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## TOWARDS THE UNDERSTANDING OF THE MONOGRAM OF JUSTINIAN I IN EARLY BYZANTINE ARCHITECTURE OF THE CENTRAL BALKANS\*\*

**ABSTRACT:** A monogram is a combination of two or more interconnected letters that create a specific visual parallel to someone's name, title, both name and title, or invocation. One such monogram with the name of emperor Justinian I (527–565) is incised on the capital discovered on the site Caričin grad, identified with Justinian's city of Justiniana Prima. Although its appearance is very important for understanding the real as well as the symbolical place of the city within the wider historical and socio-cultural context of the Central Balkans, this capital mostly escaped scholarly attention. This paper offers alternative possibilities for understanding the said imperial monogram as the instrument for visualization of patronage and immortalization of the donor.

**KEYWORDS:** Monogram, Early Byzantine, Justinian I, Central Balkans, Caričin grad/Justiniana Prima, Basilica with transept.

A monogram can be defined as a combination of several interconnected letters that create a specific visual parallel to someone's name, title, both name and title, or even invocation (HÖRANDNER 1991: 1397–1398; PESCHLOW 2004: 69–71; RIZOS, DARLEY 2018: 1033). It was known to the ancient cultures of Greece and Rome, primarily on coins and small-scale objects, but its apparition on architectural monuments is tied to the Late Antiquity and reached the peak of its popularity in the sixth-century churches.<sup>1</sup> One monogram of Justinian I (527–565) is discovered on a *tribelon*-capital of the Basilica with transept (МАНО-ЗИСИ 1955; КОНДИЋ, ПОПОВИЋ 1977: 109), situated in the Lower City on the site Caričin grad, identified

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<sup>1</sup> For some of the recent studies dedicated to the monograms in Late Antiquity, cf. EASTMOND 2016; GARIPZANOV 2018; CARILE 2021; STROTH 2021.

with a high degree of certainty as Justiniana Prima (ПЕТКОВИЋ 1913; КОНДИЋ, ПОПОВИЋ 1977: 13, 163; ПОПОВИЋ 1990; ZANINI 2003: 207–209; HOLUM 2006: 90; BAVANT 2007: 337; IVANIŠEVIĆ 2016: 109). Although discovered in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century (МАНО-ЗИСИ 1955: 139–143), this quite damaged capital attracted very little scholarly attention.<sup>2</sup> The preserved fragment, with the dimensions 56.5 × 45 cm, is kept in the National Museum in Belgrade (Inv. No. 371/IV).<sup>3</sup> This paper is dedicated to the study of the said monogram, its place within the Basilica with transept, and the meaning of this powerful instrument of visualisation of patronage within the appropriate historical and socio-cultural environment (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Capital with a monogram of Justinian I, Basilica with transept, Caričin grad / Justiniana Prima, 6<sup>th</sup> century (after the documentation of the National Museum in Belgrade, Inv. No. 341/IV)

<sup>2</sup> At the moment of its discovery, researchers were not sure whether the incised monogram was that of Anastasius I or Justinian I, since both looked very similar. Yet, because of its appearance and the fact that the monograms of Anastasius I were discovered only on coins and not on architectural elements, it was concluded that the monogram bears the name of Justinian I, which is accepted by the wide scholarly public from that moment on. Cf. МАНО-ЗИСИ 1955: 143.

<sup>3</sup> In the documentation, it is noted that the capital was discovered in the southern aisle of the church, while in literature the place of its discovery is defined as “next to *tribelon*-columns”, cf. КОНДИЋ, ПОПОВИЋ 1977: 115. The author would like to thank the museum counselor, prof. Tatjana Cvjetičanin, for the necessary information.

