

## The *House of Parthenius* revisited

UDK 904:728.3(497.713)“652”

Macedonian Academy of Sciences and Arts  
anikoloska@manu.edu.mk

**Abstract:** *The well-known late antique house from Stobi, excavated in the 1920s and named the House of Parthenius (Fig. 1), deserves to be revisited for a number of reasons. We are interested in the cultural and historical context of this house which will lead us to a better understanding of the social role of the owners, their status, privileges and influence, but most of all their religious orientation and the intended use of the sculptural décor. In recent years increasing attention has been given to studies of Late Antiquity and also to the private sphere, which opens up the possibilities of having a more contextual insight into the life and the meaning of this residence and its décor. Consequently, the other reason for this re-visitation is to bring together once more the statuary found within the archaeological context of this residence. Besides the wall paintings and the mosaic floors, sculptures were an important part of this domestic furnishing. The statues found in the House of Parthenius belonged to different periods than the context of their finding, covering a time span from the Hellenistic period up to Roman Imperial times. Some of them might have been locally made, but most of them are imports exhibiting high artistic qualities, all of them reused and serving new purposes as collectables.*

**Key words:** *House of Parthenius; décor; social and historical aspects; sculptural collection – provenance, arrangement, and religious use.*

### *Conditions of discovery and architecture*

Our primary interest is the original context of the discovery of the building. So, before anything else, let us follow sources back to the earliest publications on this object, made during the campaign of 1927-30 of which we read in the reports of V. Petković,<sup>1</sup> thought to be a bath at the time, or even a sanctuary dedicated to the mysteries of Bacchus. Unfortunately, these reports did not go into great detail in considering the precise location of the discoveries.

In the first year of the excavations the north-west part of the building was unearthed exposing a geometric mosaic floor where fragments of marble statues were found, bronze statuettes of Apollo (Fig. 2), Lar (Fig. 3), Fortuna (Fig. 4), the lower part of a marble Hygeia (Fig. 5), as well as the front half of the gilded marble head of Serapis (Fig. 6), thought at the time to be a head of Poseidon. The following year of the campaign even more statues came to light – the famous bronze satyrs (Figs. 7, 8), a

---

<sup>1</sup> Petković 1928, 1928a, 1929, 1930, 1931.

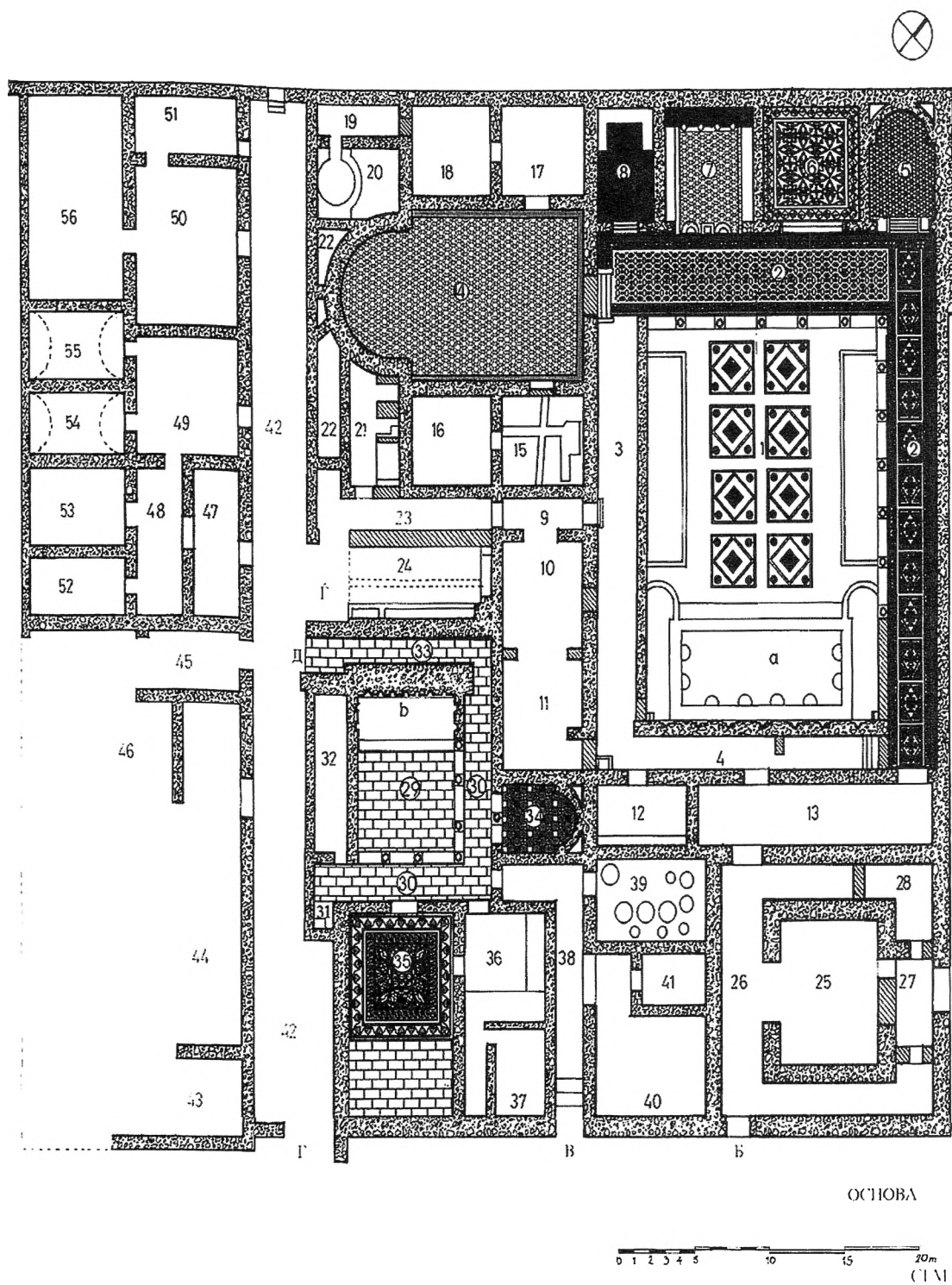


Fig. 13. Plan of the *House of Parthenius* (Gerasimovska 2009, fig. 35)

bronze statue of Venus (Fig. 9) and another marble torso of Venus Victrix, a marble Bacchus with an inscription (Fig. 10), a marble archaistic relief of Pan with the nymphs (Fig. 11), a fragment of a relief depicting Cybele (Fig. 12), also a marble head of Kora (Fig. 13), and smaller, marble heads of Zeus and a satyr. Petković reports the marble ornaments too, made in an oriental manner. In the north-west part of the building stucco reliefs, fragments of wall paintings and marble columns were also found, while in the north apsidal room a capital with a Christ monogram, two sculptural bases, and some coins minted during the reign of Mauricius Tiberius, Justin II and Justinian were also discovered.

