

# **Ecclesia S. Mariae de Turre cum capellis suis - identification of an earlier phase of the Church of the Holy Cross at Tar - Stancija Blek (Tar-Vabriga - Torre- Abrega, Istria)**

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**Konestra, Ana; Benčić, Gaetano; Cirelli, Enrico; Bartolić Sironić, Klaudia;  
Sommariva, Ilaria**

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**/ Institute of Archaeology**  
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**HR-10000 Zagreb**  
**tel 385 (0) 1 615 0250**  
**fax 385 (0) 1 605 5806**  
**e-mail: iarh@iarh.hr**  
**web: http://www.iarh.hr**

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*Ecclesia S. Mariae de  
Turre cum capellis suis* –  
identification of an earlier  
phase of the Church of the  
Holy Cross at Tar – Stancija  
Blek (Tar-Vabriga – Torre-  
Abrega, Istria)

*Ecclesia S. Mariae de  
Turre cum capellis suis* –  
utvrđivanje ranije faze crkve  
sv. Križa na lokalitetu Tar –  
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Torre-Abrega, Istra)

Prethodno priopćenje >  
Srednjovjekovna arheologija  
Preliminary report >  
Mediaeval archaeology

Ana Konestra<sup>1</sup>  
Gaetano Benčić<sup>2</sup>  
Enrico Cirelli<sup>3</sup>  
Klaudia Bartolić Sirotić<sup>2</sup>  
Ilaria Sommariva<sup>4</sup>

(1) Institute of Archaeology

Jurjevska ulica 15

HR-10000 Zagreb

ana.konestra@gmail.com

ORCID: 0000-0002-7726-6515

(2) Museum of the Poreč Territory

Decumanus 9

HR-52440 Poreč

gaetano.bencic@muzejporec.hr

klaudia.bartolic@muzejporec.hr

(3) Alma Mater – University of Bologna

Dipartimento di Storia Culture Civiltà

Piazza S. Giovanni in Monte 2

IT-40124 Bologna

enrico.cirelli2@unibo.it

ORCID: 0000-0002-7273-7824

(4) Independent researcher

Bologna, Italija

ilariasommariva92@gmail.com

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The paper reports the results of the first campaign of excavations at the Church of the Holy Cross near Stancija Blek (Tar-Vabriga – Torre-Abrega municipality, Istria), which is close to the multiphase settlement of Old Tar. A trial trench behind the rear wall of the church and along its southern peripheral wall revealed an earlier building and one grave. Though the uncovered remains are scanty, several distinct architectural designs allow us to propose a first typological determination of the newly discovered structure and shed light on subsequent development at the site.

Ključne riječi: Tar-Torre, Stancija Blek, crkva, srednji vijek

U radu se donose rezultati prve kampanje istraživanja uz crkvu sv. Križa nedaleko Stancije Blek (Općina Tar-Vabriga – Torre-Abrega, Istra), odnosno nedaleko multifaznoga lokaliteta Stari Tar. Probnim sondiranjem uz začelje i južni zid crkve utvrđeno je postojanje ranije građevine i jedan grob. Iako su otkriveni ostaci za sada oskudni, nekoliko specifičnih arhitektonskih značajki omogućava iznošenje nekoliko prijedloga tipološkoga smještanja novootkrivene građevine, ali i bolje razumijevanje daljnjega razvoja lokaliteta.



## Introduction

Since 2008, excavations and conservation have been conducted at the site of Tar – Stancija Blek (the Tar-Vabriga – Torre/Abrega municipality in Istria) by the Institute of Archaeology and the Museum of Poreč Territory, and with the collaboration of the University of Bologna (DISCI) since 2016. Research was focused on the well-preserved remains of a late antique/early medieval building – the “tower” mentioned by the sources (Benčić 2006) – which was erected on the disused remains of an early Roman rural complex that had several phases of use since its establishment in the first half of the 1<sup>st</sup> c. AD (Šiljeg et al. 2017; Konestra et al. 2019a, both with earlier bibliography). Along with the “tower”, a small sacral building with adjacent sepulchral zone was established in the Middle Ages (Konestra et al. 2019a: 407–409; Benčić et al. 2020), and the whole site was fortified by an elliptical enceinte, now preserved in its northern extension and the monumental western entrance (Konestra et al. 2019a; 2019b: 409–411). Supposedly, a village developed during the Middle Ages within the fortified area, mentioned in the sources as Turris, a fief of the Bishop of Poreč (Benčić et al. 2005: 55).<sup>1</sup> Its memory is preserved in the toponym of Tarovec (Old Tar, Benčić 2006: 326), as the area is locally known. In fact, the settlement, mentioned by the sources at a certain point as Old Tar, was probably abandoned during the late Middle Ages, when the inhabitants moved to the location of today’s Tar settlement (mentioned from the 13<sup>th</sup> c. as New Tar), when the bishop’s fief was also divided in two parts and the latter was shared with the Counts of Gorizia (Benčić 2006: 324–325).

A few hundred meters from the site there are the remains of another building, partially preserved to below the roof level, and identified as the Church of the Holy Cross, known from late medieval and Early Modern historic sources (Benčić 2006) (Fig. 1). Previous clearing works in and around the church uncovered finds of church furniture with interlace decoration (Benčić 2006 and *infra*), fragments of a stone column, and other spoliae indicating the existence of an earlier church close by.

Fieldwork carried out in 2022 at Stancija Blek (hereinafter: St. Blek) concentrated on the latter area, and included clearance work, architectural documentation, and a trial trench encompassing the areas immediately to the east and to the south of the remains of the Church of the Holy Cross. The aim was to assess the state of the remains and plan for conservation and further archaeological fieldwork. The scope of this contribution is to report on the new finds; the conclusions will necessarily be preliminary, but nevertheless important for guiding further research.

