The Roman Necropolis in Šempeter: The History of Research

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Twelve kilometres west of Celje lies Šempeter, well-known for having the finest preserved Roman monuments in Slovenia. This fertile valley attracted people even in prehistoric times, since the Amber Route (connecting the Baltic regions rich in amber with the northern Adriatic market) passed that way. Prehistoric burial mounds are known in Griže and Šešče, while the prehistoric settlement connected with them is found in Langer.¹ Prehistoric graves of the Hallstatt period were also discovered in Šempeter in the eastern part of the Roman necropolis, lying beneath the Roman graves.²

During the Roman period members of the civic aristocracy of Celeia owned estates in the valley and erected their tombs in Šempeter. The Roman settlement (vicus) was probably situated close by, next to the main road, but little is known of it. Roman remains have been recovered from the surroundings of Šempeter – e. g., from Zgornje Grušovlje, Podlog, Dobrteša vas, Novi Klošter and Gotovlje – but none of these sites has been systematically investigated.³ Nearby, there is also Ločica pri Polzeli, where, at the end of the 2nd century AD, the second Italic legion was stationed.⁴ Along the valley ran the main Roman road Aquileia–Emona–Celeia–Poetovio, which was partly researched during the excavation of the eastern part of the Šempeter necropolis and by means of topographical surveys.⁵ In Šempeter itself, a few hundred metres west of the excavated necropolis (near the local railway station), modest late Roman graves and

¹ Lojze Bolta, Najstarejša zgodovina Spodnje Savinjske doline, Savinjski zbornik 1, 1959, 103–113: 108.
³ Vera Kolšek, Savinjska dolina v rimski dobi, Savinjski zbornik 1, 1959, 118–131.
⁴ Marjeta Šašel Kos, Zgodovinska podoba prostora med Akvilejo, Jadranom in Sirmijem pri Kasiu Dionu in Herodijanu (A Historical Outline of the Region between Aquileia, the Adriatic and Sirmium in Cassius Dio and Herodian), Ljubljana 1989, 243.
marble stelae from the 4th century were discovered, showing that the settlement remained inhabited after the great flood and devastation in the 3rd century.\textsuperscript{6} Administratively, Šempeter belonged to the urban region of Celeia (\textit{Municipium Claudium Celeia}), which was part of the Roman province of Noricum, but from the reign of the Emperor Diocletian onwards it belonged to \textit{Noricum Mediterraneum}.

The Roman burial ground in Šempeter lay along the northern side of the road \textit{Emona} (Ljubljana) – \textit{Atrans} (Trojane) – \textit{Celeia} (Celje), being bounded on the south side by the river Savinja. It stretched for over a kilometre, but because the present-day buildings stand close together, it has never been completely excavated. The necropolis was discovered purely by accident in 1952. While digging in the Wolf family’s orchard, a statue of a seated woman, a relief of a satyr with a nymph and some architectural elements were discovered. The Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts, under the direction of Prof. Josip Klemenc, took charge of the excavations in June of that year, together with colleagues from the Celje Regional Museum and the Department of Archaeology at the University of Ljubljana. These investigations continued up to 1956.\textsuperscript{7}

During the period of the excavations the team researched a surface area of 2500 m\textsuperscript{2} and discovered 604 stone pieces or fragments thereof, primarily made of white marble. The area of the former course of the Savinja, a river bed filled with gravel, was investigated, since parts of the collapsed tombs lay there. The bottom of the river bed was reached at a depth of 4 m from the ground surface at that time, and profiles showed that the Savinja made a small bend in this area. The surrounding region was precisely delimited by the excavators with trial trenches, and the boundary of the excavation was determined in the north and west by reference to the remains of the enclosure of the grave plots that demarcated the necropolis itself. The archaeological team entered the pieces discovered on a grid in order to link the individual parts more easily.\textsuperscript{8}

It soon became apparent that certain tombs were capable of reconstruction, so a special team made plaster casts of each discovered piece on a scale of 1:10. Particular attention was given to the various holes and incisions, since these provided the best indications for fitting together individual parts or elements of a tomb. The most important of these were (i) the lifting holes, which were generally rectangular, chiselled conically and placed in the pivotal area of the block, (ii) the dowel holes for linking the blocks in the vertical plane, located on the bedding and resting surfaces