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The early Byzantine period in the Central Balkans was very fruitful when architectural and artistic achievements are in question, but at the same time it was quite turbulent in many aspects (ШПЕХАР 2019 with older literature). The overall prosperity of this area, followed by the intensive Christianization, was suddenly interrupted in the mid-5<sup>th</sup> century by Hunnic raids. The gradual restoration of imperial rule started from the late 5<sup>th</sup> century and reached its peak during the reign of Justinian I when circumstances allowed cities, strongholds, and churches to be restored. Among numerous cities and churches erected in various strategically and spiritually vital locations, a very important place belongs to Justinian's newly founded city in the province of Dacia and in the vicinity of his birthplace, named Justiniana Prima after its founder (ПРОКОПИО 2018: IV.19). The church which is the main subject of this paper is situated east of the main street of the Lower City and is one of the most representative and best-preserved buildings on the site. It had the form of the three-aisled basilica, 30 m long and 18.5 m wide, with a transept in front of the apse and a 15 m long atrium on the west (КОНДИЋ, ПОПОВИЋ 1977: 109). The atrium had two lateral annexes, added somewhat later, which were most probably used for sacrificial offerings. The aisles were divided by two colonnades consisting of six columns each. Remains of burnt wood suggest that the church was originally covered by a wooden ceiling. Partly preserved representative floor mosaics were discovered within the apse, nave, and the central part of the narthex, while lower parts of the apse and transept walls were covered in marble revetment (ШПЕХАР 2019: 97–98 with older literature).

In this study, our attention is primarily focused on the *tribelon*, triple-arched representative entrance that led from the narthex into the naos. In general terms, *tribelon* is one of the most distinctive and elaborate entrance-shapes of Late Antique and early Byzantine churches. It was formed by two columns and three arches, which spanned the space between them and the lateral piers. In the case of Basilica with transept on the Caričin grad site, the *tribelon* had the usual appearance with two columns and three arches that spanned the width of the entrance. Columns were topped by ionic impost-capitals made of local stone and, most probably, by local stonemasons. The majority of relief sculpture consisted of stylized acanthus leaves. The Latin monogram of Justinian I within a wreath had the central place above a preserved volute of the southern capital, while the same position on the northern capital is occupied by a rosette (МАНО-ЗИСИ 1955: 139–143; НИКОЛАЈЕВИЋ-СТОЈКОВИЋ 1957: 52–53; КОНДИЋ, ПОПОВИЋ 1977: 115–117). A monogram of the empress Theodora was not discovered, although preserved contemporary analogies from the churches in Constantinople, Ephesus, or Germia (Gümüşkonak in Turkey) indicate that her monograms were visible along with those of Justinian's (PÉTRIDÈS 1902; ALCHERMES 2006: 361–362; JAMES 2014: 65; UNTERWEGER 2014: 101, 106). Yet, since the monogram of the empress wasn't discovered in the Basilica with transept, scholars used that information to date the building in the period after her death in 548 (НИКОЛАЈЕВИЋ-СТОЈКОВИЋ 1957: 53; КОНДИЋ, ПОПОВИЋ 1977: 115). Except for that, insufficient attention is dedicated to the monogram of Justinian I, its context, and the fact that it had such a prominent position within a church.

In order to understand the monogram on the capital of the Basilica with transept in Justiniana Prima, we must first turn to some of the most distinctive ancient monograms. Their origin is much earlier than the 6<sup>th</sup> century and can be traced to ancient Greek minted coins of the Hellenistic period, where they appeared on the reverse. Those were most probably producers' monogrammatic stamps, used to indicate the mint (GARIPZANOV 2018: 109). When the Romans were introduced to Hellenistic cultures, they also started to use monograms to mark their coins, at the beginning also in a form of monogrammatic stamps of the mints on the reverse (GARIPZANOV 2018: 109–111). During the imperial times, Roman mints were closely dependent on the court, so, understandably, the imperial monograms started to appear as a reverse motif. In general, coins were perceived as a distinctive visual medium that the imperial government used to convey the most important messages to the citizens of the Empire, for example the information about the death and apotheosis of the emperor, changes to the throne, election of co-rulers, etc. (MACCORMACK 1981: 162). Therefore, the imperial monogram on the reverse was actually a substitute for the imperial portrait, indicating the name of the current ruler as well as his monopoly over the mints. In a similar context, monograms also appeared on other objects, such as rings, pottery, glass vessels, etc. An excellent example is provided by the glass *balsamaria* discovered in Northern Italy, where we can read the name Aurelian in the form of a monogram within a wreath. This was the monogram of either the emperor Marcus Aurelius (161–180) or Caracalla (Marcus Aurelius Severus Antoninus, 198–217), which indicated the imperial monopoly over the balsam, preserved in said *balsamaria* (GARIPZANOV 2018: 111).