## Holy Cross and *S. Maria de Turre*: two phases of Turris’ *extra moenia* church

Two religious buildings can be associated with the settlement of *Turris* (Old Tar) on the basis of historic sources. In 1177 the Church of St. Mary is mentioned as *ecclesiam Sanctę Marię de Turre cum capellis suis* (FIM, 3: doc. 1177\_PAP; Benčić 2006: 324 with earlier bibliography; Nefat 2006). A much later source, dated to 1735, mentions *S. Maria de Val verde detta ancora di S. Croce or in Dente*,<sup>2</sup> which led to the supposition that the two names might, in fact, indicate two identifiable phases at the same site or that the name of the small chapel identified within the settlement was given to the larger church at a later time (Benčić 2006: 335). The Church of the Holy Cross is also mentioned in reports from bishop visitations;<sup>3</sup> the earliest are dated to 1645, 1649, and 1653, when minor furnishing and repairs were requested; in 1657, it was prescribed that the church should be closed until all the necessary furnishings were acquired and works carried out (including window frames, repairs to the floor); then in 1676, 1683, 1688, 1693, 1697, 1701<sup>4</sup> more works were often repeatedly requested, including a bell-gable, grates on the windows, rising the altar, repairs to the roof etc. A particularly interesting report from 1714 informs us about the income of the church and that 12 masses are held per year. Also, it mentions that some of its income was assigned to the bishop because the church collapsed and was out of use, but that it was partly repaired that year. It also mentions that there was a central round window above the entrance. Furthermore, it was ordered to clear the rubble inside. Other furnishings and repairs were prescribed in 1720 and 1727; the church was closed again in 1733 to repair the roof. The order for other repairs in 1739 mentions another detail of its appearance: two windows (which necessitated blinds) on the front wall.<sup>5</sup> Finally, in 1781, the Holy Cross was briefly mentioned and repairs were ordered.

The remains of the Church of the Holy Cross / Saint Mary are located on a slightly elevated position encircled by a large stone cairn and bordering a karst doline, overlooking a mild slope descending towards the coast (Fig. 1). The church is partly flanked by a path leading from Val di Torre Cove towards St. Blek, which turns south here and reaches the entrance to the settlement enceinte, probably reflecting an older communication line. Another path, probably modern, flanks the building from the east, leading to the olive grove in the nearby doline. The building has

2 Translated as “Saint Mary of *Val Verde* (green valley), also known as Holy Cross or in *Dente*”, the latter being a nearby location.

3 All the data is sourced from Uljaničić-Vekić et al. 2006. See also Nefat 2006.

4 On this occasion it was explicitly mentioned that the bishop visited the Church of the Holy Cross in Stari Tar (Old Tar) (Uljaničić-Vekić et al. 2006: 170).

5 Earlier mentions of windows were either not specific or mentioned the side windows, which are still visible.

1 The first mention of the site in historic sources is in a diploma of Otto II (983 AD), noting a “Turrim que est supra piscationem None” (FIM, 2: doc. 983\_OP).



Fig. 1 Aerial view of St. Blek – Old Tar and the Holy Cross / St. Mary (photo by: K. Bartolić Sirotić)  
Sl. 1 Zračni snimak St. Blek – Staroga Tara i Sv. Križa / Sv. Marije (snimila: K. Bartolić Sirotić)

an irregular rectangular layout measuring 12.45 m x 6.85 m. The back and northern perimetral walls are preserved roughly to below the roof level, while the southern perimetral is slightly lower. The front wall is the most damaged, with the partially preserved height below 1 m. Different building techniques and numerous repairs have been noted within the walls. Most notably, a difference in *opus* can be observed: the southern perimetral was built with elongated stone slabs of mostly regular dimensions, laid with a tendency to form regular rows, while the northern perimetral presents a more irregular layout with differently shaped blocks. The back wall shows signs of significant repairs in its central part, but reading is difficult because of the remains of plastering. On the northern and southern perimetral walls there are two preserved window openings, located slightly off centre towards the east. As mentioned, the front wall probably had two windows flanking the entrance and a central round window above it. The northern perimetral possibly had a side entrance, but it is now walled, and its traces are currently hard to confirm with certainty. No decorative or specific architectural features which might aid its more precise dating have so far been ascertained, and it is unknown if the requested bell-gable was actually built. Local population mentions graves found around the church, though its cemetery function is not mentioned in the sources, leading to the conclusion that these might belong to an earlier phase (Benčić 2006: 335).

In May 2022, after a thorough clearing of the vegetation inside and around the church remains,<sup>6</sup> a trench (10x2m) was positioned so to allow investigation of the area behind the rear wall of the still standing structure and part of the area along its southern perimetral. A mostly sterile layer of soil mixed with rocks was ascertained in the northern part of the trench, while a shallow foundation trench was investigated along the rear wall. In the southern part of the trench there was a layer of mortar and small stones, probably belonging to the construction phase of some of the structures. Below both there is a mostly sterile layer of *terra rossa* and there are limestone boulders (bedrock). Within large cracks in the bedrock, pottery sherds were collected from a localised position (see *infra*) and regularly placed limestone slabs were uncovered, belonging to the covering of a grave (see *infra*).

#### Newly identified architecture

In the north-eastern corner of the preserved building there were two spoliae – a flat, 8.5 cm thick stone slab with a profiled side, of unknown original function, and a large block, part of the counterweight of a pressing installation (Fig. 2); the latter was probably brought from the settlement, where other

<sup>6</sup> Lush ivy, covering most of the upper parts of the church walls, was not removed so that the structures might be preserved until the conservation works.





