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The Apostolic Puzzle: *Illyricum Sacrum* and the Origins of Christianity in the Ancient Roman Province

Apostolska uganka: Illyricum Sacrum in začetki krščanstva v starodavni rimski provinci

Abstract: The work *Illyricum Sacrum* is examined in this article or more specifically, how it presents the origins of Christianity in the ancient Roman province. The claims made by the editors of the *Illyricum Sacrum* are analysed in regard to the apostolic origins of the churches in the area, focusing on the roles of apostles Peter and Paul, as well as their disciples Titus and Domnius in particular. The article discusses the absence of concrete evidence supporting these claims and explores the potential religious and political motivations behind the narrative. It also takes the Jesuits' influence into account in proving these churches' antiquity and apostolicity. Despite possible deficiencies, the article¹ recognizes the value of *Illyricum Sacrum* as a historical source for researching Christianity in the Adriatic region.

Keywords: *Illyricum Sacrum*, Early Christianity, Dalmatia, Apostolic Origins, Religious History

Povzetek: Prispevek obravnava delo *Illyricum Sacrum*, in sicer kako je v njem predstavljen nastanek krščanstva v starodavni rimski provinci. Trditve urednikov dela *Illyricum Sacrum* so analizirane glede na apostolski izvor cerkva na tem območju, s poudarkom na vlogi apostolov Petra in Pavla ter zlasti njunih učencev Tita in Domnika. Članek obravnava pomanjkanje konkretnih dokazov, ki bi podpirali te trditve, in raziskuje morebitne verske in politične vzgibe, ki stojijo v ozadju pripovedi. Upošteva tudi vpliv jezuitov na dokazovanje starodavnosti in apostolskosti teh cerkva. Kljub morebitnim pomanjkljivostim, članek priznava vrednost *Illyricum Sacrum* kot zgodovinskega vira za raziskovanje krščanstva v jadranski regiji.

Ključne besede: *Illyricum Sacrum*, zgodnje krščanstvo, Dalmacija, izvori apostolstva, verska zgodovina

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1. Introduction

The religious reform that took place during the 16th century had a profound impact on the religious landscape of Europe, resulting in significant changes to the previously uniform and monolithic religious community. In order to effectively compete with the agile Protestant churches in this new competitive environment, the Catholic Church sought to reorganize itself and implement new actions, such as the Council of Trent, as well as other far-reaching reforms. The success of the Catholic Church during the Counter-Reformation was largely attributed to the pivotal role played by the Jesuit order, which recognized the potential of intellectual literacy in defending and engaging in religious discourse, positioning themselves as the leaders of this movement. While the emphasis has always been on the Roman-centeredness and universality (globalism) of Catholicism, it should be acknowledged that localism and local culture have also been influential in Catholic religious communities since the Middle Ages. This can be observed in various aspects such as liturgy and paraliturgical practices, where the Church acted as an official or semi-official entity or participated as a cooperative party. In contrast, the newly established Protestant churches demonstrated a stronger sense of local and national identity, often opposing the Latin-speaking global Christian Catholic Church. For instance, Martin Luther, although initially hesitant, eventually taught Latin at the University of Wittenberg, while Melancthon actively engaged in such instruction, which facilitated the growth of the Melancthonian-based Calvinist Church among East European students, especially Hungarians. Regionalism and confessional rivalries increasingly elevated the importance of historiography during this period. The emergence of European academic historiography can be traced back to this time. In addition to general historiography, there was a growing interest in ecclesiastical historiography, which primarily sought to strengthen group cohesion but also had a religious-polemical motivation. Despite the belief that religious boundaries had been established by the end of the 17th century, several political and historical events significantly challenged the validity of this assumption. Two noteworthy events —the rise of the Habsburg Empire as a conglomerate of great powers in Central Europe and the subsequent expulsion of the Ottomans from Austria and the Hungarian royal territories —led to a new political and religious landscape in the region. Aligned with the baroque ideologies of the Habsburg dynasty, efforts were made to achieve religious unity in the acquired territories, often through coercive means. The Jesuits, who had excelled in the Counter-Reformation, played a leading role in promoting the Catholic ideology of the Baroque era. The Jesuit Order pursued missionary endeavours as one of its primary objectives. While certain geographical areas, such as the Americas and the Far East, garnered significant attention and offered opportunities for fame, the territories under Ottoman rule for over a century and a half also presented opportunities for missionary work. The Jesuits' interest in church history predates this particular context and may have been motivated not only by religious debates but also by a genuine interest in the historical background of various bishoprics. The Jesuits' missionary zeal and their interest in church history