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{7} Josip Klemenc, Vera Kolšek, Peter Petru, \textit{Antične grobnice v Šempetru}, Kata
dologi in monografije 9, Ljubljana 1972.
\bibitem{8} Klemenc, Kolšek, Petru, op. cit. (n. 7), 10.
\end{thebibliography}
(iron dowels were put into them, and the narrow channels were then filled with lead), and (iii) the cramp holes on the bedding surfaces, which made a horizontal connection with the iron cramps. All the existing holes were reused in the reconstruction. Another important indicator was the position of pry-holes – smaller grooves or lines that marked out the place for the next block. The surface of these areas was usually polished, whereas the rest was rough and untreated.

When the excavations were concluded in 1956, there followed several years of intensive work as attempts were made to reconstruct the monuments. The Vindonii tomb was almost completely reconstructed even during the period of excavation, and by 1958 Vera Kolšek and Peter Petru had presented a proposal for the complete reconstruction of the Ennii, Spectatii and Spectatius Secundinus tombs. Reconstructive work commenced in the spring of 1959.

In addition to correctly assembling the elements, the reconstructive work demanded the addition of some missing components that were important for stability of the re-erected tombs. Since it was decided that only the same material could suitably complement the monuments, it was necessary to obtain sufficient quantities of white Pohorje marble. Five stonemasons hewed out and prepared the complementary parts. This work was demanding, since in some cases very large pieces had to be substituted – e.g., the front right-hand part of the canopy of the Spectatii tomb, or the supporting column for the canopy of the same tomb. During the reconstruction itself considerable work was occasioned by smaller damaged parts and cracks in the monuments that needed to be repaired with appropriate marble fragments. The stonecutting work lasted almost five months; then followed the assembly and erection of the tombs.

By August 1959 the monuments had been erected and prepared for visitors in the park. Only the foundations of the Spectatii tomb today occupy the original site of its discovery, while the four reconstructed tombs and other monuments have been arranged in an aesthetically pleasing manner over the green area. Besides the four reconstructions, it is worth mentioning the large elements of unreconstructed tombs, the small ossuary of local limestone with carved figures of the deceased on the top and the tombstone of Statutius Secundianus, where the relief under the inscription represents preparations for the funeral feast.

In 1964 systematic archaeological excavations of the eastern part of the Šempeter necropolis commenced. Remains of this were first chanced upon when a gravel pit for renewing the Celje–Šempeter road was dug, back in 1947. The profile revealed remains of Roman walls, tiny artefacts and remains of cremations. In 1963 the team began to fill in the gravel pit and again came upon a large complex of walls and a layer indicating Roman culture. This find gave rise to systematic archaeological research
over the entire area. Excavations by the Celje Regional Museum under the leadership of V. Kolšek in 1964–65 and 1967 uncovered another part of the Šempeter necropolis with 96 graves and a Roman road. The graves and tombs were arranged close to one another in a direction pointing towards the reconstructed tombs in the village.

Examination of the grave plots revealed that some have a constructed central grave, the inner walls of which were plastered in some places. The other graves within grave plots are simply dug into the ground and covered with a paving of small river pebbles. Remains of such paving have been discovered on several grave plots and also between individual graves – which indicates that the burial ground as a whole was paved with stones. The remains of funerary monuments are preserved only in their foundations, which differ in form and size. The rectangular foundations are shallow and rather poorly constructed (e.g., nos. 38, 40, 41–45), but the foundations of more massive type are stronger and reach 60 cm to 100 cm in depth (e.g., nos. 59–63, 67–69). Monuments once stood on these marble and sandstone blocks; only a few remains of the funerary architecture are preserved: fragments of sandstone roof ridges, part of the moulded cover of a socle and the corner of a slab with a moulded frame.

In addition to some of the foundations, the enclosure of the grave plot is also preserved, and on the surface between the foundation and the enclosure there lie some simpler grave pits of irregular shape. Some have the wall of the grave lined with stones and reach a depth of 120 cm. In these graves the original contents are preserved intact, except where robbery has occurred in ancient times. The most poorly preserved are simple graves shallowly dug out and lacking a grave construction. In most instances, the cremated remains were scattered over the bottom of the grave pit; only in three graves was a burial urn used.

