where church dignitaries were buried. The tomb has a rectangular base, and the interior space is vaulted with a semi-circular vault and decorated with frescoes. On the eastern wall, the apostles Peter and Paul are depicted, and on the western wall there could be apostles, bishops, martyrs, saints or portraits of persons buried in the tomb. Four cemetery churches were discovered, of which only the basilica with the martyrium near the Jagodin mala bridge was preserved.

Remesiana is located on the site of today's Bela Palanka, in the Nišava river valley. Remesiana is known as the birthplace and seat of Bishop Niketa, who lived between 366 and 414. In the middle of the 5th century there was Bishop Diogenianus, who participated in the synod in Ephesus in 449.

A basilica and several buildings around it were discovered south of the forum. Three construction phases are constant. The basilica was built in the second phase. On the west side is the apse - the tribunal. Remains of columns were found, representing the southern side of the portico of the forum. The space between the basilica and the forum was filled with tabernacles. Several smaller rooms were discovered on the southern side of the basilica, which together with the southern rampart form a whole. In them were found ceramic tubules for heating, as well as fragments of fresco plaster. Parts of the walls belonging to the first construction phase were found under the basilica. They are related to the first Roman settlement. In the third phase, the basilica was turned into a church. The apse was demolished, and the nave was divided into three naves. The remains of a building with Ionic capitals were found in the southwestern part of the fortification.



A three-nave basilica from the 6th century was discovered west of the fortress. Two construction phases were established, the first of which is with an apse and a narthex.

Tures was, according to the itineraries, a Roman way station, but based on the research of the topography of Pirot and archaeological material, it is assumed that there was a larger urban settlement there [16, p. 238]. Procopius' early Byzantine town of Kvimedava is also connected to this area. The remains of an early Christian basilica were found in the city itself, above the southwest gate.

Aquis is a Roman town on the site of today's village of Prahovo. It is located on a pebbly coast through which the water from the mud of Negotin drains to several sources. In the 6th century experienced a boom and became the largest city in Coastal Dacia. The episcopal seat was founded in the 6th century, and there is a mention of a bishop who participated in the council in Serdica in 343. After the Hun conquest from the year 441-447. the episcopal seat was probably transferred to the nearby Meridio, which was the stronghold of the heresy of Bishop Bonos of Nais. Justinian restored the episcopate with a charter from 535, and then he probably founded the region of Aquis. The city of Aquis was the administrative, ecclesiastical and military center of the area with the strongest ramparts, the largest crew and population.

Aquis has been the seat of the bishopric since the 4th century, and certainly had numerous churches. Rare finds of capitals and pedestals probably date from the 6th century. During each excavation, remains of buildings and money from the 4th to the 6th century were found, as well as pottery from the 6th century. Sounding research revealed one building with an apse near the northern rampart, and parts of two other rooms. The apse faces east, and in front of it a single wall with a drainage channel next to it was discovered. Four brick floors were discovered inside the building, showing that it had been rebuilt three times. The last floor was built after the demolition, most likely at the end of the 6th century.

Jelica is an early Byzantine settlement on the Jelica mountain near Čačak. The most extensive archaeological research is carried out at the multi-layered site of Gradina on Jelica with prehistoric, ancient, early Byzantine and medieval

material. The most important profane buildings and five churches were examined, "A" - "E". Most of the buildings had glazed windows, which is not common for the interior of the Balkans. The settlement on Gradina probably perished in the fire.

Churches "E" and "C" were located inside the ramparts, and the position of the church "D" and "A" not reliably determined. Church "B" was outside the ramparts and surrounded by the necropolis. Around the Cemetery Church 68 graves were discovered, with graves mostly dug in without special construction, although there are a few brick tombs and walled graves. Part of the grave inventory were bronze earrings, necklaces, belt buckles and bronze fibulae of the Germanic type. Burials are constant inside and around Church "C", Church "A". The burial of Germans inside the church indicates an advanced process of acculturation. All churches except Church "B" they were of similar dimensions and built in the same way with the use of mortar. Basilica "A" has three naves and two phases of construction are constant. The floors were made of a reddish or yellowish plaster coating. Only in the Church "A" and Church "C" remains of stone plastic were found. In the Church "C" traces of frescoes, fragments of stone furniture, pillars, capitals, bases, parts of parapet panels have been preserved. Church "C" had a baptistery in the middle nave with a cross-shaped pool and the best-preserved remains of frescoes with ornamental motifs and marble imitations. In the Church "A" parts of the altar partition and one window with a carved cross were discovered. Additions were noticed on the churches, so Church "A" first it was single nave, and later it got side naves and a narthex. The dominant position of Gradina indicates its function as the main military, trade, craft and church center in its area. So far, it has not been established whether the life of the settlement was violently interrupted at the end of the 6th or the beginning of the 7th century.