Fig. 2 Orthophoto of the rear wall of the Church of the Holy Cross and a segment of the earlier wall (photo and processing by: K. Bartolić Sirotić)  
Sl. 2 Ortofoto snimak začelja crkve sv. Križa i segment ranije arhitekture (snimila i obradila: K. Bartolić Sirotić)

similar pieces were found walled within medieval structures or within the destruction debris. In the south-eastern corner, under the rear wall, there was a continuation of its lowest segment and foundation towards the south, hinting at the existence of an earlier structure over which the later church was partly built (Fig. 2). The clearing of the surface area along the southern perimetral wall identified another structure, ca. 1 m to the south, preserved to the height of a few rows of stone slabs and following the orientation of the perimetral. This structure stretches towards the west for 17 m, and then turns towards the north. Roughly at the middle there is an opening. Other walls seem to connect to it from the south, but these have not been investigated more thoroughly. Further excavations defined the organic connection between that structure and the north-south wall identified under the rear wall of the later church, forming a corner. An enlargement of the trench by ca. 2 m towards the west along the southern perimetral defined an internal square enlargement of the newly identified corner, and a well-preserved pavement made of large, rectangular stone slabs, and the base of a pillar (Fig. 3). The pavement stretches at the same level further west, while a foundation trench along the southern perimetral wall of the later building seems to have systematically destroyed the pavement slabs. The pillar base, adjacent to the southern wall of the earlier structure, suggests there was an enclosure ca. 1.6 m from the newly ascertained earlier eastern wall.

The preliminary cleaning along the north-eastern corner and the northern perimetral of the later church ascertained that there were no earlier remains in this area, at least not preserved with the same height as those on its southern side.

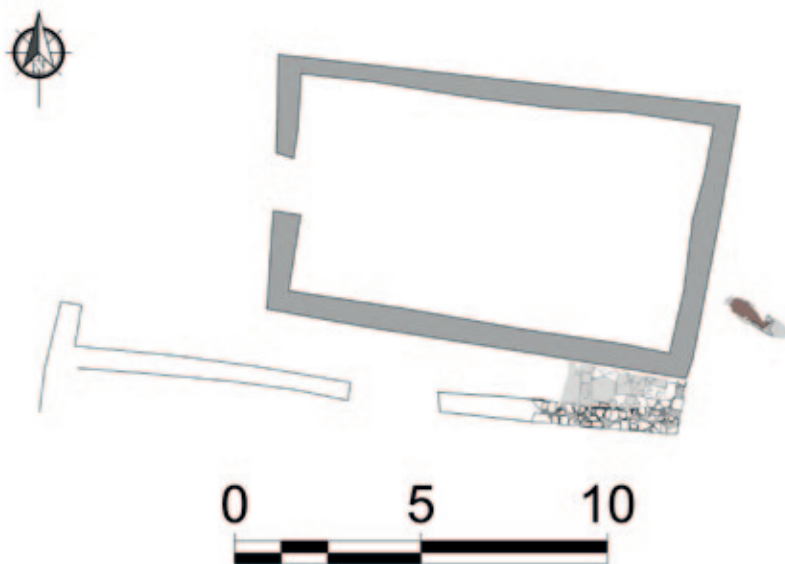


Fig. 3 Layout of the Church of the Holy Cross, newly discovered architecture and grave 1 (photo and processing by: K. Bartolić Sirotić)  
Sl. 3 Tlocrt crkve sv. Križa, novootkrivene arhitekture i grob 1 (snimila i obradila: K. Bartolić Sirotić)

### The grave

As already mentioned, a large natural crack between two limestone boulders contained well-placed thin stone slabs spreading in the east-west direction, partially collapsed in their western portion and preserved in place in the east. The removing of the slabs confirmed an inhumation within the natural crack; the tomb was filled with *terra rossa* mixed with small rocks and small lumps of mortar. The upper part of the skeleton was damaged by the collapsed slabs, which destroyed parts of the ribs and spine. The body was laid on the back facing east, with the arms behind the pelvis, while the position of the lower extremities indicates it was laid wrapped in a shroud. No movable finds were associated with the inhumation. A preliminary analysis<sup>7</sup> indicated that the body was a mature male, 50 years old or older, showing traces of several age-related but

<sup>7</sup> The authors would like to thank Debora Ferreri, PhD, for her help with the preliminary determination of the remains.



Fig. 4 Grave 1 in trench 1 at the Church of the Holy Cross (photo by: A. Konestra)  
Sl. 4 Grob 1 u sondi 1 kod crkve sv. Križa (snimila: A. Konestra)

possibly also stress-induced lesions (osteoporosis, scoliosis, very abraded tooth surfaces etc.) (Fig. 4). The position of the body, the lack of grave-goods or attire, the covering with stone slabs and the shrouding of the corpse, resemble the depositional practices of the few graves excavated in the sepulchral area uncovered within the settlement (Konestra et al. 2019b: 182–183). Nevertheless, similar grave structures and depositional practices were fairly common in Istria during a longer timeframe (Marušić 1963; 1995; see also Jurković et al. 2008: 146–147; Matejčić, Milošević 2010a) and are not indicative for dating the grave.