One particular feature of the Šempeter burial ground is the skeleton graves of newborn babies (graves 25, 50, 55, 56, 87). Here, the child was simply laid in a rough pit and covered with a clay lid; a vessel was added to the grave in only one instance.

In two places there were found remains of a funeral pyre (ustrina) as well as the graves – here the dead were cremated. This was a shallow oval pit right beside the grave, about 1.5 m long, full of cremated remains and broken ceramic pieces. Remains of shattered vessels lay partly on the pyre with some fragments in the grave pit.

South of the burial ground the Roman road Emona–Celeia was discovered; it ran along the entire length of the necropolis. The road surface

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9 Kolšek, op. cit. (n. 2).
10 Kolšek, op. cit. (n. 2), 10, Pl. 22.
11 Kolšek, op. cit. (n. 2), 10, Pl. 23.
12 Kolšek, op. cit. (n. 2), 11, Pl. 6, 7.
was poorly preserved; it measured 6 m in width, or 9 m together with the roadside ditches. The ground on the south side of the road was investigated via trial trenches.\textsuperscript{13} It was established that the burial ground did not extend south of the road (i.e., on the side of the river Savinja).

Thus the cemetery was separated from the Savinja only by the road, and during the floods in the second half of the 3rd century (c. 267 AD),\textsuperscript{14} which affected the whole Savinja valley together with Celeia, the Šempeter necropolis, too, was destroyed. The swollen river tore away much of its own banks and of the road. The monuments that stood closest to the river bed fell into it and were preserved, since they were covered by the river’s gravel, but the other blocks and fragments ended up, as time went on, as building material.

**THE VINDONII TOMB**

This tomb is made up of 12 pieces and is 4.60 m high. The lowest tier of the tomb comprises two blocks and is partly sunk in the ground. The second tier, formed from a single piece, makes up the base of the socle and has a truncated upper edge on all sides. The central part is raised and roughly worked, while the area with the reliefs is polished. The covering slab over the socle has a moulding on three sides; at the back the moulding is faintly visible.

The Vindonii tomb, designed as a funerary *ara*, is one of the oldest monuments in Šempeter (Fig. 1). The socle stands on a simple stepped pedestal and preserves the ashes of the deceased and the grave goods. The front is adorned with a relief of Heracles leading Alcestis back from the underworld. Heracles walks in front, a lion skin hanging over his arm, and leans on a cudgel. Alcestis is dressed in a long *chiton*, with a cloak over it that also covers her head. This central relief is framed by a decoration with a *kantharos*, birds and ivy. The two side reliefs on the socle represent hunters. The left one wears a short tunic and carries a hare around his neck. The one on the right is naked, with a shepherd’s crook and a basket with birds on his shoulder and two dead birds in his left hand.

The socle is covered by a moulded block that bears another slab marked with the abbreviation D M (*Dis Manibus* – to the divine *manes*, the souls of the dead). The upper part of the tomb is the altar. This carries, on the front, an inscription declaring that Gaius Vindonius Successus, the aedile of Claudia Celeia, set up the monument to himself and his wife Iulia, daughter of Sextus, a most faithful wife who died when she was fifty. The

\textsuperscript{13} Kolšek, op. cit. (n. 2), 10, Appendix 1; Kolšek, op. cit. (n. 6), 9, Fig. 2.

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two reliefs on the sides represent a servant and maidservant. The scribe holds a writing tablet in his hands, and a cylinder for written scrolls lies at his feet. The maidservant holds a jewellery casket in her hands. The monument is finished off at the top with a slab whose edges have two bound up coils with frontal rosettes. The crowning motif is missing on the top of the ara; this was possibly a container or a gryphon.

Gaius Vindonius performed the function of an aedile (an administrator of public buildings) in Celeia. According to an analysis made by J. Šašel, he was the first or one of the first aediles in the city after the province of Noricum was founded and the municipium (municipium Claudium Celeia) was established, ca. AD 45. However, more recent findings place the monument in the late Flavian or early Trajan period – i.e., at the end of the 1st, or the beginning of the 2nd, century.