During the Late Antiquity, monograms started to appear more often and changed their function – originally understood as a pragmatic marking device, they gained almost symbolical meaning as a visual substitute for personal name, acclamation, invocation, or even prayer.<sup>4</sup> With the rise of Christianity, monograms were used to convey a rather specific message to a wider public, which is clearly shown by Christogram, Staurogram, and several other monograms indicating the name of Jesus Christ (HURTADO 2006: 208–211). Constantine's vision before the battle on the Milvian Bridge made those monograms a substitute for the invocation of Christ's name (LACTANTIUS 1897: 44.4–6; EUSEBIUS 1999: 28.2; VAN DAM 2011: 117–118, f.n. 26). They were understood as prayer, gratitude, apotropaic symbol, and guarantee of divine protection for every Christian. In the centuries that followed, and under the clear influence of Christ's monograms, the visual value of monograms, in general, inclined more towards their meaning as symbols of power, primarily in small and later in monumental form. The best example for small-scale but highly important imperial monograms can be found, once again, on coins. On the reverse of copper coins of Theodosius II (408–450) an imperial monogram encircled by a laurel wreath was incised instead of, at that time, more usual motifs of a cross or Chi-Rho monogram (KENT

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<sup>4</sup> Various types of invocations of deities were often present in Roman Empire, among different cultural groups, polytheistic as well as monotheistic, cf. CASEAU 2012: 115–116. In Late Antiquity, such invocations were often compressed in the form of a monogram, cf. GARIPZANOV 2018: 112–113.

1994: 277, nos. 462–463, no. 465, Pl. 18). The interesting fact, especially when having in mind the monogram from Caričin grad, is that the imperial monogram is placed within a triumphal wreath. Although monograms within wreaths appeared several centuries earlier, for example on the already mentioned glass *balsamaria*, the reverse of copper coins of Theodosius II introduced a new way of understanding the monogram as a symbol of the victorious rule of the emperor. It is very important, especially when having in mind that the monogram was placed on the coins of the lowest denomination. Namely, copper coins circulated among all strata of society, which further suggests that the monogram on them was intended to be seen by a wide population. The positive effect of this solution was recognized by various later emperors, from Marcian (450–457) to Anastasius I (491–518) on the East, as well as by Libius Severus (461–465), Anthemius (467–472) and Julius Nepos (474–475, 476–480) on the West, who all continued the same practice of putting monograms on the reverse of the lowest copper denominations (HAHN 1973: 33–36, Nos. 40, 55; KENT 1994; GARIPZANOV 2018: 136–137, fig. 5.3).

From the second half of the 5<sup>th</sup> century, monograms were incorporated into decorative programs of sacral buildings, as was the case of the Baptistery of Bishop Neon (451–c. 468) in Ravenna, whose monogrammatic name is represented in mosaic on the arch of north-eastern niche. But it was Theodoric (471–526) whose representative monograms within laurel wreaths appeared in a form of relief on the capitals, now reused in the Piazza del Popolo in Ravenna, but originating from one of his several endowments (CARILE 2021: 6–8). Some of the earliest early Byzantine examples of monumental monograms, incorporated into a large-scale public building, are contemporary to those of Theodoric's. They originate from Constantinople and are tied to the church of a noble ktetor, great-granddaughter of Theodosius II and mother of a pretender to the throne, princess Anicia Juliana (462–527). As a person with long and strong imperial lineage, she erected the Church of St. Polyeuctos in the vicinity of her palace (CROKE 2006: 56–57). Not by a chance, Anicia Juliana decided to replace the older and smaller church of her great-grandmother, empress Eudocia, with the grandiose building dedicated to the same saint, thus underlining her ties to one of the most pious empresses (BARDILL 2006: 341; CROKE 2006: 55; GARIPZANOV 2018: 160–162). This church was a statement which shows, in architectural and visual terms, that her family has more right to the throne than Justin I (518–527) or his nephew, later to become the emperor Justinian I. Monograms within the church of St. Polyeuctos were placed on several capitals and piers, such as the notable *pilastris acritani* (Fig. 2), preserved today in front of the south facade of St. Marco's church in Venice (NELSON 2010: 63–64 with older literature; EASTMOND 2016: 219). Not all the monograms from the church are properly understood until now, but those that are deciphered bear the name of St. Polyeuctos (HARRISON 1989: 90). What is very interesting for us is that the monograms were also preserved on cornices above the doorway that led from the narthex into the naos, testifying that such placement – above the entrance into the most sacred space available to the worshipers, is a legitimate way of expressing authority, whether of a patron-saint or of a ktetor.