#### Movable finds

The destruction debris in the Church of the Holy Cross included two fragments of church furniture (Fig. 5) bearing the same interlace motif as the one previously found in the same context. They probably belong to the upper decorated frame of a pluteus (Benčić 2006: 311), otherwise seemingly undecorated or more probably bearing only a central decoration. The motif of a double



Fig. 5 Newly discovered fragment of an interlace decorated pluteus (photo by: G. Benčić)  
Sl. 5. Uloak novopronadenoga pluteja s pleternom ornamentikom (snimio: G. Benčić)

band of opposing intertwined three-rod knots, diagonally connected without knots (the so-called "pretzel motif"), has analogies on other stone church furniture elements in Istria, such as a pilaster from the basilica with three apses in Guran (Marušić 1963: T. II: 2), a fragment of a pluteus from the parish church in Bale (Marušić 1983: T. IX: d), a fragment walled within St. Michael of Banjole near Peroj (Barada, Mustač 2005: 26–28; Mustač 2017), and two plutei fragments from Pula (Belošević 2019: kat. I.12–13), but also elsewhere: for example, there is a similar motif on several pilasters from the island of Krk (Toljanić 2017: cat. no. 58). All the analogies established so far seem to point towards a dating of the fragments from Holy Cross / St. Mary to the 9<sup>th</sup> c.

As already mentioned, several pottery sherds were found during the excavations. A notable stray find is an amphora handle probably belonging to a south Hispanic Dressel 20 (1<sup>st</sup> – 3<sup>rd</sup> c. AD) (Blázquez Martínez, Remesal Rodríguez 2003) (Pl. 1: 1). Close to the grave, towards the church wall, several fragments of coarse ware were unearthed within the SU 05 layer (Pl. 1: 2–5). These are sherds of globular cooking pots with the surface of the body characterized by incised parallel lines to better resist the heat from the embers (Mancassola 2005: 31–59). These pots resemble the "Piadena type" produced in northern Italy, dated to the 9<sup>th</sup> c. AD. The same context included other sherds of coarse ware, with a similar globular shape but a different fabric (rich in small calcite inclusion) and plain surface (Pl. 1: 6–8). These cooking pots have parallels at other Istrian sites from the 8<sup>th</sup> c. AD and at north Italian/Alpine and Adriatic settlements, possibly as an evolution of the products of the "Classe type". The most similar examples come from Koper (Cunja 1996: 122–126) and Tonovcov Grad (Fazioli 2012). An attempt at classification has been proposed by the team working at Guran (*ager* of Pula); it has



been demonstrated that the ware shows continuity from the 8<sup>th</sup> to the 10<sup>th</sup> c. AD, with very few changes (Jurković et al. 2011: 127, T. 26). The topsoil layer very close to the church perimetral wall contained two small Venetian glazed cups (Pl. 1: 9–11). The clay slip and the monochrome green glaze have been almost totally compromised by the acidity of the soil, though small parts are still visible. They were produced close to Venice in the 13<sup>th</sup> c. and exported along both coasts of the northern Adriatic (Gelichi 1993).

Along with pottery finds, a rim of a glass plate was recovered from the same layer. It belonged to a small flat plate with a folded rim (Pl. 1: 12), similar to the Carolingian shapes identified in the monastery of S. Vincenzo al Volturno and at various European sites, and dated from the 8<sup>th</sup> c. onward (Salch 1972).

### Typology and possible dating of the older church phase

The discovery of only the south-eastern corner of the older building hinders the understanding of the whole layout, so while its length might be reconstructed, if the southern perimetral is indeed a unique wall belonging to one phase, its width remains unknown. As the preliminary works seem to show, the latter was narrower than the full width of the church dedicated to the Holy Cross, which reused the previous structures only partially, overlapping with them in a decentralised manner.

With the trench dug behind the rear wall of the structure, it was ascertained that the church never had semi-circular external apses. If we add the location of the base for the pilaster of the chancel screen, there are two possibilities to reconstruct the layout of the presbyteral area of the earlier church: it might have belonged to either the type with two inscribed rectangular apses, or the type with three, though the latter seems more probable if the southern perimetral was indeed of the mentioned length. A possible subdivision into naves, related to the design of the presbyteral area, remains unknown, as both one and three naves might be possible on the basis of analogies in Istria.<sup>8</sup> The geographically closest parallel to the first mentioned type (e.g. Babić 2015: 243) is that of the Church of the Virgin Mary in Ružar,<sup>9</sup> excavated in the 1960s (Šonje 1970: 68–71; Marušić 1978: 87), with one nave and three inscribed rectangular apses (Fig. 6: 1). Its dimensions (7.30 x 12.80 m) seem to be smaller than St. Mary in Tar; the dating within the 9<sup>th</sup> c. is suggested by a stone fragment with interlace decoration recovered within a nearby cairn (Šonje 1970: T. III: 1; Marušić 1978: Fig. 140).

Considering triapsal churches with three naves, a possible analogy is provided by a basilica

of an unknown saint, located close to the medieval village of Guran.<sup>10</sup> The church has two smaller lateral and one larger central apse inscribed within the flat back wall, and three naves subdivided by massive masonry pillars. Almost identical to the uncovered segment of the church in Tar is the solution of the covering of the presbyteral area, that is, the enlargement of the corners of the side apse(s) (Terrier et al. 2003: 100, Fig. 8), i.e. traces of tromps functional for its vaulting (e.g. Jurković 2000a: 173) (Fig. 6: 2). Though slightly longer, measuring 20 x 10.7 m (Terrier et al. 2003: 101), it is quite comparable to St. Mary (again, if the southern perimetral is a unique wall); there are also other comparable details, such as the opening in the southern perimetral and the pavement of stone slabs<sup>11</sup> (Terrier et al. 2004: 100–101; 106–107). Traditionally dated to a broad timeframe from late antiquity to the 12<sup>th</sup> c. (Jurković et al. 2011: 118), its chronology is still doubtful. While it has been ascertained that the building was erected in a single phase (Jurković et al. 2011: 119–120), the thermoluminescence dating of pottery finds from under the floor seems to indicate that it was in fact built in the 11<sup>th</sup> c. (Terrier et al. 2006: 213), while numerous finds of church furniture indicate a date in the late 8<sup>th</sup> – early 9<sup>th</sup> c. (Jurković 2000b: 40–41; Matejčić 2005: 17; Jurković, Marić 2006: 204). The church was in use well into the late Middle Ages (Jurković et al. 2011: 120).