THE ENNII TOMB

The family tomb of the Ennii is composed of 22 stones and is 5.60 m high. It is built in the form of a chapel (aedicula) and is probably the finest monument in Šempeter. The socle is adorned with rich, beautifully worked reliefs (Fig. 2). The one in front represents Europa being carried off across the

sea by Jupiter, changed into the form of a bull. A dolphin is carved above the waves, while the maiden's veil floats in the wind. The borders on the sides are decorated with a kantharos, a vine and grapes. The right side of the socle has a relief of Ganymedes, carried off by Jupiter in the form of an eagle, while the left side has the motif of a satyr and nymph, who symbolize the continuation of life after death.

The top of the socle bears a carved inscription in the tabula ansata. The tomb was erected by Quintus Ennius Liberalis and Ennia Oppidana in memory of themselves and their seventeen-year-old daughter Calendina, probably on the occasion of her death. Later, the name of their son Vitulus, who died at the age of thirty, was added. The portraits of the first three family members are sculptured in the reliefs beneath the canopy. The father, dressed in a tunic and toga, holds a document in his hands. The mother is clad in Celtic costume, with a cloak over her dress. Her jewellery is rich, comprising a pearl necklace, a neck-band with a half-moon pendant, a small chain on her breast and two fibulas fastening her dress. She holds a handkerchief in her hand, and her head is covered with a Noricum-style head-dress. Calendina, who is sculpted in a niche with a triangular pediment, stands between two genii, with spent torches in their hands. The ceiling of the tomb is adorned with coffers filled with rosettes, while the ridge of the double-eaved roof ends in a head of Medusa.

Judging by the inscription, the Ennii in Celeia did not exercise any noteworthy political function, and it is not possible to date the monument.
accurately. Calendina’s hair-style imitates that of the Empress Faustina the Elder, the wife of the Emperor Antoninus Pius (138–161). On the basis of the style of the reliefs, the monument can be dated to the early Antonine period, before Marcus Aurelius (161); but some authors ascribe it to the subsequent period.¹⁸

THE TOMB OF THE SPECTATII

The family tomb of the Spectatii is the largest of the reconstructed monuments, since it stands 8.25 m high. The richly adorned socle, divided by a narrow frieze into two parts, stands on a moulded base with steps. The reliefs on the lower side from right to left tell the story of Iphigenia, the first one depicting the scene in Aulis. Artemis blesses the sacrifice: a hind is to be slaughtered instead of the maiden. The central scene on the front of the socle represents Iphigenia’s brother Orestes with his friend Pylades by the altar at Tauris. The tale is completed by a relief showing the flight of Iphigenia, Orestes and Pylades from Tauris.

The corner reliefs portraying the Seasons (autumn and winter on the right, spring and summer on the left; Fig. 3) and the twins Castor and Pollux complete the rich decoration of the socle. Above the narrow frieze, which displays the animal scene plus two Gorgons and a Silenus in medallions, is placed a slab with an inscription identifying the owners of the

Fig. 3. The tomb of the Spectatii: the relief of a young man with a sickle and a basket with ears of corn represents summer (Photo: Viktor Berk).

¹⁷ Kastelic, op. cit. (n. 16), 223.
tomb. Gaius Spectatius Finitus erected the tomb for himself and for his son Gaius Spectatius Priscianus. The two were “mayors” (duoviri) in Celeia. Part of the inscription is missing; this probably mentions the wife of Finitus. The reliefs to the right and left of the inscription represent a satyr and nymph, while the two outer sides show scenes of sportive games and reliefs of heroes. Atop the socle lies a moulded slab. A second inscription, carved later above the moulded slab, mentions Septimia Iusta, the wife of Spectatius Priscianus.

The upper part of the tomb contains statues of the three deceased family members below the canopy roof, which is supported in front by two columns. The head of Medusa, which guards the resting-place of the dead, graces the front of the tomb roof.