Around the sides of the pool there were eight pedestals in white marble, decorated with twisting flutes. All of the mentioned material in these reports was found in the parts of the house marked 1 to 3 on house plan. The following year (1929) the portico on the west side of the central peristyle and four rooms at the west end of the building were unearthed, among them the north apsidal one with a mosaic floor (4 to 8 on the plan). However, not much statuary was found - only one headless statue of Bacchus and the rest of the Cybele relief, although their precise location was not explicitly recorded. The last year of the campaign resulted in the unearthing of a peristyle with seven niches and colonnades (marked 29 to 35 on our plan). Here, a head adorned with a laurel wreath was found, also impost blocks decorated with crosses and two bases.<sup>2</sup> In a room next to this peristyle a bronze cylindrical seal with an inscription was discovered which inspired the name of this building got its name given by the excavators.<sup>3</sup> Inscriptions were also found within the walls of the *House of Parthenius*,<sup>4</sup> but only one merits our attention



**Fig. 1.** Bronze statuette of Apollo (Photo courtesy of the Archaeological Museum in Belgrade)

<sup>2</sup> All of the sculptures found during the 1927-30 excavations were brought to the National Museum in Belgrade and are still kept there. I would like to express my gratitude to Dr. Deana Ratković for the collaboration and the latest photographs.

<sup>3</sup> The inscription on the bronze seal reads *Παρθενίου* (Of Parthenios) (Babamova 2012, n° 296 with bibliography).

<sup>4</sup> Inscription of an unidentified emperor (Babamova n° 32); sepulchral inscription on three fragments reused as imposts (Babamova n° 50); sepulchral inscriptions (Babamova 2012, n° 69, n° 73, n° 75, n° 86, n° 87, n° 99, n° 113); various (Babamova 2012, n° 139, n° 148, n° 150, n° 190, n° 201).



**Fig. 2.** Bronze statuette of Lar (Photo courtesy of the Archaeological Museum in Belgrade)



**Fig. 3.** Bronze statuette of Fortuna (Photo courtesy of the Archaeological Museum in Belgrade)

in this context, namely the one mentioning an altar of Artemis.<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, it is not known where precisely in the house it was discovered.

After the campaign finished the architectural details of the building were published.<sup>6</sup> Before us we have an urban residence of considerable size, located in the central, prominent area of Stobi, between the streets of *Via Principalis Inferior* and *Via Principalis Superior*. Similar houses have been excavated in Stobi, all of them in the central area – the *House of Peristeria*, *Domus Fullonica*, the *House of Polycharmos*, the *Episcopal Residence*, but also the building known as the *Casino*.<sup>7</sup> They were all built at the beginning of the fourth century and survived over the next two centuries, have common features such as a peristyle and an audience room, and all demonstrate the life of the provincial aristocracy and the changing society of late antique Stobi. However, *The House of Parthenius* stands out in terms of its architectural décor and the statuary found within.

<sup>5</sup> For the various different readings of the Artemis inscription see Babamova 2012, n° 3.

<sup>6</sup> Nestorović 1931; Nestorović 1936; Kitzinger 1946, 118-129; and in the recent years Mikulčić 2003, 170-175; Gerasimova 2009, 64-67.

<sup>7</sup> For the architecture and the bibliography of the other late antique houses in Stobi see Gerasimovska 2009, 68-75.

Not to go too deeply into architectural details, but let us lay out just the basic elements that are of interest to our study. The house has undergone several building phases; beginning in the early fourth century, taking on its final appearance in the early fifth century and occupied until the late sixth century.<sup>8</sup> The north courtyard is the most conspicuous one: a monumental peristyle with seven niches in front of which there is a pool with columns where most of the statues were found. The courtyard is encircled by passages leading to the four rooms with mosaic floors on the north side. On the west side the apsidal audience room opens up. All of these rooms are paved with elegant geometric mosaic floors. The small peristyle on the south side also has seven niches, opening up towards the small apsidal room, again, all paved with mosaics. The other rooms were private chambers for the *familia*, and also rooms for accommodating the servants. There is architectural evidence of an upper storey of this residence, used to ensure privacy. Later building phases are much more modest, classified as primitive cottages, offering only basic living conditions.<sup>9</sup> It was around this time that the statues were deposited in the pool which served as a debris receptacle, thrown there when occupation of the house ceased and the rooms were rebuilt to serve a new purpose. *The House of Parthenius* was conserved and reconstructed in 1973-4 turning it into one of the most attractive sights in Stobi today.

Like many late antique houses discovered throughout the Empire in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, this one was also given a rather romanticized name - the *House of Parthenius*, also known as the *Theodosian Palace*. However, a distinction is sometimes made between the two in the literature.<sup>10</sup> We cannot say whether or not they were separate objects, based on the sole argument that they did not correspond architecturally by the time of the discovery. In other words, entrances changed regularly to suit the new spatial requirements of different periods.<sup>11</sup> Mikulčić, followed by Gerasimovska, even included the rooms incorrectly identified as *Prison* as part of the house and enlarged the perimeter into a perfect square (59m x 59m). These corners of the residence served as a workshop and a warehouse. Later in this study I will, as well, refer to the whole building as a single residential complex named the *House of Parthenius*.

### *Historical and cultural context of the building*

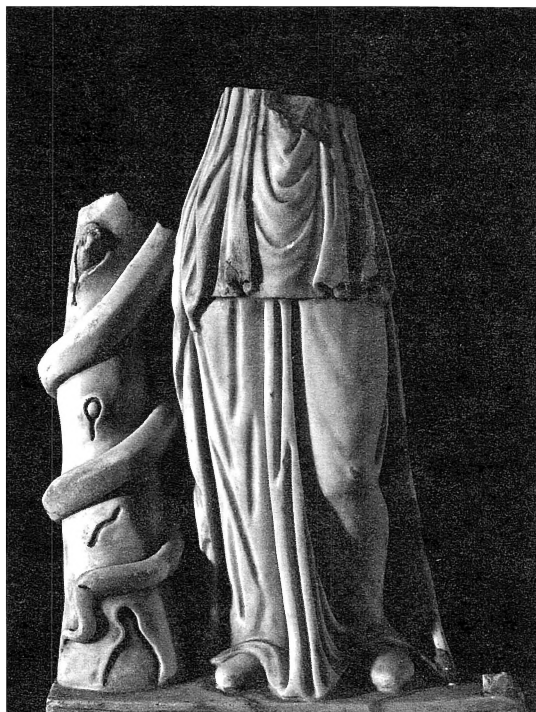
Stobi was a prominent provincial city in Late Antiquity. At one point in its long history it became one of the most influential cities of the region, and a capital of

<sup>8</sup> Kitzinger (1946, 124-127) sets the *terminus ante quem* for the latest building phase of the house no later than the early fifth century; the floor mosaics are also indicative of the dating. Kolarik (1987, 304) compares the craftsmanship to the second phase of the mosaics in the nave of the early church (mid-fifth century).