A further analogy is provided by the Church of St. Cecilia, again in the environs of Guran (near Vodnjan) (Fig. 6: 3), erected on the remains of Roman structures (a villa?); in one of its numerous phases, the church had three square apses inscribed within a rectilinear rear wall. After systematic excavations, and on the basis of <sup>14</sup>C dating, the 5<sup>th</sup> phase of the church, with the presbytery articulated with three square inscribed apses within a rectilinear rear wall (Marić et al. 2012: 360), was dated to a period after the 11<sup>th</sup> c. (Jurković et al. 2013: 435; Terrier et al. 2013: 188–189). In the subsequent phase, the presbytery of the church was reworked after a design with two inscribed apses, but semi-circular in this case.

The same group IX, as defined by B. Marušić, includes the well-preserved Church of St. Stephan at Peroj (Fig. 6: 4), in the *ager* of Pula (Marušić 1978: 83–87; Matejčić, Milošević 2010). Its dimensions of ca. 6.70 x 17.20 m provide an interesting analogy if compared to the remains unearthed at Tar, indicating that the southern perimetral of the early phase might in fact have been preserved in its original length. Also, since its height has been preserved to below the roof level, and although the apsidal area was subsequently reworked due to its use as a stable, it provides good analogies to the design of the apses with tromps forming a dome. New research at the church ascertained that there

8 For a recent overview of churches with inscribed apses in Istria see Demonja 1998; see also Babić 2015.

9 Ružar is an abandoned medieval settlement located near Vižinada, still within the *ager* of Poreč.

10 For a history of previous research at the site see Terrier et al. 2003: 98–99.

11 It is worth mentioning that the chapel adjacent to the tower within the settlement of Old Tar has the same pavement design (see Benčić et al. 2020).

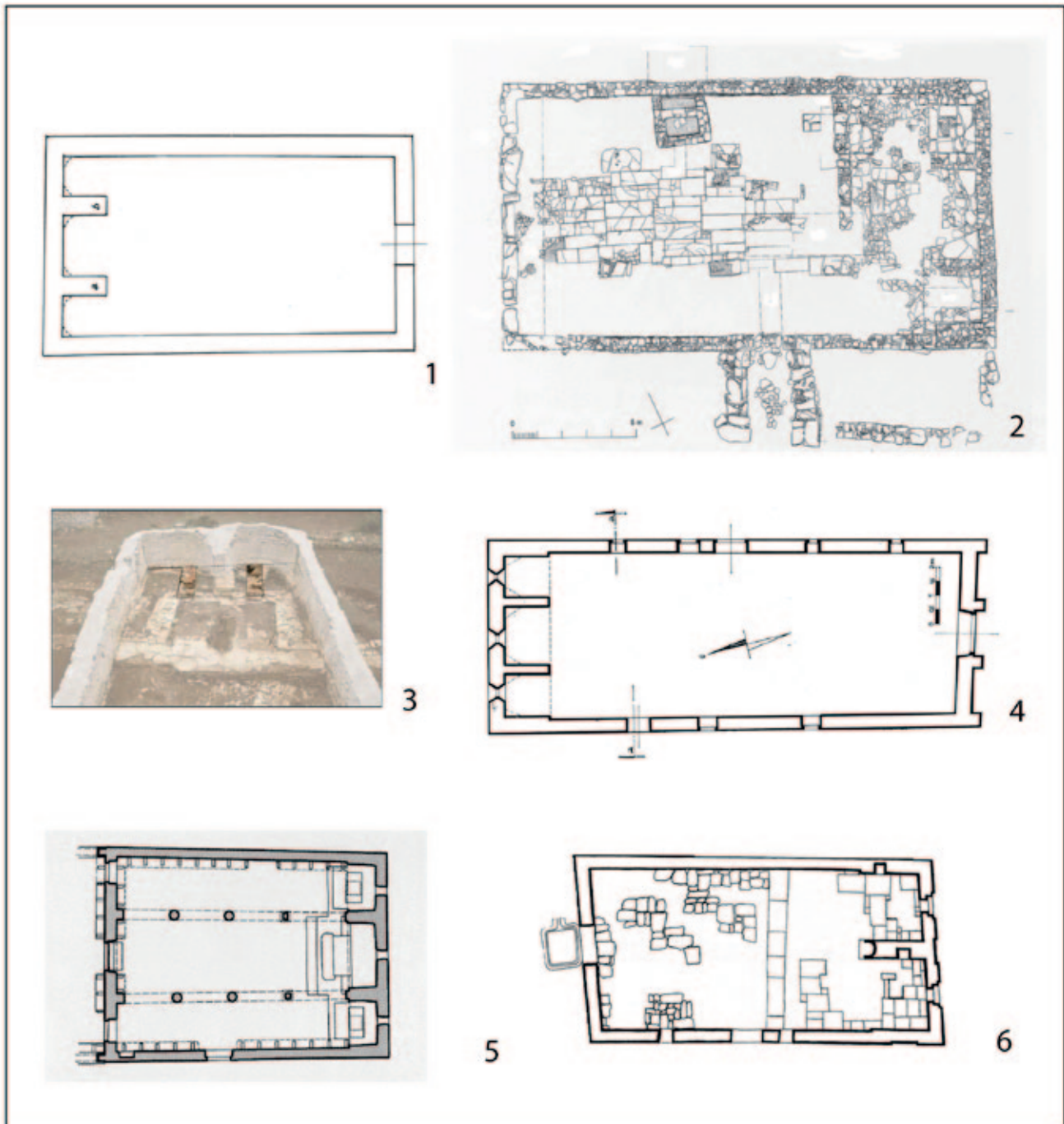


Fig. 6 Layouts of churches mentioned in the text: 1 St. Mary, Ružar (after: Marušić 1978: Fig. 138); 2 Basilica with three apses, Guran (after: Jurčević 2009: Tloct br. 5); 3 St. Cecilia near Guran, phase 5 (after: Marić et al. 2012); 4 St. Stephen near Peroj (after: Marušić 1978: Fig. 126); 5 St. Fosca near Vodnjan (after: Matejčić 2005); 6. Madonna Piccola, Bale (after: Matejčić 1997: Fig. I)