Fig. 3. Monogram of Justinian I, Hagia Sophia, Constantinople, 6<sup>th</sup> century  
(after: GARIPZANOV 2018: 178, fig. 6.9)

Fig. 2. Pier with a monogram from the church of St. Polyuctos in Constantinople, Church of St. Mark, Venice, 6<sup>th</sup> century  
(after: EASTMOND 2016: 220, fig. 11.1)

Having in mind the meaning of monograms in the church of St. Polyuctos, it is completely understandable why Justinian I used the same visual and symbolical language in his foundations.<sup>5</sup> The monograms in early Byzantium became the visual symbols of *paideia* (CROKE 2006: 54–55). Their ample use in visible places in his first foundation, the Church of St. Sergius and Bacchus in Constantinople, suggests that Justinian, his master-builders, and stonemasons were very aware of their importance (SWAINSON 1895; BARDILL 2000: 2–3). Monogrammatic names in the church of St. Sergius and Bacchus were not that of the patron-saints but exclusively of the ktetors, Justinian I and Theodora (GARIPZANOV 2018: 168). From this church onward, the placement of monograms on high altitudes above the sight-line became typical for Justinian's endowments, as is also visible in Hagia Sophia (Fig. 3) and Hagia Irene in Constantinople, and the church of St. John in Ephesus (FOSS 1979: 88, footnote 88; BARDILL 2000: 3). Such position testifies to the exceptional importance that the imperial couple had within the sacred space, which they deserved not only as rulers but

<sup>5</sup> For the newest study of monograms in Justinian's Constantinopolitan endowments, cf. STROTH 2021.

also as ktetors. If we have in mind that the sacred space of the church is the earthly image of the holy celestial realm, as it was comprehended throughout the Middle Ages, it is understandable that the monograms on capitals high above the ground level suggest that ktetors were “placed” between Earth and Heavens. Such “position” is enabled by the act of ktetorship. Justinian I and Theodora anchored the practice of placing monumental monograms of donors on prominent and visible places. It was repeated by many aristocrats and members of church clergy with the same symbolical meaning. The monogram was the “graphic sign of authority”, as is suggested by Ildar Garipzanov in his notable study of this topic (2018), but was also the instrument for perpetual invocation of donor’s name in the House of the Lord, as well as a votive symbol. The votive offering was, in our case, the church itself. The one whose name is written within the church sacral space, regardless of the way that name is inscribed, is considered to be “present”, although not in person (EASTMOND 2016: 230). The founder was thus immortalized within the sacred space of his/her endowment.

It can be concluded that the name written in the form of a monogram in Basilica with transept on Caričin grad site is the name of the person who had very important, most probably the decisive role, in the erection and/or decoration of the said church. That name was supposed to be seen and recognized by worshipers when passing under the *tribelon*, i.e. when entering the church nave. At the same time, that name was also supposed to be recognized by the Lord, omnipresent in every church despite its dedication. That is why the majority of surviving texts in Late Antique and early Byzantine churches are votive, pious, and thankful (EASTMOND 2016: 220). One thing remains questionable, and that is the precise position of monogram within the church. It was symbolically placed on the boundary of the sacred space – on the southern *tribelon*-capital of the naos entrance. The fact that it was placed on the southern side of the church is in accordance with the real place intended for the emperor in Constantinopolitan churches, primarily the *metatorion* in the southern aisle of Hagia Sophia (MATHEWS 1971: 133–134; MAINSTONE 1988: 223–226). Still, it is not clear whether the monogram was facing the naos or the narthex, which is of utter importance because its position determined who and at what moment could see it. Mentioned analogies and the similarity with other capitals discovered within the church (МАНО-ЗИСИ 1955: 140–143) suggest that it was originally facing the church naos, which would be in accordance with its role of the visual symbol that indicates the perpetual presence of the person named in the form of a monogram. Only such a position would guarantee that the emperor’s name would be visible during the Liturgy, when prayers may have been said on his behalf.