are both clearly obvious in the *Illyricum Sacrum*, the work under discussion. This publication has gained recognition as a valuable reference for scholars interested in the history of Christianity in the Adriatic region from the 18th century onward. However, the authorship of the work, at least in part, remains a subject of dispute and has yet to be conclusively proven. Although Daniele Farlati published the work under his own name in 1751, it was already known within scholarly circles, either attributed to Farlati or associated with a manuscript bearing a similar title. (Vanino 1932; Ferraccioli and Giraudo 2018) The concept for the monumental work *Illyricum Sacrum* is attributed to Filippo Riceputi, whose interest in history was no less influenced by the events of the late 17th century (Ferraccioli and Giraudo 2018; Vanino 1932, 207). Riceputi's formative years as a novice in Vienna, where he interacted with novices from German-speaking, Hungarian, and Croatian backgrounds, kindled his fascination with history. His subsequent twelve-year sojourn in Gorizia, Rijeka, and Trieste nurtured his passion for historical inquiry even further. During this period, Riceputi made conscientious efforts to maximize his time and diligently collected a substantial number of documents. As he later resumed his missionary work among the locals, referred to as *Volksmissionar*, he continued to accumulate source materials during his seven-year stay in Dalmatia. Through personal connections and networking, Riceputi succeeded in amassing an extensive body of source material on the subject. Furthermore, he purposefully returned to the region on multiple occasions to conduct further research in archives and monastic libraries. (Vanino 1932, 201–216)

Around 1728, Riceputi already had concrete ideas in mind, and he planned to publish his work in three volumes (Vanino 1932, 220). Unfortunately, this did not succeed, apart from the fact that certain passages were incorporated into the following volumes, we do not know much about it, and we do not even really know in what state Riceputi left the opus at his death in 1749, according to Farlati, the work was not printed (221). Nevertheless, the material handed down by him could certainly have been profitably turned and used by his successors, among whom the aforementioned Farlati, who was also his collaborator, carried the idea to triumph, if not entirely in accordance with the vision of the great predecessor. Parts of the voluminous introduction (Prolegomenon) to the work are apparently from Riceputi's bequest. With this being said, we will hereafter refer to Farlati as the editor of the historical work.

2. *Illyricum Sacrum* as a Source of Church History: Who Was the First Missionary of Illyricum?

The eight volumes of *Illyricum Sacrum* were compiled between 1751 and 1819, the ninth between 1902 and 1919. The collection presents in fact the history of the former Roman province of Illyricum (the secular and the ecclesiastical history of this region embedded in it). However, as the introduction to the first volume indicates, it extends the scope of the research to Dalmatia (Farlati 1751, 234). It

is therefore not surprising that the first chapter is devoted to a treatise on the apostolic origins of the churches of these regions (*De Originibus Apostolicis Ecclesiae Illyricae et Dalmaticae*). The introduction (*Prolegomenon*) outlines that the apostles, while preaching the Gospel in the East and the West, could not have possibly passed through the province (Illyricum) without sowing the seeds of the word of God there.

Is it credible that the Apostles and their Disciples, from the East to the West, extensively spread the Gospel, yet the intermediate regions of Illyria, which they often travelled back and forth, were so neglected and disregarded by them that they did not sow any seed of the divine word in them and did not contribute anything from Apostolic care and diligence to cultivate them with Christian precepts? Not to mention the remaining Illyrian churches, certainly the Dalmatian Church, which can rightly be compared in antiquity and dignity with the noblest ones, laid its foundations by Blessed Titus, a Disciple of St. Paul, as clearly and plainly stated in the second Epistle to Timothy. As for the church in Salonica, it is affirmed by both ancient records and very reliable sources that it was founded and administered by St. Domnius, a Disciple of the Apostle Peter, the Prince of the Apostles. (Farlati 1751, 234)

There is one minor concession: if the apostles themselves did not do the work of evangelization, then their direct disciples did. In support of this, he mentions that the church of Dalmatia was founded by St. Titus, who was a disciple of the Apostle Paul (234).

Basically, if we read through this part of the Prolegomenon, we can see that there are two main groups of great ancestors associated with the foundation of Illyricum (at least according to the editors): first, the apostles themselves, especially Peter and Paul, and the saints directly associated with the apostles, Titus and Domnius.

Let us take a closer look at these potential Missionaries of the faith.

2.1 The Apostle Peter

The reference to the most authoritative apostle Peter as one of the first Christian missionaries of the Dalmatian church is undoubtedly the strongest point of this origin narrative. (Farlati 1751, 235) The apostle Peter's missionary journey presents a double picture, with certain and less certain locations. There is no doubt that the apostle Peter's missionary activity was primarily in the Holy Land (Acts 1–6; 9:32–10:48; 12:2.7; Lk 8:1; Gal 1:8; 2:11–14). It is not accidental, therefore, that the apostle Peter's main sphere of activity was the conversion of the Jews, while Paul's was that of the Gentiles (Gal 2:7–8). According to the New Testament, Peter lived most of his life after Jesus' death in Jerusalem, with a few visits to some of the cities of Palestine (Goulder 2004, 383).