Sl. 6 Tlocti crkava koje se spominju u tekstu: 1 Sv. Marija, Ružar (prema: Marušić 1978: Fig. 138); 2 Troapsidalna bazilika, Guran (prema: Jurčević 2009: Tloct br. 5); 3 Sv. Cecilija kod Gurana, faza 5 (prema: Marić et al. 2012); 4 Sv. Stjepan kod Peroja (prema: Marušić 1978: Fig. 126); 5 Sv. Foška, Vodnjan (prema: Matejčić 2005); 6 Sv. Marija Mala, Bale (prema: Matejčić 1997: Fig. I)

was a belltower in the front part of the nave, which explains the buttresses on the façade (Matejčić, Milošević 2010: 367). No precise dating was provided by the researchers, though an early medieval character seems to be suggested by the numerous described details and architectural designs.

Dated between the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> c. is the triapsal Church of St. Fosca near Vodnjan (Fig. 6: 5), which according to Matejčić presents a layout comparable

to much earlier buildings, but also designs which are more typical of Romanesque (Matejčić 2005: 15–19).

While we consider it improbable, the church might have had two inscribed apses, thus belonging to a much rarer type, identified so far only at the Madonna Piccola (Nativity of the Virgin Mary) near Bale (Fig. 6: 6). The one-nave church has two apses separated by a wall with a niche and tromps along the internal perimetral walls of the slightly raised presbytery



(Matejčić 1997; Demonja 1998: 136). Sculpture and wall paintings might point to pre-Romanesque or early Romanesque dating (Matejčić 1997).

Considering that the uncovered part of the early phase of the *extra moenia* church in Tar – that is, the phase that was with all probability dedicated to St. Mary – is still too scanty to allow for definitive answers, the evidence gathered so far nevertheless suffices to place it within either of the two well-known, typically Istrian architectural types (e.g. Jurković 2000a: 172). Since the type with three rectangular apses in Istria is generally datable to the beginning of the 9<sup>th</sup> c. (Babić 2015: 245), and knowing that the Tar church was first mentioned in 1177, a date that fits well the dating of the second, three-nave type, we might for now only propose a timeframe between the 9<sup>th</sup> and the 11<sup>th</sup> / early 12<sup>th</sup> c. for the construction of the church, although the recovered sculpture might incline towards an earlier date.<sup>12</sup>

### Final remarks

Although the scanty and preliminary data precludes a better understanding of the monument(s) described here, we should note some final remarks on the results of the first campaign at the Holy Cross / St. Mary at St. Blek / Old Tar.

In the first place, trial trenching allowed us to ascertain without doubt that the Church of the Holy Cross located near St. Blek / Old Tar had an earlier phase – that is, that the visible building is with all probability late medieval or, more probably, of Early Modern date. Moreover, it has been ascertained that its earlier phase, probably a church dedicated to St. Mary, is early medieval or Romanesque at the latest, and that it probably belongs to a well-established type of Istrian church architecture (e.g. Demonja 1998; Jurković 2000a: 172–173; Babić 2015). The new finds of church furniture confirm this general dating.

Secondly, graves have been confirmed in the environs of the church, which will be fundamental when planning future excavations in the area, and might signal a cemetery use of the earlier church.

Finally, after evidencing the shallow foundation of the still standing building and the extensive damage to its masonry, it is imperative to proceed with the restoration of the structure, so as to avoid further damage or collapse.

Further research will make it possible to link the chronology of the church to that of the tower and the adjacent structures, but also to the small chapel within the settlement. These will also help understand the phases of formation of the latter, that is, the relationship between the fortified structure, tentatively related to the local rural elite (Benčić et al. 2020: 214–215), and the settlement that

surrounded the tower at some point. Since the tower was constructed on earlier, Roman structures, the possibility remains that an earlier phase might also be ascertained in the area of St. Mary / Holy Cross, though there is no firm evidence signalling it so far.

### Notes and acknowledgements

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<sup>12</sup> Caution is needed, as sculpture at the basilica in Guran also indicated an earlier date and was interpreted on one occasion as reused from an earlier building (Terrier et al. 2006: 213), so it remains debatable, as such a building has not yet been ascertained.