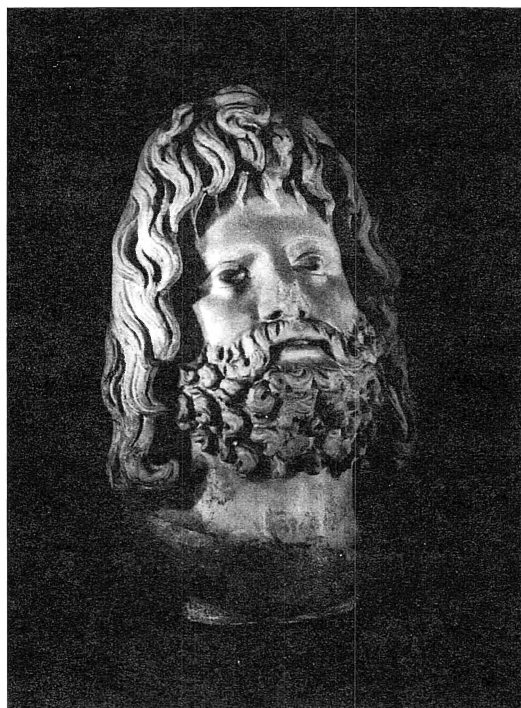
<sup>9</sup> Gerasimovska 2009, 67. M. Sc. Goce Pavlovski continued with the excavations of the building in 2014 that additionally confirmed this. I would like to express my gratitude to him for sharing his thoughts and ideas on the *House of Parthenius*.

<sup>10</sup> Wiseman 1973, n° 12 and n° 13. Nestorović 1931; Mano-Zissi 1973, 213-214; Mikulčić (2003, 170-175) and Gerasimovska (2009, 64-67), see the whole complex as a one separate building.

<sup>11</sup> Özgenel 2007, 249-251.



**Fig. 4.** Marble torso of Hygieia (Photo courtesy of the Archaeological Museum in Belgrade)



**Fig. 5.** Marble head of Serapis (Photo courtesy of the Archaeological Museum in Belgrade)

Macedonia Secunda (*Salutaris*). Late antique residences<sup>12</sup> were inhabited by influential city aristocrats, well-educated and well-traveled men of wealth and prestige. In those days the city was oriented more towards the ruling East, dominant in the fifth century throughout the Mediterranean. Many of these eastern influences can be observed in the context of the *House of Parthenius* since such urban residences were predominant in the East and in northern Africa, contrary to the western provinces where we usually find them in the countryside.<sup>13</sup> The difference between an urban house and a rural villa, while both sharing the same style of architectural fashion and domestic décor, comes down to a particular social point of view – what is understood as the *otium* of the countryside, was part of the *negotium* in the city house. The rural villa had more of a focus on the *pastime*, enjoying nature and adapting social life within it, away from the frenetic energy of an urban setting. An urban house had private, but mostly public areas such as the courtyards, where considerable official city-related activity took place.

The northern apsidal room of the *House of Parthenius* served as the official audience hall, a late antique architectural feature that came about with the rise of the provincial aristocracy. This audience hall was used for business meetings and banquets and it usually had a semi-circular dining couch or *stibadium* in the apse.<sup>14</sup> It was connected to

<sup>12</sup> Ellis 1991; Sodini 2003, 35-36.

<sup>13</sup> The open central courtyard is in fact a Greek tradition. Mostly we find analogies among the late antique houses in Asia Minor. See Özgenel 2007, 262-263.

<sup>14</sup> Ellis 1991, 119; Polci 2003, 81.

the courtyard, in order for the sculptural display to be fully presented and was moved to a more peripheral position, usually next to a street, because of its public character. Late antique peristyle courtyards with fountains were an important public space, similar to domestic piazzas, busy with daily life, but also with nighttime entertainment and dinner parties.<sup>15</sup> The northern four rooms with mosaic floors also served for hosting meetings, but for more private receptions or were used as day rooms for the residents.<sup>16</sup>

The only historical account that was ever associated with this building is the visit of Theodosius to Stobi in 388 where he issued two decrees.<sup>17</sup> A quite arbitrary assumption was made that this was a palace worthy of being an emperor's accommodation in Stobi,<sup>18</sup> hence, the other name of this building – the *Theodosian palace*. We should ask ourselves whether this Christian emperor, defiant on the matter of pagan worship, under whose reign temples and statues were being destroyed, would have stayed in an environment where such a pagan atmosphere was so clearly preserved. Theodosius finalized the “struggle” with paganism by issuing anti-pagan decrees that diminished every religious activity concerning the “past” gods that eventually resulted in the complete banning of pagan worship in 391.<sup>19</sup> The presence of pagan statues in the *House of Parthenius* would have been, to say the least, politically ‘inconvenient’ for Theodosius.<sup>20</sup> On the other hand, Theodosius never issued any decrees related to the banning of domestic mythological statuary, unless it was in any way connected to worship. So, we come to the crucial question of whether the statuary from the *House of Parthenius* was merely decorative, or whether it served a deeper religious purpose.

### *The sculptures as a collection*

Finally, let us focus our attention on the sculptures and try to examine some of the aspects connected to the building. The statuary found in this context has already been observed as a late antique collection.<sup>21</sup> The question arises as to whether we should consider the statuary found within the *House of Parthenius* as belonging only to this house or whether some of it might have belonged to the other nearby late antique houses in Stobi. Freestanding statues are movable and can be transported from their original setting;<sup>22</sup> nevertheless, one

<sup>15</sup> Polci 2003, 80; Özgenel 2007, 263.

<sup>16</sup> Özgenel 2007, 259-262.

<sup>17</sup> *Cod.Theod.* 16.4.2; 16.5.15.

<sup>18</sup> Wiseman 1973, 45; Mano-Zissi 1973, 213.

<sup>19</sup> *Cod.Theod.* 16.10.19.1–2; 25. For the interpretations of the Theodosian decrees in the late antique context of private space see Baldini Lippolis 2007.

<sup>20</sup> See for instance the discussion about Christian attitudes towards pagan statuary in Caseau 2011b.

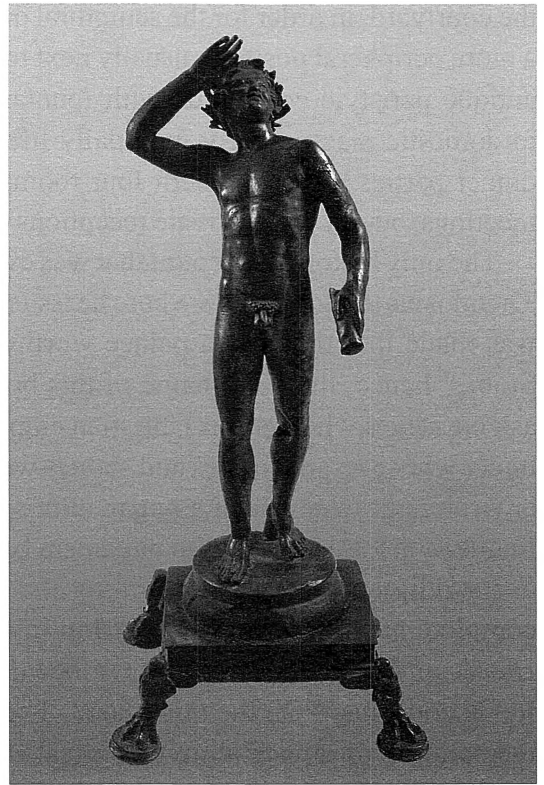
<sup>21</sup> The first person that has paid more attention to and described most of the statues as a single collection from the *House of Parthenius* is their discoverer Petković (1937). He selected the preserved ones and focused on their dating and stylistic features, disregarding the fragmented pieces. Long after, Stirling (2005) while observing other late antique collections from all over the Empire also included the statuary from the *House of Parthenius*.

<sup>22</sup> Bartman 1991, 72.