Sources for the apostle Peter's martyrdom in Rome date back to the first century. Accordingly, he was crucified under the rule of Emperor Nero. The primary sources for this are the Scriptures, the letter of the Apostle Peter from Babylon

(by implication from Rome) (1 Pet 5:13), and The Gospel of John (John 21:18-19). In addition, two non-biblical texts can be included: the Ascension of Isaiah (*Ascensio Isaiae*), a contemporary apocryphal text (Knight 1996, 2022), and the first-century religious (ecclesiastical) texts known as The First Epistle of Clement (von Harnack 2021; Dijkstra 2019, 136–138; Heid 2011, 153–179). In fact, these are the basis for the theory of Peter's martyrdom in Rome. The activities of the apostle Peter in Rome were widely accepted as authentic for a long time, with his martyrdom considered a historical fact. He was revered as the first bishop of Rome and seen as the guardian of apostolic continuity in the Western Christian Church. However, with the advent of the Reformation, the issue of apostolic continuity became a subject of controversy, accompanied by religious polemics and self-justification (England and Bruhn 2002).

The controversies surrounding Peter's role seemed to subside by the end of the 19th century, but scholarly interest reignited it in the early 20th century. These later studies were less influenced by confessional motivations, although they could not be entirely ruled out. Notable scholars like F. C. Baur, Lietzman, Cullman, R. Bauckham, and J. Gnilka have contributed to the literature on this issue (F. C. Baur 1831; Lietzmann 1915; Cullmann 1953; Bauckham 1992; Gnilka 2002).

The recent scholarly debate has been focused on arguments for and against Peter's presence in Rome, with Christian Gnilka and Otto Zwierlein (Zwierlein 2013, 32–68) representing opposing positions based on their confessional backgrounds (Gnilka being Catholic and pro, Zwierlein Protestant and contra). Due to the complexity of the subject, it is difficult to take a definitive position here, as it would require more extensive analysis (Goulder 2004; Jakšić 2009).

Nonetheless, the relevance of this issue to our topic lies in the fact that if Peter did not have a significant presence in the city of Rome, it is unlikely that he would have also taught in Dalmatia. However, even if we accept that Peter's martyrdom occurred in Rome, this does not provide conclusive evidence for his journey to Dalmatia, as there is limited information available on the specific route taken by the apostle, which may have been a later fabrication.

In Christian antiquity, apostles and their missionary efforts were often paired together, leading to the association of Peter and Paul as the leading apostolic pair. Therefore, one plausible conclusion is that if the apostle Paul visited Dalmatia, it is likely that Peter also travelled there. However, this conclusion, although seemingly evident, raises further questions. The author of the *Illyricum Sacrum* supports this idea by highlighting that traditionally, the travel routes from east to west passed through the region, suggesting that the apostles would have utilized these routes. The author distinguishes between the sea route, which was more expensive and considered a luxury journey, and the land route to Rome, which would have provided more opportunities for missionary work due to its accessibility and lower cost:

“Furthermore, there were two commonly used routes from Asia to Italy: one by sea and the other by land. However, I believe that the Apostles ar-

ranged their journeys in such a way that, whenever possible and unless some serious reason hindered them, they would prefer the land route over the sea route. This might be because it seemed most fitting according to the established practice and Apostolic tradition to travel through regions on foot, following the example of poor pilgrims. It could also be because the land journey provided great convenience for spreading the Christian religion, as those eager to widely disseminate the faith could move to various provinces, passing through the territories of different peoples, and thus deliver the elements of divine faith wherever they went and scatter the seeds of the Gospel.” (Farlati 1751, 235)

2.2 Paul

After the distinguished apostles, important saints will be presented in the following who are somehow connected to them:

“However, the Church of Dalmatia, which can rightfully be compared to the most noble ones either in terms of antiquity or dignity, laid its foundations by the blessed Titus, a disciple of the apostle Paul, as clearly and explicitly stated in the second Epistle to Timothy. Furthermore, both ancient records and highly credible sources testify that the Church of Salona was founded and administered by Saint Domnius, a disciple of Peter, the Prince of the Apostles.” (Farlati 1751, 234)

Indeed, it is noteworthy that despite the extensive documentation of Paul’s missionary activities, encompassing various locations and routes, there exists a dearth of compelling evidence suggesting his presence in Dalmatia, or, more specifically, in Salona, the attributed founding site of the church in Illyricum Sacrum. Equally significant is the absence of reliable historical sources that definitively confirm or refute the notion of Peter and Paul undertaking joint travels. As astutely pointed out by Goulder (2004, 381), the available information fails to provide conclusive support for either scenario.