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# Sažetak

Istraživanja šire arheološke zone nedaleko Stancije Blek kod Tara (Općina Tar-Vabriga – Torre-Abrega, Istra) provode se od 2008. godine suradnjom Instituta za arheologiju i Zavičajnog muzeja Poreštine te uz uključivanje, od 2016. godine, Alme Mater – Sveučilišta u Bologni. Dosadašnja su iskopavanja obuhvatila tzv. kulu (najbolje sačuvani objekt na lokalitetu) i neposredni prostor uz nju, omogućivši definiranje segmenata rimskih i srednjovjekovnih faza lokaliteta, odnosno rimskoga ruralnog objekta i kasnijega (fortificiranog) srednjovjekovnog naselja Stari Tar. U neposrednoj blizini lokaliteta na St. Blek nalaze se ruševine crkve sv. Križa, za koju je, na temelju nalaza spolija, pretpostavljena (rano) srednjovjekovna faza, dok su danas vidljivi ostaci pačetrovinaste građevine (12,45 m x 6,85 m) po svojoj prilici znatno kasniji (Benčić 2006; Nefat 2006) (sl. 1). Uz ostale podatke iz povijesnih izvora, uglavnom izvještaja mnogobrojnih ranonovovjekovnih vizitacija (Uljančić-Vekić et al. 2006), lokalno stanovništvo uz nju navodi i nalaze grobova. Najraniji povijesni izvori koji spominju crkvenu građevinu uz staro tarsko naselje govore o crkvi sv. Marije (Benčić 2006; *FIM*, 3: doc. 1177\_PAP), što dodatno govori u prilog postojanju ranije građevine ili pak translaciji titulara između ove i manje kapele otkrivene unutar naselja (Benčić et al. 2021).

Istraživanjima 2022. godine po prvi se put pristupilo iskopavanjima ovoga prostora te je, nakon čišćenja interijera i okolice crkve, manja sonda (10 x 2 m) postavljena iza začelnoga zida postojeće apsida/e. Plitka i jednostavna stratigrafija u sondi uglavnom se sastojala od crvenice pomiješane s ulomcima žbuke, dok je uz sam zid građevine istražen plitki ukop temelja. U južnome dijelu sonde utvrđen je sloj žbuke i kamenja koji po svojoj prilici pripada nekoj od faza gradnje. Spuštanjem uz začelni zid primijećen je nastavak najnižih slojeva zida prema jugu (sl. 2), stoga je sonda produžena u tome smjeru, a površinski sloj uz južni perimetralni zid građevine detaljnije je očišćen. U sjeveroistočnome uglu crkve utvrđene su dvije spolije, jedna od kojih pripada antičkom tijesku, odnosno po svojoj prilici donesena s lokaliteta St. Blek. Čišćenjem površinskoga sloja šute uz južni perimetralni zid crkve, oko 1 m južnije definiran je zid protezanja sjever – jug u dužini od 17 m, a koji se veže na nastavak temelja crkve tvoreći kutu. U prostoru između toga i perimetralnoga zida postojeće građevine utvrđena je podnica od pravilnih, većih kamenih ploča, presječena ukopom

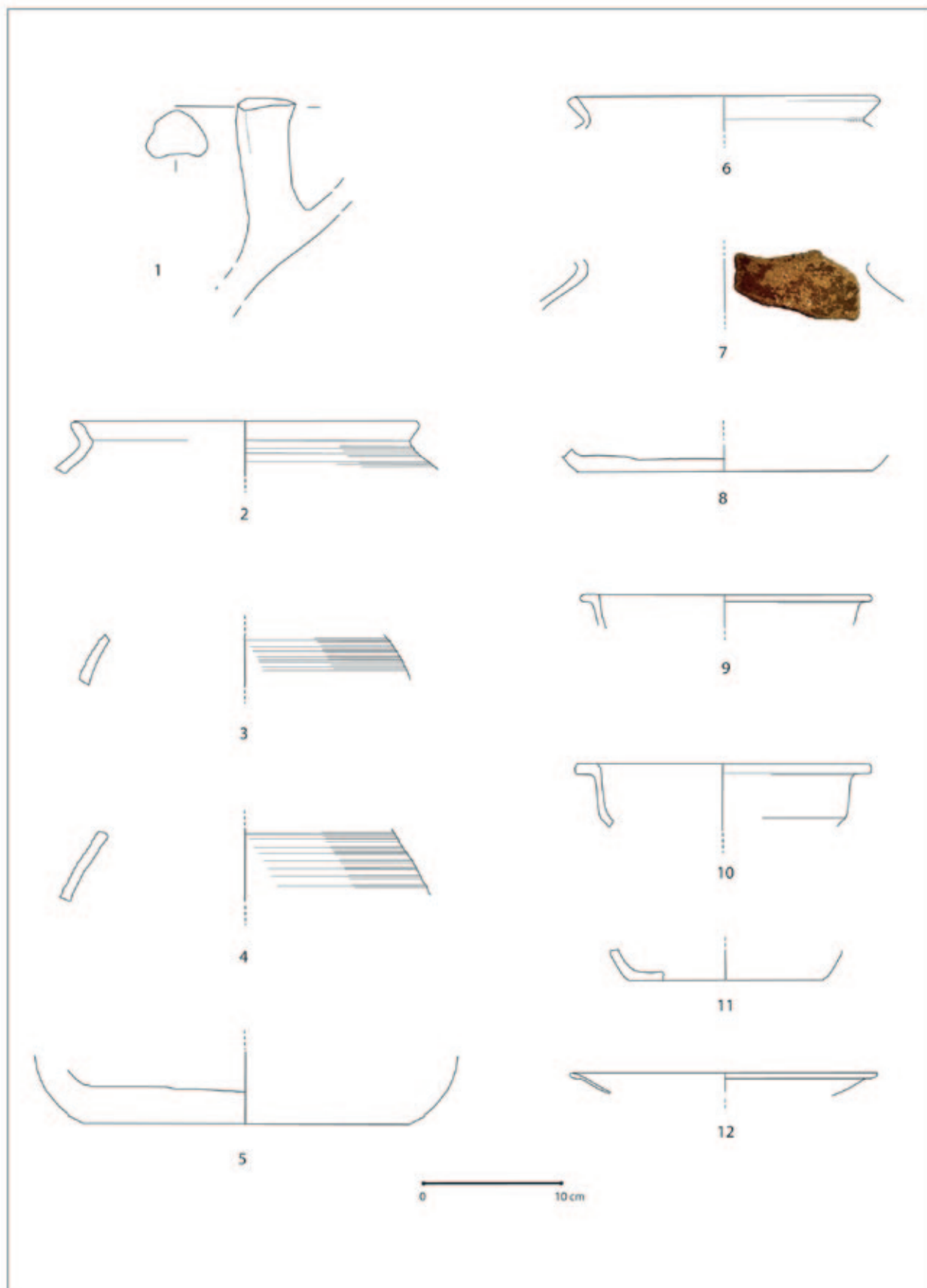
temelja kasnijeg zida, dok je na oko 1,6 m od novo-definiranoga istočnoga zida pronađena baza pilastra. U kutu kojeg tvore novootkriveni zidovi utvrđeno je proširenje, odnosno ojačanje (sl. 3). Osim toga u sondi su, unutar škrapa između dvaju većih vapnenačkih blokova živca, utvrđene poklopnice groba, čijim je istraživanjem utvrđen kostur starije muške osobe (sl. 4) pokopan bez priloga ili elemenata nošnje.