Another aspect of this monogram must also be taken into consideration – it was incised within a triumphal wreath. Therefore, it fits into the Roman visual vocabulary of triumph, a special honour given to a triumphant emperor. This fact is important especially in the context of the socio-historical background of Justinian’s rule over this part of the Balkans. Namely, Justinian I was the Roman emperor who managed to return many lost parts of the Empire under imperial governance, including the Central Balkans (PROCOPIO 2018: IV). Therefore, it is understandable that a victorious triumphal wreath was an appropriate



Fig. 4. Capitals with monogram of Bishop Victor, San Vitale, Ravenna, 6<sup>th</sup> century  
(after: CARILE 2021: 16, fig. 9)

visual medium for the further accentuation of the emperor's achievements. He indeed was a victorious ruler whose epoch was marked by the visible prosperity of the Central Balkans after a very turbulent period (ШПЕХАР 2021: 15–16). Having in mind that fact, as well as all known examples of monograms in representative buildings, it seems improbable that local clergy or local administration could use the imperial monogram of Justinian I only to denote that the church was erected during his reign, or even to suggest that the church was erected in his eponym city. Both small-scale and monumental examples known to us suggest that imperial monograms appear only on items, coins, and buildings in some way personally tied to the emperor or empress – whether to indicate imperial monopoly (*balsamaria*), as means of imperial propaganda (coins), or to demonstrate imperial ktetorship



(sacral buildings). A very good example can be seen in the church of San Vitale in Ravenna, completed during the reign of Justinian I, where monograms of two persons were incised into the imposts – the name of Bishop Victor on the ground level (Fig. 4) and Julian the banker on the gallery level, namely the names of persons directly engaged in the erection and dedication of the church (MAUSKOPF DELIYANNIS 2010: 232; CARILE 2021: 16, 19–21). The visual media which were to indicate the importance of Justinian I and his wife for the church of San Vitale are the famous mosaic panels in the apse. Besides, on the panel with Justinian, the name of bishop Maximianus is written above his representation, which most probably replaced the original portrait of some other bishop, maybe Victor (MAUSKOPF DELIYANNIS 2010: 238–241, fig. 84, with older literature; CARILE 2021: 15). Therefore, it is clear that only persons credited for building and decorating the church of San Vitale put their names or monograms within the church.

Although Justinian I is known as the ruler who erected or restored numerous churches in the Central Balkans, no other monogram or his name written in any other way in a sacred building has been discovered so far. This fact indicates that he was not personally in charge of any of those churches, although most of them were built during his reign. The restoration of Byzantine domination over this part of the Balkans was an important aspect of Justinian I's epoch. To this testify two settlements, one newly built and one restored, that bore the emperor's name – Justiniana Prima and Justiniana Secunda (Ulpiana). Yet, only one example – the imperial monogram in Basilica with transept – suggests the emperor's personal involvement and it is not a coincidence that such a building is situated in the city founded to mark the Justinian's birthplace. Although today most scholars accept that the Caričin grad site is the city of Justiniana Prima, it is very interesting that this capital was never taken into consideration as the possible argument for proving the ubication of the emperor's eponym city. It is our opinion that this monogram may actually be the strongest argument for the emperor's personal involvement in the city he founded, although most probably never visited. His perpetual presence was indicated by his monogram – he was not only to be remembered as the founder of a city named after him, but he was also to be remembered as the triumphant donor of one of the most distinctive and most richly decorated churches in the city.

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## КА РАЗУМЕВАЊУ МОНОГРАМА ЈУСТИНИЈАНА I У РАНОВИЗАНТИЈСКОМ ГРАДИТЕЉСТВУ ЦЕНТРАЛНОГ БАЛКАНА

Резиме

Монограм је комбинација два или више међусобно повезаних слова, специфичан вид скраћења нечијег имена, титуле или чак инвокације. Један такав монограм са именом цара Јустинијана I откривен је на капителу над јужним стубом тривилонa базилике са трансептом на локалитету Царичин град, идентификованим са Првом Јустинијаном. Уз преглед ранијих примера монограма и њихове употребе на различитим предметима, на новцу или у градитељству, овај рад доноси могућа тумачења значаја и значења царског монограма у архитектонском сакралном контексту. Иако је Јустинијан I поиман као прави обновитељ царске власти у овом делу Балкана, поменути налаз је једини који недвосмислено сведочи о царевом непосредном ангажовању на изградњи и/или украшавању цркве, свакако не случајно саграђене у граду који је требало да обележи место његовог рођења.

Кључне речи: монограм, рана Византија, Јустинијан I, централни Балкан, Царичин град / Прва Јустинијана, базилика са трансептом.