**Fig. 6.** Bronze satyr playing a flute (Photo courtesy of the Archaeological Museum in Belgrade)



**Fig. 7.** Bronze satyr dancing (Photo courtesy of the Archaeological Museum in Belgrade)

cannot regard it very likely that heavy sculptures were moved far from where they were originally displayed. It is more feasible that these particular statues were displayed in the closest connected room in the context of their finding, before they were deposited in the late antique debris.<sup>23</sup> Since the statuary from *the House of Parthenius* was found within the pool of the courtyard which has architectural features for statuary display, such as niches and bases, it is most probable that here was their final location. In the reports of Petković we read that many other sculptural fragments were found in the pool, including fingers, limbs and torsos; we should therefore consider that there were more statues originally deposited here, coming mostly from the *House of Parthenius* which had the capacity to house them. Although the sculptures discussed here were found in rather good condition, others were completely broken and reused, most likely as building material. This once luxurious peristyle with a pool seems to have been transformed into a late antique debris receptacle that also served as a sort of a quarry for the later population of Stobi.

Another important question is what is the present location of the sculptural fragments of which Petković reports, found during the 1927-31 campaign. Among the fragments which are not specified, he mentions marble heads of Zeus and a satyr, a headless statue of Bacchus, and a marble statuary group of which only the bull and

<sup>23</sup> See the methodological directions given by Stirling 2005, 15-28.



the base were preserved. Sokolovska<sup>24</sup> for the first time publishes the head with laurel wreath found in the *House of Parthenius*. There is also a statuary group of Jupiter Dolichenus<sup>25</sup> that is most probably the one that Petković reports, although the precise location of discovery is not stated. Nothing else, at least not to my knowledge, has ever been published regarding the fragmented pieces found in the *House of Parthenius* after the reports of Petković. Certainly, some of the numerous fragments published by Sokolovska<sup>26</sup> from the Stobi Museum and the Museum of Macedonia might have been among those found during the 1929-1932 campaign, but, most of them are probably stored at in the National Museum in Belgrade.

### *- Provenance and the life of the statues*

*I believe that every archaeological monument has three lives. The first life is the true life of the monument, the one it was made for, so it served a purpose when it wasn't yet a monument. The second life of a monument is the one that it was given by archaeologists and historians, according to their own visions, interpreting it after the discovery. They are trying to get closer to its original life, and tend to determine, with varying degrees of success, the real context of the monument. In any case, they give it a new life, which in the scientific articles can begin to lead a life of its own, sometimes, unfortunately, without too much connection to its true reality. The third life is the one that a certain monument gets when, after discovery, it finds its way in this world, again among people, visited or not, having a certain meaning to a large or a smaller group of people (Marin 2013, 267-8, trans. by A. Nikoloska).*

While interpreting the sculptures from the *House of Parthenius* anachronistic mistakes were made simply by disregarding the context of their finding. Namely, the sculptures were collected in separate catalogues and studies often ordered them by category instead of by the archaeological context. To be more precise, while explaining the religious habitat of the city, the sculptural material from the *House of Parthenius* cannot be taken as a direct testimony of a religious devotion of any time but the chronological context of the actual discovery. As discussed, certain sculptures from the *House of Parthenius* were considered as parts of the religious imagery of contemporary Stobi at the time of their making. This misleading methodological mistake was frequently made while perceiving the pagan worship of the city, even by the author of this paper.

We must, after all, acknowledge the fact that some of the sculptures were collectables from the local heritage of Stobi. The only one that can, with any certainty, be treated as such is the statue of Dionysos – Liber,<sup>27</sup> a product of a provincial workshop and the only precisely dated sculpture due to the pertinent inscription. It was erected in 119 by

<sup>24</sup> 1987, n° 205, T. 79, fig. 3

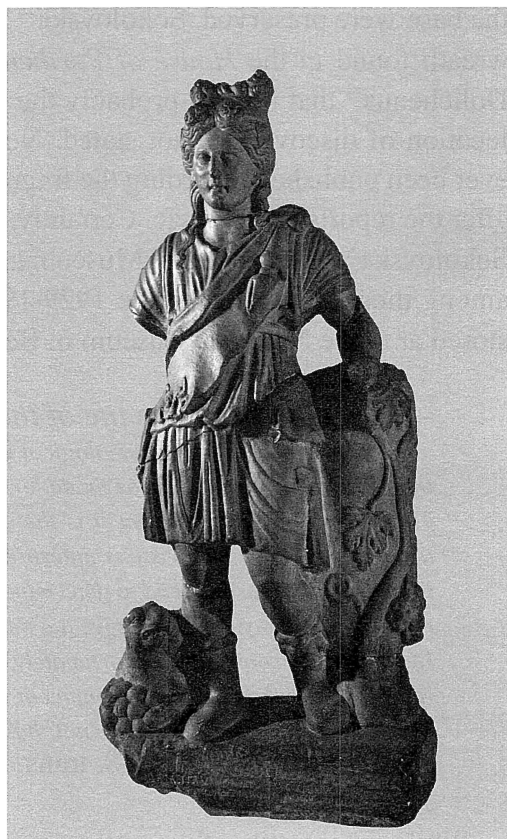
<sup>25</sup> Düll 1977, n° 279, Abb. 68; Sokolovska 1987, n° 204, T. 79, fig. 204.

<sup>26</sup> Sokolovska 1987, nos. 209-211, 213, 213-217, 223, 224, 226, 230, 232, 233, 241-244, 247, 252-256, 258, 260-263, 265-268.

<sup>27</sup> Saria 1930; Vulić 1931, n° 101; Petković 1937, 22-23, V; Grbić 1958, 91-92; Bitrakova-Grozdanova 1987; Sokolovska 1987, n° 154, T. 61, fig. 3; for the readings of the inscription see Babamova 2012, n° 6.



**Fig. 8.** Bronze statuette of Venus (Photo courtesy of the Archaeological Museum in Belgrade)



**Fig. 9.** Marble statue of Dionysos – Liber (Photo courtesy of the Archaeological Museum in Belgrade)

a former praetorian L. Dexius Longunus in Stobi for the health of the Emperor and it is a clear case of local transfer of property from public ownership to private citizens. Also, the over-life-sized head of Serapis,<sup>28</sup> dated to the Antonine period, whether the middle or the late period, could be considered a testimony of local worship. During the recent excavations in Stobi, a temple was unearthed connected to the Egyptian cults.<sup>29</sup> In the direct vicinity of the newly found building, a statue of Isis was discovered. It is of greater dimensions as well, with both statues probably furnishing this temple. The gilded head was certainly not produced in Stobi on account of its craftsmanship, an import that might have served two functions in Stobi before its discovery when it began serving its third, after discovery.

I believe, however, that most of the sculptures were late imports delivered for the

<sup>28</sup> Petković 1937, 30-32, XI; Grbić 1958, 89; Düll 1977, n° 276, Abb. 66; Sokolovska 1987, n° 196, T. 75, fig. 1; Bitrakova-Grozdanova 1999, 58-62.

<sup>29</sup> The discovery of the temple was presented by Silvana Blaževska and Jovan Radnjanski at the International symposium *Romanising Oriental Gods? Religious transformations in the Balkan provinces in the Roman period. - New finds and novel perspectives* held at the Macedonian Academy of Sciences and Arts in September 2013. The proceedings of the symposium are soon to be published.

purposes of the house collection, carefully selected since their display reflected the taste and status of the owner. The selection was made by the patrons, well learned and well traveled, whose criteria depended on their sensibilities and interests. Such art collections are very common, found all over the provinces,<sup>30</sup> made of reused sculpture, sometimes reworked, and of newly carved ones.<sup>31</sup> There was a competitive market behind it, involving a network of people dealing and distributing. The patrons of the house must have had good connections in order to assemble this collection.