Uzimajući u obzir novoutvrđene dijelove arhitekture koji se nalaze ispod recentnije građevine te nalaz kamenoga ulomka pluteja s pleternim ukrasom koji je prikupljen iz urušenja u unutrašnjosti crkve i koji posve odgovara istovjetnom ranijem nalazu (Benčić 2006) (sl. 5), moguće je pretpostaviti kako otkriveni ostaci pripadaju ranijoj crkvenoj građevini. Na temelju tlocrtnoga oblikovanja njenoga po svojoj prilici jugoistočnoga dijela te uzimajući u obzir pojedine istarske analogije, građevinu je moguće smjestiti u tipove s dvije ili tri četvrtaste apside upisane u ravno začelje. Prema dužini crkve i nekim drugim elementima, poput ojačanja (trompi) i dimenzija zone prezbiterija, moguće se analogije troapsidalnog arješenja nalaze u Ružaru (Šonje 1970: T. III: 1; Marušić 1978: Fig. 140), Guranu – troapsidalnabazilika (Jurković 2000a; Terrier et al. 2003; Marić et al. 2012 i dr.) i jedna faza sv. Cecilije (Marić et al. 2012; Jurković et al. 2013; Terrier et al. 2013), sv. Stjepanu kod Peroja (Marušić 1978: 83–87; Matejčić, Milošević 2010) i sv. Foški kod Vodnjana (Matejčić 2005) (sl. 6). Eventualno dvoapsidalno rješenje moglo bi biti analogno crkvi sv. Marije Male kod Bala (Matejčić 1997). Predložene analogije te one koje su utvrđene za spomenuti ulomak crkvenoga namještaja (Marušić 1963; Barada, Mustać 2005: 26–28; Mustać 2017; Toljanić 2017) govore u prilog dataciji između 9. i 11. stoljeća, čemu odgovara i datacija manjega broja keramičkih i staklenih nalaza (Mancasola 2005; Gelichi 1993; Fazioli 2012; Salch 1972) (T. 1) pronađenih u sondi, nedaleko groba.

Iako je istraživanjima 2022. godine otkriven tek manji dio po svojoj prilici ranije sakralne građevine na položaju sv. Križ, odnosno sv. Marija kod St. Blek, prikupljeni podaci potvrđuju ranije pretpostavke te pružaju nove podatke o organizaciji naselja Stari Tar i njegovim sakralnim građevinama. Osim toga ti nalazi, ali i nalaz groba, uvelike će olakšati planiranje daljnjih zahvata, najprioritetniji od kojih je konzervacija zida postojeće građevine.

## Napomene i zahvale

Terensko istraživanje 2022. godine zajedno su provele tri institucije, s A. Konestrom kao voditeljicom istraživanja (Institut za arheologiju, Zagreb), K. Bartolić Sirotić (Zavičajni muzej Poreštine) zamjenicom voditeljice istraživanja, a uz sudjelovanje G. Benčića (Zavičajni muzej Poreštine) te E. Cirellia i I. Sommarive (Sveučilište u Bologni). Kampanju je financirala općina Tar-Vabriga – Torre-Abrega. Dio ovogodišnjih analiza financijski je podržao Poljski Nacionalni znanstveni centar (Narodowe Centrum Nauki), grant ID: 478202, NO. 2020/37/B/HS3/02458. Autori zahvaljuju dvoje anonimnih recenzentata na korisnim komentarima i smjericama vezanim uz pojedine aspekte rada.



Pl. 1 Pottery and glass from trench 1 at the Holy Cross / St. Mary near St. Blek / Old Tar: 1 amphora Dressel 20, handle; 2-5 cooking pots, 9th c., from northern Italy; 6-8 early medieval cooking pots with northern Adriatic calcitic fabric (8th-9th c.); 9-11 Venetian green glazed bowls (12th - 13th c.); 12 Carolingian glass plate (photo and drawings by: E. Cirelli)

T. 1 Keramički i stakleni nalazi iz sonde 1 kod crkve Sv. Križa / Sv. Marije kod St. Blek / Staroga Tara: 1 ručka Dressel 20 amfore; 2-5 kuhinjski lonci, 9. stoljeće, sjeverna Italija; 6-8 ranosrednjovjekovni kuhinjski lonci sa sjevernojadranskom kalcičkom fakturom (8.-9. stoljeće); 9-11 Venecijanske zeleno glazirane zdjelice (12. - 13. stoljeće); 12 Karolinški stakleni tanjur (snimio i nacrtao: E. Cirelli)