Felix Romuliana is a monument of Roman court architecture, in the present-day village of Gamzigrad, about 11 km west of Zaječar. It was raised by Galerius in his birthplace and named after his mother, Romula. The palace was built on the site of a rustic villa from the 3rd century. The construction of Romuliana was probably stopped after the death of Galerius. At the end of the 4th century, a basilica was built in the southeastern part of the palace. A new, three-nave basilica with a baptistery

was later built above it [10, p. 120-141]. After the Hunnic destruction, Romuliana became a small Byzantine settlement.

Veliki Gradac - Castel Taliata, near Donji Milanovac is one of the largest and best preserved in our part of the Danube Limes. The early Byzantine fortification on Veliki Gradac is characterized by the repair of late antique ramparts. The western gate was closed and turned into a baptistery. The church is basilica-style and consists of a nave, with an altar apse on the east, and a narthex on the west, annex and towers converted into a baptistery. The entire building was built of bricks with mortar joints. The baptismal font was placed in the southern part of the northern tower of the former western gate. The baptismal font is made of bricks, with binding layers on foundations of pebbles and mortar. The baptistery had an oval-shaped pool with steps in the east-west direction and the remains of a canopy. The baptismal font disappeared during the restoration of the Danube border in the 6th century. On the ruins of the early Byzantine basilica and outside it, a row cemetery was created, near which a small church was built.

Klisura near city Niš is a village where an early Byzantine basilica with a quadrangular baptistery with an apse and a cross-shaped pool was discovered.

### *Baptisteries*

The appearance of Christianity on the Balkan Peninsula is related to the first half of the 1st century. The new faith first spread in the cities of the coastal area of the Aegean, Marmara, Ionian and Adriatic seas. Christianity penetrated the interior of the Balkans more slowly, so some parts were baptized only in the 4th and 5th centuries. Baptisteries were usually components of larger architectural complexes, and only seldom were they self-standing structures next to basilicas, such as is the case in Caričin Grad, Gamzigrad, Taliata [2, p. 21-41]. Quatrefoil baptisteries typologically hail from the East. In the territory of today's Serbia quadrangular baptisteries are the most frequent. This type of baptistery is among the oldest, and the first examples are from Aquillea and Truyere. If baptisteries are within the framework of basilicas, as a rule they are located in the northern section. Some baptisteries had an apsidal niche with an altar, as the eucharistic rite would be

performed after the baptism. Baptistery in the narthex has been noted in Remesiana. Octagonal baptisteries are characteristic of the western parts of the Empire. The piscinas are as a rule cruciform, and this type belongs to the Salonitan circle of monuments. Apart from that, there exist oval, circular and octagonal piscinas. Quatrefoil piscinas originate in the Orient. The first baptisteries were built next to episcopal basilicas characterized by monumentality and rich decoration. At the beginning only bishops could baptize, but later this right was vested in lower-ranking clergy as well. That is when baptisteries appeared also in basilicas distant from urban centers. The baptismal rite was performed by immersion and very rarely by infusion. Initially, mainly adults were baptized, and as of the 6th century, children started to be baptized as well. With the introduction of children's baptisms, the dimensions of the piscina became smaller. Once Christianization had gained foothold, children started to be baptized. The dimensions of the baptisteries were reduced and traces of such adaptations are observable on some of them.

The invasion of Gots, Huns, Avars and Slavs brought the break in development of the city life of Roman type. In Justinian's period, many towns have been restored, but they had another character. When towns and fortresses have fallen into hands of Avars, the northern frontier of the Empire was destroyed and the way to the south was opened. This facilitated the settling of Slavs at the beginning of 7th century A.D. The Early Christian churches were ruined, and for two centuries and during the Early Middle Ages appeared the Serbian Principalities with new church organization [6, p. 85-194].