For instance, we can more freely think of there relief with the thiasos<sup>32</sup> as an import. It is part of a group of Neo-Attic Hellenistic copies reproduced from a lost original, made in archaizing style. Of course, there is no way of knowing with absolute certainty whether this piece of art was originally commissioned for the citizens of Hellenistic Stobi or if it was brought here in Late Antiquity as a collector's item. However, bearing in mind that these particular reliefs were not mass-produced and common to the region of Athens, the second possibility is more reasonable. It is a similar case with the relief of Cybele.<sup>33</sup> This monument is from later Roman times, although this iconographical type is typical for the late Classical and Hellenistic period. We know that the cult of Cybele, judging from the lack of material connected to it, was not worshiped in Stobi, so the Cybele relief was also, most probably, imported in late antique times. This Great Mother did not leave a significant mark in Stobi during Roman times. The only evidence consists of terracotta figurines, not great in number, however very frequent in Hellenistic and Early Roman times all over Macedonia, Thrace and Asia Minor, found in graves,<sup>34</sup> which speaks only of private worship with a sepulchral aspect. Therefore, a relief of such dimensions and grandeur, that would have been a manifestation of a more public form of worship, would not be expected to be found in the context of

<sup>30</sup> Although the evidence of such collections is vast, Stirling in her sixth chapter (2005, 165-227) has managed to make a rather broad overview of examples from all over the Empire; on collections of the late antique residences in Athens see Saradi 2011, 275-280; on collections from late antique houses in Rome see Sfameni 2012.

<sup>31</sup> On questions of late antique conservation and dating of sculptures found in late antique context see Hannestad 1994 and 2007.

<sup>32</sup> Petković 1937, 12, I; Grbić 1958, 29-30; Düll 1977, n° 208, Abb. 65; Bitrakova-Grozdanova 1987, 121-122, Tab. IV-1; Nikoloska 2010.

<sup>33</sup> Vulić 1931, 239, n° 638; Petković 1937, 26, IX; Düll 1977, n° 282; Sokolovska 1988, 122, n° 10; Vermaseren 1989, 315.

<sup>34</sup> See Vermaseren 1989 for the many examples from both western and eastern Roman provinces.



**Fig. 10.** Marble relief of the thiasos of Dionysos  
(Photo courtesy of the Archaeological Museum in Belgrade)

the earlier city. Here we also consider the exceptional bronze satyrs,<sup>35</sup> clear imports, believed by many to be late Hellenistic Pompeian products.

The provenance and the dating of the other marble sculptures are more difficult to determine with certainty. The marble torso of Venus Victrix<sup>36</sup> and the marble Venus with the dolphin<sup>37</sup> are not particularly exceptional in terms of workmanship, although they are not quite products of provincial workshops, so it is more possible for them to have been imported for the purposes of the late antique decorative pool arrangement of the *House of Parthenius*. Venus, as well as Dionysos, is part of the traditional decorative repertoire, often seen in late antique residences. Unfortunately the marble Venuses

<sup>35</sup> Bronze satyr playing a flute (Petković 1937, 13-15, II; Grbić 1958, 42-44; Bitrakova-Grozdanova 1987, 129-130, T. III-1; Sokolovska 1987, n° 161. T. 65, fig. 1-2). Bronze satyr dancing (Petković 1937, 16-21, III; Grbić 1958, 42-44; Bitrakova-Grozdanova 1987, 130-131, T. III-2; Sokolovska 1987, n° 160, T. 64, fig. 1-2).

<sup>36</sup> Petković 1937, 27-30, X; Grbić 1958, 90; Düll 1977, n° 12; Sokolovska 1987, n° 134, T. 53, fig. 3.

<sup>37</sup> Grbić 1968, 90-91; Düll 1977, n° 13; Sokolovska 1987, n° 135, T. 53, fig. 4.

are now lost, according to Deana Ratković from the National Museum in Belgrade, probably destroyed during the war. The marble torso of Hygeia,<sup>38</sup> on the other hand, seems to be more of a local product. All of these statues have been dated differently by different authors, which suggests that they need to be studied once more.<sup>39</sup> The Hellenistic marble head of a girl<sup>40</sup> has been identified as Kora or the goddess Artemis, while the head with laurel wreath<sup>41</sup> could belong to a mythological sculpture, but, since it was found in association with the impost blocks with crosses, it is also likely that it could have been part of Christian imagery.

The bronze statuettes of Venus<sup>42</sup> and Apollo<sup>43</sup> are dated to the first century, the bronze Fortuna<sup>44</sup> a century later. These kinds of statuettes were mass-produced and highly mobile, and found all over the Empire, so it is hard to speak about them in terms of local heritage or imports. They reflect the private aspect of worship, therefore were often moved as personal belongings. The same can be said about the bronze Lar<sup>45</sup> dated to the second half of the second century by Düll.

So, in addition to Marin's perspective cited above, we can say that the monuments from *the House of Parthenius* had even more lives, being transported several times from their original context even during antiquity.

#### - Arrangement

Another interest of this study is the possible arrangement of the statuary in the residence. Again, there is no way of knowing for certain the original arrangement of the sculptural display in the *House of Parthenius*, nor do we know how many pieces of sculpture and reliefs were in this late antique collection, bearing in mind that many marble fragments of sculptural body parts and statue bases were found within its context. However, we can offer ideas of certain possibilities. The fact that most of the pieces were found in the pool in front of the western courtyard doesn't give us definitive confirmation that they were erected only in this sector of the house; nevertheless, it is the only one in direct context. So, it is very likely that most of the statues were displayed in the luxurious chambers of the north courtyard, especially considering the niches, the bases, and the intercolumniation of the peristyle. Late antique residence courtyards

<sup>38</sup> Petković 1937, 32, XIII; Grbić 1958, 91; Düll 1977, n° 195, Abb. 53; Sokolovska 1987, n° 186, T. 71, fig. 4.

<sup>39</sup> The studies of Hannestad (1994; 2007) led to different parameters than those that have been applied so far for dating of sculptures found in late antique context. I believe that some of the statues of the *House of Parthenius* can and should be submitted for re-examination following these parameters. Of course, this calls for a complete new study.

<sup>40</sup> Petković 1937, 32, XII; Grbić 1958, 37; Mano-Zissi 1973, 190; Bitrakova-Grozdanova 1987, 126-127, T. VII-2; Sokolovska 1987, n° 142, T. 57, fig. 2

<sup>41</sup> Sokolovska 1987, n° 205, T. 79, fig. 3

<sup>42</sup> Petković 1937, 21-22, IV; Grbić 1958, 92-93; Düll 1977, n° 11;

<sup>43</sup> Petković 1937, 24, VI; Grbić 1958, 96; Düll 1977, n° 32, Abb. 13;

<sup>44</sup> Petković 1937, 25, VIII; Grbić 1958, 96; Düll 1977, n° 250, Abb. 63.