On the basis of the stylistic character of the reliefs and the details of the clothing on the statues of the deceased, the tomb belongs to the period of Septimius Severus (193–211).19

THE TOMB OF SPECTATIUS SECUNDINUS

The tomb of Spectatius Secundinus is composed of 24 elements and stands 4.80 m high. It is one of the latest monuments in Šempeter, and is also constructed in the form of a chapel (aedicula). It differs from the other monuments in its form, and its decoration, in particular, is more modest. On the stepped base stand fairly high walls with columns at their corners. The tomb was erected by C. Spectatius Secundinus during his lifetime, in memory of himself, his wife Tutoria Avita, his son Spectatius Cervius, his nephew Rusticius Tutorius and his son Rusticius Albinus.

The portraits above the inscription probably represent the married couple and their 12-year-old nephew. Since only half of the depiction has been preserved, the presence of a portrait of the husband on the right can only be inferred. The inscription is imperfectly engraved, while mistakes appear in orthography. The names of some of the family members were engraved later, as is indicated by the different style of lettering and the position of the inscriptions.

On the left pilaster there is an axe (ascia). In the Roman world this implement had a symbolic meaning that was particularly widespread among the Celts. The ascia symbolized the ritual commencement of digging a tomb, while at the same time it ‘defended’ the tomb against the

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unauthorised later burial of an unknown person in it. The axe also served the preparations for a funeral in several functional ways, being used to dig the pit for the grave and to cut the wood used for the pyre and for the stonemasons’ production of the tombstone.

On the right-hand side, the wall between the two pilasters is framed with leaved capitals, but the area left for the relief is void. The monument probably dates from the late Severan period (the rule of Severus Alexander) or from the time of the first military emperors – i.e., from the first half of the third century.²⁰

The Šempeter tombs constitute some of the finest preserved Roman monuments in Slovenia and even in Central Europe as a whole (Fig. 4). Their reconstruction and re-erection aroused wide interest right from the start, and has posed numerous questions and challenges connected, on one hand, with the iconography and the dating of the monuments and, on the other, with the reconstruction itself.

![Fig. 4. Šempeter necropolis, view of the park (Photo: Tomaž Lauko).](image)

In the first, multi-authored publication concerning the Šempeter monuments²¹ the course of the reconstruction was described in detail by V. Kolšek, while in 1995, at a conference held in Celje, she once again substantiated and explained the reconstruction of the Ennii tomb.²² The

²⁰ Kastelic, op. cit. (n. 16), 224.
²¹ Klemenc, Kolšek, Petru, op. cit. (n. 7).
²² Vera Kolšek, Die Rekonstruktion des Ennier-Grabmonuments in Šempeter im
Šempeter tombs were also included by G. Kremer in her work on the funerary architecture of Noricum monuments, where she proposed a reconstruction of the large tomb with arcade decoration. The final contribution so far to the reconstruction of these tombs was made by A. Maver in her diploma dissertation, again regarding the form of the so-called Arcade Tomb.

Subsequent to the first publication, the dating of the monuments was revised fundamentally several times, especially on the basis of their iconographic characteristics and individual details. H. Gabelmann led the way by proposing a new dating for the tomb of Spectatius Secundinus; W. K. Kovacsovics followed, in respect of the Ennii and Spectatii tombs; finally, P. Kranz, in his study of 1986, corrected the dating of all four re-erected tombs on the basis of a stylistic analysis of their reliefs. In accordance with the stylistic features of the reliefs showing the Seasons and the Dioscuri, he placed the Spectatii tomb in the Severan period. Some years later, he strengthened these conclusions further by making a study of the models of the southern Noricum stone-cutting workshops and the influences on them, which led him to believe that most of the southern Noricum funerary monuments and some of the Šempeter ones can date only from the period following the Marcomannic Wars.

New studies of the problems relating to the Šempeter monuments were more recently presented at the 4th international conference on the problems of Roman provincial art held in Celje. Papers dealing with the iconographic and stylistic features of the reliefs, the problems of dating and the reconstruction of the monuments are collected in the proceedings, which were published in 1997. Mention should also be made of the work of B. Djurič on the trade in marble in the Eastern Alps, where Celeia is mentioned as one of the centres for the trade in white marble along the

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29 *Akten*, op. cit. (n. 18).
Sava and Savinja rivers, a claim supported by the richness and quality of the marble monuments in Šempeter and Celeia.