After Roman conquest appeared new cities with the deduction of Roman colonist or by military camps. City's status of the colony or municipium usually was assigned to the settlements which existed in pre-Roman period or have been formed gradually with the colonization of Roman citizens.

With the development of Christianity, new city quarters were formed, where objects of Christianity cult were stored. In the last phase of their development the antique cities on the territory of today's Serbia became episcopal seats, such as Sirmium, Bassianae, Singidunum, Viminacium, Margum, Horreum Margi, Naissus,

Remesiana, Turres, Ulpiana, Aquis, Gradina on Jelica, Felix Romuliana and Iustiniana Prima. Many episcopal centers are known only on the basis of written sources, and list of bishops who participated in synods, but the remains of some episcopal basilicas have been archaeologically researched.

In ancient Roman architecture, a basilica was a public building, where courts were held, as well as serving other official and public functions. Basilicas are typically rectangular buildings with a central nave flanked by two or more longitudinal aisles, with the roof at two levels, being higher in the center over the nave to admit clerestory and lower over the side-aisles, and an apse at one side. During the later reign of Constantine the Great this form became the basis of the so-called Early Christian basilicas.

The churches from the 4th century didn't survive, and they were often replaced by new churches built over their foundations or in the vicinity. In the 5th century churches had dominant role in the urban plan. The great emphasis on baptistery building in this period demonstrates the determination and rigor which the Church pursued the process of conversion among the indigenous population. The basilicas with baptisteries appeared in urban centers, and in the rural areas. During the 6th century the process of the Christianization of population was completed. The architectural design of the age of Justinian characterize sophisticated advances, and introduction of domes into basilicas. During Justinian's reign many cities were built or restored, and all these churches were under jurisdiction of the Archbishopric of Justiniana Prima. After invasion of Avars and Slavs in the 7th century the Early Christian churches were ruined, and for two centuries, during the Early Middle Ages, appeared the Serbian Principalities with new church organization [6, p. 85-194].