<sup>45</sup> Petković 1937, 24-25, VII; Düll 1977, n° 267, Abb. 64;



**Fig. 11.** Marble relief of enthroned Cybele  
(Photo courtesy of the Archaeological Museum in Belgrade)

were considered as public spaces – a centre of daily life and activity, monumental in appearance with their paved mosaic floors and colonnades, and lush decoration, so the prestigious status could have been displayed in its entirety.<sup>46</sup>

One parameter that helps us reconstruct the statues' possible position is their size.<sup>47</sup> However, the question of style while grouping the statuary is even more important. Stirling, for example, has wrongly placed the bronze satyrs in different groups based only by their size.<sup>48</sup> The bronze satyrs must have been arranged as

<sup>46</sup> Özgenel 2007, 262-3.

<sup>47</sup> Stirling (2005, 197-8) even distinguished four groups within the statuary from the *House of Parthenius* based on size (I group – bronze statuettes of Lar, Apollo, Fortuna, Venus, and the smaller bronze satyr; II group – marble statuettes of Venus, Dionysos, and Hygeia; III group – large bronze statuette of a satyr, marble female head, Serapis; IV group – marble relief of the thiasos and the relief of Cybele).

<sup>48</sup> Bronze satyr playing a flute, height: statue 1.15m; Bronze satyr dancing–height: statue 0.65, base 0.07.



a sculptural pendant,<sup>49</sup> an instant notion after one sees them together, united by their craftsmanship, style and character. Their best position would probably have been at the entrance of the apsidal room, or in one of the four rooms with mosaic floors, so their juxtaposition could have been exploited in a more effective manner. Another possible pendant has been composed of the thiasos relief and the Cybele relief, similar in both shape and dimensions.<sup>50</sup> It is worth noting that these two deities complement each other also in their religious sentiment, both being deemed part of the “oriental” cults, mostly popular and responsible for the religious transformation in Late Roman times, so their possible juxtaposition is even more logical.

The sculpture of Dionysos with the inscription could have also furnished one of the rooms considering its larger dimensions (0.87m), also the marble torso of Hygeia (0.41m) which at its full height would have been equally large. The most probable position of the head of Serapis might have been in one of the niches and it surely wasn't displayed as a whole sculpture judging by its dimensions (0.44m). It is possible, on the other hand, that the marble head of a girl (0.24m) belonged to a whole sculpture housed in the *House of Parthenius*. The small bronze statuettes of Fortuna (0.10m) and Apollo (0.15m) were moved around a lot due to their small size, positioned in more private corners of the house, where incense was burned and candles were lit. Such areas of the house served as private shrines, where intimate prayers were made to the gods in solitude.

The position of the sculptures can also be determined by the mythological character portrayed. Some of the statues, as for example the marble Venuses,<sup>51</sup> surely stood on the bases in the pool of the north courtyard. We often see Venus connected to pools and fountains.<sup>52</sup> Here we can include also the bronze statuette of Venus, contrary to Stirling's grouping, with its height of 0.30m that belongs more to the group of statues for display, than to smaller statuettes suitable for private and intimate worship. The fact that the wreathed head was the only found fragment of a sculpture beside two sculptural bases in the small courtyard and in context with impost blocks bearing Christian symbolism makes us question its pagan, mythological character.<sup>53</sup> There is a chance that this fragmented piece belonged to a Christian statue in which case the small courtyard could have been a part of the house where the display of Christian imagery was more accentuated.

#### - *Religious use*

We return to the question asked earlier in the study as to whether the statuary collection served merely a decorative purpose or a religious one; was it just an art

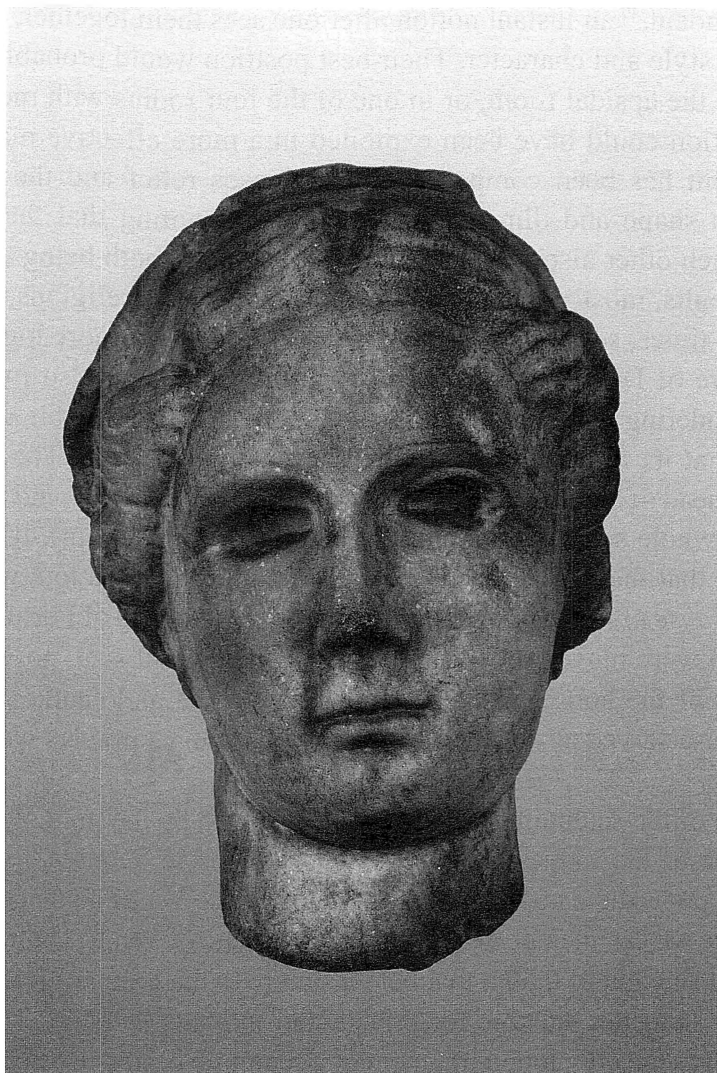
<sup>49</sup> Bartman 1991, 79-82.

<sup>50</sup> Relief depicting the thiasos of Dionysos, height – 0.52m, width – 0.62m; Marble votive of Cybele, height – 0.47m, width 0.47m.

<sup>51</sup> Marble torso of Venus, height 0.45m; Marble torso of Venus with a dolphin, height 1.02 m.

<sup>52</sup> Stirling 2005, 220.

<sup>53</sup> Stirling has identified the fragment as belonging to Dionysos or Apollo (2005, 26). However, Christian statues are also often wreathed.



**Fig. 12.** Marble head of a girl  
(Photo courtesy of the Archaeological Museum in Belgrade)

collection of mythological statuary or a religious statement? So far, we have some indications to confirm the latter. Stirling is the only author investigating this very question regarding the collection from the *House of Parthenius* and she lays out arguments that the statuary had a religious usage after all.<sup>54</sup> She considers that the votive inscription on the Dionysos statue is an element of worship even in a reused context. Also, enthroned divinities could have been seen as cult statues, as is the case of the enthroned Cybele.<sup>55</sup> Stirling's arguments regarding the possible religious use

---

<sup>54</sup> 2005, 198-199.