In her work on the Dionysian reliefs in the Noricum region M. Pochmarski-Nagele paid fresh attention to the motifs on the Šempeter tombs, re-examining, inter alia, the figures of the satyr and nymph, found on both the Ennii and the Spectatii tombs. Her conclusions propose a new dating for these tombs in the late Antonine period.

In one of his last contributions concerning Šempeter, E. Pochmarski touched on the statues of the deceased in the Spectatii tomb. In analysing the clothing, or more precisely the winding of the toga on the deceased and their characteristics, he expressed doubts that the statues really belonged to this tomb. He identified one of the male figures as Spectatius but claimed that the female statue represented Spectatius’s mother, who would then have been the person mentioned in the missing part of the inscription.

The family tomb of Spectatius Secundinus was dated by Gabelmann and Kranz to the early 3rd century, in accordance with the hair style and dress of the female figure. F. Glaser has made an interesting contribution, in which he points to the representation of the woman and the boy (the nephew) and the link with the cult of Isis – the boy with a crest on his head is the so-called “Horusknabe”, dedicated to the mysteries of Isis, with a writing instrument and diptych in his hands.

S. Priester has extended the study to the mythological world of the Šempeter monuments, seeing in the mythological representations primarily an expression of everyday life interpreted through mythological allusion, and less a statement of the spiritually rich and artistically highly developed world of the local aristocracy.

Of particular importance for the iconography of the Šempeter monuments – in addition to his short contributions – is the monograph by Jože Kastelic (The symbolism of Myths on Roman Funerary monuments).

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31 Pochmarski-Nagele, op. cit. (n. 19).
32 Pochmarski, op. cit. (n. 19), 79–102: 86.
33 See notes 25, 27.
37 Kastelic, op. cit. (n. 16).
Only some of the most important works dealing with the Šempeter monuments have been mentioned here. Their richness and their iconographic and stylistic features will remain in the future an inexhaustible source of new discussions, each of which will add to our knowledge of the history of these tombs.

Rimsko grobišče v Šempetru je ležalo vzdolž severne strani ceste Emona (Ljubljana) – Atrans (Trojane) – Celeia (Celje), na južni strani pa je tekla reka Savinja. Do odkritja nekropole je prišlo leta 1952. V času arheoloških izkopavanj je ekipa raziskala površino 2500 m². Raziskan je bil predel nekdanje struge Savinje, z gruščem zasuto rečno korito, v katerem so ležali deli podrtih grobnic. Kmalu se je pokazalo, da bo mogoče nekatere grobnice rekonstruirati, zato je posebna skupina naredila mavčni odlitek vsakega odkritega kosa v merilu 1 : 10. Posebno pozornost so namenili različnim vdolbinam in zarezam, saj so bila to najboljša vodila za sestavljanje posameznih delov oziroma členov grobnice.

Ko so bila izkopavanja leta 1956 končana, je sledilo nekajletno intenzivno delo in poskus rekonstrukcije spomenikov. Spomladi leta 1959 so začeli z rekonstrukcijskimi deli, avgusta pa so bili spomeniki postavljeni in pripravljeni za obisk.


Šempetrske grobnice spadajo med najlepše ohranjene spomenike rimske dobe. Njihova rekonstrukcija in postavitev je že na začetku zbudila zanimanje in številna vprašanja in izzive, povezane na eni strani z
ikonografijo in časovno opredelitvijo spomenikov, pa tudi s samo rekonstrukcijo.

O poteku rekonstrukcije je v prvi skupni publikaciji o šempetrskih spomenikih natančno poročala V. Kolšek, leta 1995 pa je na kolokviju v Celju ponovno utemeljila in pojasnila rekonstrukcijo grobnice Enijcev. V svoje delo o nagrobn arhitekturi in tipologiji noriških spomenikov je vključila šempetrske grobnice tudi G. Kremer. Zadnji prispevek k rekonstrukciji šempetrskih grobnic je delo A. Maver, ki je v diplomski nalogi rekonstruirala t. i. arkadno grobnico.