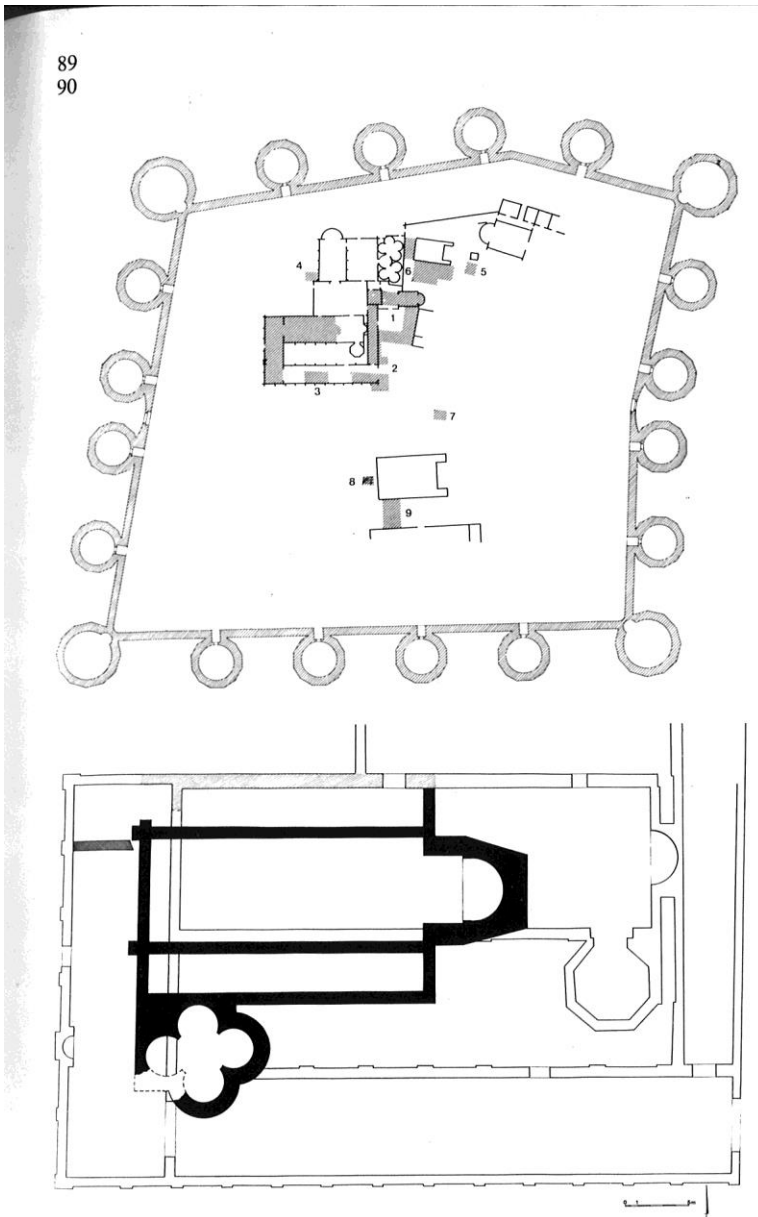
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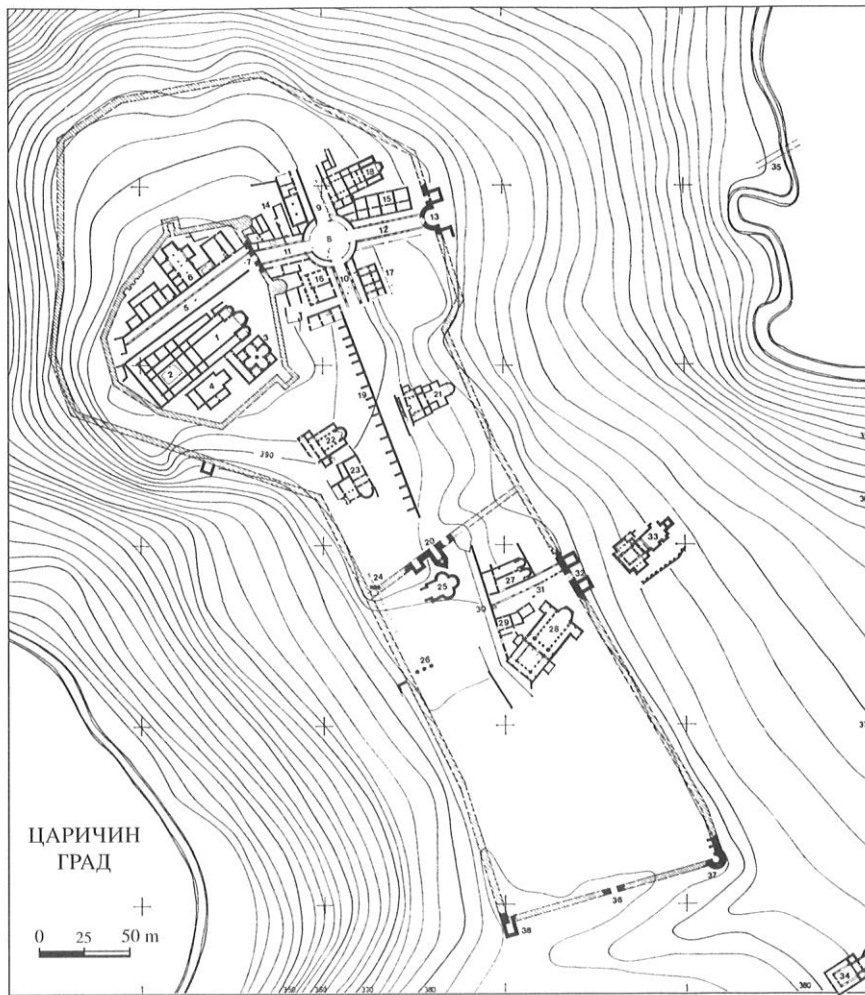
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## Pictures



1. Plan of Gamzigrad, and basilica in it  
(Gamzigrad, Late Antique Emperor's Palace, Beograd 1983, p. 98).





## 2. Plan of Justiniana Prima

(Sirmium – City of Emperors and Martyrs, Sremska Mitrovica 2003, p. 254.).