<sup>55</sup> We find the best example of the private late antique worship of Cybele at the House of Proclus in Athens where there was a room on the west side with reused votive reliefs of Cybele in a naiskos, clearly used as a shrine (Saradi 2011, 277); on the worship of Cybele in a late antique private context in Rome see Sfameni 2012, 125-128.

of the statuary from the *House of Parthenius* can be supplemented with some further observations.

Above anything else, the ecstatic posture of the bronze satyrs alludes to the frenzies of the worship of Dionysos, not to forget the ithyphallic satyrs on the base of the dancing one. Other scenes showing worship can also be acknowledged, as on the relief of the thiasos of Dionysos. The relief captures the ambience of the festivities honoring Dionysos and the mystic aspect of meanadeism. The worship of Dionysos was especially important in Late Antiquity,<sup>56</sup> and bearing this in mind it is easy to assume that the tradition of his cult in Stobi was preserved even longer, in the privacy of the local aristocracy. Dionysos was a popular god among the Macedonians and continued to be during Roman times, largely evidenced in these regions of the Empire. This god and his thiasos was an oft-occurring mythological theme among the private collections all over the Empire which is also the case with the *House of Parthenius*. The Dionysiac imagery in the *House of Parthenius* is noteworthy, including the statue with an inscription, the relief with the thiasos, the bronze satyrs, but also a smaller marble head of a satyr and a torso of the god about which Petković reports. On the Cybele relief there is a tympanum associated with music and the hypnotic rhythm of the rituals of her cult, which can be taken into account.<sup>57</sup> The figure of Lar is holding a patera and a horn, again showing means of worship and suggesting that there was a lararium in the house. Here I would also include the inscription which speaks not only of the worship of an individual, in our case a certain Theuchrestos that set the altar, but also of a thiasos devoted to the goddess. The fact that portraits seem to be missing from the collection in the *House of Parthenius* provides support for the idea that we are looking at a religious environment inclined to pagan worship.

However, pagan worship coexisted with Christianity under the same roof. This city patron must have held meetings with the Christian authorities of Stobi as well, so the small courtyard could have been the audience room reserved for them. Let us remind ourselves that these provincial aristocrats, the patrons of the *House of Parthenius*, lived during the times of Christian Stobi. Christianity arrived at Stobi relatively early and subsequently laid down new moral grounds and rules, where numerous Christian basilicas existed contemporarily, being centres of the city's religious life. However, not much Christian material was found in the residence, the crosses on the impost capitals in the small peristyle and in the northern apsidal room being the only certain indication of any Christian presence, although Christian symbolism was sometimes used as a mean of precaution.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>56</sup> See for instance the lecture of Thomas Spencer Jerome on the importance of Dionysos in Late Antiquity in Bowersock 1990, 41-53.

<sup>57</sup> The well-known mystery formulas of Clement of Alexandria (*Protreptikos* 2,15,3), and the later one of Firmicus Maternus (*De errore profanorum religionum*, 18,1), speak of these instruments as crucial in the performance of Roman initiation rituals.

<sup>58</sup> *For the elite, remaining a worshipper of the gods rather than converting to Christianity was still possible but it demanded cautiousness in ritual practices as opposed to the rural population, who continued to worship the gods in the traditional ways* (Caseau, 2011a, 120).

### *Concluding thoughts*

The intention of this study was to go through the findings of previous research regarding the latest studies of Late Antiquity, so that we can try to reconstruct as accurate a vision as possible of the life of the *House of Parthenius*' patrons. An attempt was made as well to try and place the statuary in a more contextual discourse. The sculptural opulence and the diversity of style and subject makes this house a true museum; none of the sculptures found in this context were contemporary to any of the building phases of the house, so it is clear that the owners were art collectors, wealthy provincial aristocrats with social privileges and influence, living a cultured life. A patron of a city house with such wealth had daily meetings with all sorts of authorities, city officials and well-off citizens in his grand audience lobbies, where he underscored his authority by letting them see his good taste and the financial means to have such a collection, making, at the same time, a statement of a man that honors tradition. Bearing this in mind, we must consider the sculptures in the context of this house as part of the lush display of power and religious orientation that directly connected the inhabitants with the ways of their ancestors. At least five generations were brought up in this house over nearly two centuries, traditionally preserving and passing on the pagan heritage of the city through *Paideia*.<sup>59</sup> This rather eclectic collection must have been part of the education of the young aristocrats in late antique Stobi. The pagan revival, or rather, its preservation in Late Antiquity was common among the urban elite. The aristocracy was the last to forget about the ways of the past and the pagan statues remained associated largely to them.

In order to answer the main question of this study as to whether the sculptural décor of the *House of Parthenius* had a religious purpose, let us summarize our findings. Our collection contains mythological statues, images of enthroned divinities, of worship and frenzy, votive reliefs, and even a votive inscription, but no portraits. To associate this residence with Theodosius is completely misleading; an atmosphere where the tradition of pagan habits was kept alive would not have been the venue of choice for this Christian emperor. Perhaps the Episcopal residence or some of the other late antique houses in Stobi, not so associated with pagan worship, would have been more suited to the emperor's taste. This statuary collection demonstrates a preservation of pagan atmosphere within a private context in times of the triumphant Christianity. The power of the owner allowed him to freely enjoy the pagan atmosphere within his own chambers, while Christianity prevailed in the public life of the city, in effect a case of crypto-paganism.<sup>60</sup> It is yet another example of the persistence of pagan worship among the higher strata of Roman society in Late Antiquity.

<sup>59</sup> *Paideia* was an important part of the daily life of the late antique aristocracy. See chapter seven in Stirling 2005.

<sup>60</sup> On crypto-paganism see Caseau 2011b, 490-492.

## Повторна посета на *Куќата на Партениј*

### *Резимé*

Познатата доцноантичка куќа од Стоби, откриена во 20-тите години на минатиот век и именувана како *Куќата на Партениј*, заслужува да биде разгледана од неколку причини. Нас нè интересира културниот и историски контекст на оваа куќа, што ќе нè доведе до подобро разбирање на социјалната улога на сопствениците, нивниот статус, социјалните привилегии и влијанија, но најмногу од сè нивната верска определба и намената на скулптуралниот декор. Последните студии за доцната антика и приватната сфера отворија можности за поконтекстуален увид на животот и значењето на оваа куќа и на пронајдената колекција. Токму поради тоа, друга причина за оваа повторна посета е да се соединат уште еднаш скулптурите кои се пронајдени во рамките на археолошкиот контекст на оваа резиденција. Покрај фреските и мозаичните подови, скулптурите биле важен дел од овој домашен амбиент. Статуите откриени во *Куќата на Партениј* припаѓале на различни периоди од контекстот на нивното наоѓање, опфаќајќи временски распон од хеленистичкиот период до римскиот царски период. Некои од нив се локално изработени, но повеќето се импорти, со високи уметнички квалитети, сите искористени во нови цели како делови од приватна колекција, но и како објекти на религиско почитување.

BIAB – *Bulletin de l'Institut Archéologique Bulgare.*

CCCA – *Corpus Cultus Cybelae Attidisque.*

DOP – *Dumbarton Oaks Papers.*

ÉPRO – *Études préliminaires aux religions orientales dans l'Empire romain.*

GSKA – *Godišnjak Srpske Kraljevske Akademije.*

JÖAI – *Jahrbuch des Österreichischen Archäologischen Institutes in Wien.*

LAA – *Late Antique Archaeology.*

MAA – *Macedoniae Acta Archaeologica.*

PAWB – *Potsdamer Altertumswissenschaftliche Beiträge.*

## Bibliography:

- Babamova, S. 2012. *Inscriptiones Stoborum. Studies in the Antiquities of Stobi I*, Stobi.
- Baldini Lippolis, I. 2007. "Private space in late antique cities: Laws and building procedures" in L. Lavan, L. Özgenel & A. Sarantis (eds.), *Housing in Late Antiquity. From Palaces to Shops*. (LAA 3.2 - 2005), Leiden 2007, 197-237.
- Bartman, E. 1991. "Sculptural Collecting and Display in the Private Realm", in E. K. Gazda (ed.), *Roman Art in the Private Sphere. New Perspectives on the Architecture and Décor of the Domus, Villa, and Insula*, University of Michigan Press 71-88.
- Bitrakova – Grozdanova, V. 1987, *Monuments de l'Epoque Hellenistique dans la Republique Socialiste de Macedoine*, Skopje.
- Bitrakova – Grozdanova, V. 1999, *Religion et Art dans l'antiquité en Macédoine*, Skopje.
- Bowersock, G. W. 1990, *Hellenism in Late Antiquity. Thomas Spencer Jerome lectures*, University of Michigan Press.
- Caseau, B. 2011a. "Late Antique Paganism: Adaptation under Duress", in L. Lavan & M. Mulryan (eds.), *The Archaeology of Late Antique 'Paganism'* (LAA 7 – 2009), Leiden 2011, 111-134.
- Caseau, B. 2011b. "Religious Intolerance and Pagan Statuary", in L. Lavan & M. Mulryan (eds.), *The Archaeology of Late Antique 'Paganism'* (LAA 7 – 2009), Leiden 2011, 479-503.
- Düll, S. 1977. *Die Götterkulte Nordmakedoniens in Römischer Zeit*, München.
- Ellis, S. P. 1991. "Power, Architecture, and Décor: How the Late Roman aristocrat appeared to his guests" in E. K. Gazda (ed.), *Roman Art in the Private Sphere. New Perspectives on the Architecture and Décor of the Domus, Villa, and Insula*, University of Michigan Press, 117-134.
- Gerasimovska, D. 2009. *The Role of Habitat in the Culture of Life through Antiquity in the Republic of Macedonia*, Skopje.
- Grbić, M. 1959. *Odabrana grčka i rimska plastika u Narodnom muzeju u Beogradu*, Beograd 1958.
- Hannestad, N. 1994. *Tradition in late antique sculpture. Conservation – Modernization – Production*, Aarhus University Press.
- Hannestad, N. 2007. "Late Antique Mythological Sculpture – in Search of Chronology" in F. A. Bauer & C. Witschel (eds), *Statuen in der Spätantike*, Wiesbaden, 273-306.
- Kitzinger, E. 1946. "A Survey of the early Christian town of Stobi", DOP 3, 81-162.
- Kolarik, R. E. 1987. "Mosaics of the Early Church at Stobi", DOP 41, Studies on Art and Archeology in Honor of Ernst Kitzinger on His Seventy-Fifth Birthday, 295-306.
- Mano-Zissi, Dj. 1973. "Stratigraphic Problems and the Urban Development of Stobi", *Studies in the Antiquities of Stobi I*, Belgrade, 185-232.
- Marin, E. 2013. *Moji rimski papiri*, Zagreb.
- Mikulčić, I. 2003. *Stobi, an ancient city*, Skopje.
- Nestorović, B. N. 1931. "Iskopavanja u Stobima", *Starinar* 6. 109-114.



- Nestorović, B. N. 1936. "Un Palais à Stobi", BIAB 10 (Actes du IV Congrès International des études Byzantines, Sofia, September 1934), Sofia, 173-183.
- Nikoloska, A. 2010. "Genesis, development and prevalence of the iconographical motif Cybele in a naiscos" *Patrimonium* 7-8, 69 – 80.
- Özgenel, L. 2007. "Public Use and Privacy in Late Antique Houses in Asia Minor: the Architecture of Spatial Control", in L. Lavan, L. Özgenel & A. Sarantis (eds.), *Housing in Late Antiquity. From Palaces to Shops*, (LAA 3.2 - 2005), Leiden 2007, 239-281.
- Petković, V. 1928. GSKA XXXVII, Beograd, 190 – 191.
- Petković, V. 1928a. GSKA XXXVII, Beograd, 220 - 221.
- Petković, V. 1929. GSKA XXXVIII, Beograd, 231 - 234.
- Petković, V. 1930. GSKA XXXIX, Beograd, 188 - 191.
- Petković, V. 1931. GSKA XL, Beograd, 220 - 225.
- Petković, V. 1937. "Antičke skulpture iz Stobija", *Starinar* XII, 12-35.
- Polci, B. 2003. "Some Aspects of the transformation of the roman *domus* between Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages" in L. Lavan & W. Bowden (eds.), *Theory and practice in late antique archaeology*, (LAA I - 2003), Leiden 2003, 79-109.
- Saradi, H. G, (with the contribution of D. Eliopoulos) 2011 in L. Lavan & M. Mulryan (eds.). "Late paganism and Christianisation in Greece", *The Archaeology of Late Antique 'Paganism'* (LAA 7 – 2009), Leiden 2011, 263-309.
- Saria, B. 1930 "Ein Dionysosvotiv aus dem Konsulatsjahr des P. Dasumius Rusticus, JÖAI XXXVI, 64-74.
- Sfameni, C. 2012. "Isis, Cybele and other oriental gods in Rome in Late Antiquity: "private" contexts and the role of senatorial aristocracy", in A. Mastrocinque, C. Giuffrè Scibona (eds.), *Demeter, Isis, Vesta and Cybele: Studies in Honour of Giulia Sfameni Gasparro*, PAWB 2012.
- Sodini, J-P. 2003. "Archaeology and late antique social structures", in L. Lavan & W. Bowden (eds.), *Theory and practice in late antique archaeology*, (LAA I - 2003), Leiden 2003, 25-56.
- Sokolovska, V. 1981. "Stobi in the light of Ancient Sculpture", in *Studies in the Antiquities of Stobi III*, Titov Veles, 95-106.
- Sokolovska, V. 1987. *Ancient Sculpture in SR Macedonia*, Skopje.
- Sokolovska, V. 1988. "The Images of Cybele in Macedonia," MAA 9 (1988), 113-127.
- Stirling, L. 2005. *The Learned Collector. Mythological Statuettes and Classical Taste in Late Antique Gaul*, University of Michigan Press.
- Vermaseren, M. J. 1989. *CCCA VI, Germania, Raetia, Noricum, Pannonia, Dalmatia, Macedonia, Thracia, Moesia, Dacia, Regnum Bospori, Colchis, Scythia et Sarmatia*, EPRO 50 Leiden.
- Vulić, N. 1931. *Antički spomenici naše zemlje, Spomenik SKA* 71.
- Vulić, N. 1941-48. *Antički spomenici naše zemlje, Spomenik SKA* 98.
- Wiseman J. R. 1973. *Stobi. A Guide to Excavations* (Belgrade 1973).