Crucially, it must be emphasized that while the apostles were assigned distinct regions for their evangelical endeavours, Paul’s mission encompassed a vast scope, including a decree to proclaim the Gospel throughout the entire world. Consequently, one could conceivably argue for the inclusion of Illyricum within the purview of Paul’s missionary activities:

“and I think that this was Paul, who spent not a little time and labor of his apostleship in the regions bordering on Illyricum, and certainly brought some part into Illyricum as well /.../ so also Paul, with the care of all nations, was especially demanded of the Christian education of the Illyrians; from which it follows that the Illyrian church ought to recognize the second of the princes of the Apostles as its parent and principal founder, and to be venerated with a special and exceptional worship.” (Farlati 1751, 255)

Although it may be tempting to associate Peter and Paul as a missionary duo, the lack of substantial historical evidence regarding their individual itineraries or their simultaneous presence in specific regions poses a significant challenge. Particularly regarding less-documented areas like Dalmatia, the scarcity of concrete historical records restricts our ability to establish definitive conclusions concerning their travels in this region. The available evidence does not provide a reliable basis for asserting that the apostle travelled extensively northward into the Illyricum region. This view aligns with the research of David L. Eastman, who highlights the lack of substantiated information regarding Paul's missionary activities among the Scythians in Illyricum, despite the assertions made by Sulpicius Severus according to Venantius Fortunatus of Poitiers (Eastman 2011, 4; 140).

However, the inclination of local churches to establish a connection between their origins and an apostle in order to enhance their credibility, privileges, and recognition is not a phenomenon limited to the 18th century. Such practices have been observed since the early Christian period, with the figure of the apostle Peter, along with Andrew, being particularly popular during the Middle Ages. As briefly mentioned by the author, several churches along the Italian Adriatic coast claimed to have been founded by apostles (Farlati 1751, 236). This notion likely intrigued the author, who seeks to establish a link between the traditions of Christian mission on the Dalmatian coast and the founding of neighbouring churches, particularly in the Italian region.

“/.../ that almost all the peoples who inhabit the Adriatic coast, from Dalmatia towards the west, namely the inhabitants of Ravenna, of Fanna, of Ancona, of Bari, of Tarento, and others, trace the beginnings of their churches back to the very beginning of the Christian name, and they consistently affirm that they first received the establishment and discipline of the Christian religion from the very Prince of the Apostles, through the tradition of their ancestors.” (Farlati 1751, 236)

Following the examination of the available information, doubts arise regarding the assertions of the apostles' establishment of churches in Salona. It becomes apparent that the authors of *Illyricum Sacrum* themselves acknowledge the challenges of substantiating their claims. Nevertheless, it appears that they adopt a stance where the desired outcome justifies the methods employed in presenting their narrative: “However, what fruits of benefit Peter derived from this first journey through Illyria, how much progress he made in spreading the Gospel in those regions, and how many nations he gathered into the Church of Christ, it has not been recorded either in writings or in memory.” (Farlati 1751, 237)

2.3 The Disciples of The Apostles: Titus and Domnius

Saint Titus is recognized primarily as a companion of the apostle Paul in the New Testament, with numerous mentions in their correspondence (1 Cor 3:2; 7:6; 12:12; 8:6; 16:23; 12:18; Gal 2:1,3; Tit 1:4,2). Eusebius, in his Church History, identifies

Titus as the founder and first bishop of the Church of Crete, but there is no explicit reference to Dalmatia in this context (Eusebius 1927, 195–196; Tit 1:5). Nevertheless, early Christian tradition venerates Titus as the founder and initial bishop of the Cretan Church, elevating him to a figure surrounded by legends (Halkin 1961, 322). Regarding Titus' activities in Dalmatia, there are limited reliable sources available. While the Apostle Paul wrote a letter to his beloved disciple Titus, no specific information regarding Dalmatia is mentioned in it. The only mention of the southern province of Illyricum can be found in the letter to Timothy, where it is stated that Titus had departed for Dalmatia, alongside the departures of Demas to Thessalonica and Crescens to Galatia (2 Tim 4:10; Ramsay 1925, 286). However, scholars remain divided on the extent of Titus' involvement in Dalmatia, as the passage does not specify the precise location or city where his activities took place (Oberlinner 1994, 167). Moreover, exegetists highlight that the authorship and authenticity of 2 Timothy itself are subjects of serious doubt (Gnilka 1998, 22; Dibelius and Conzelmann 1972; Marshall and Towner 2004; Zeiller Jacques 2013, 4–5).

Turning our attention to Dominius, another disciple mentioned in *Illyricum Sacrum* as the founder of the Christian Church of the ancient city of Salona (Zeiller Jacques 2013; Handley 2014; Chevalier 2012; Saxer 1987), it is important to note that there are no biblical or other ancient sources associating him with the Apostle Peter. The biblical texts and apocryphal works related to the apostle do not contain any references to a disciple named Dominius. However, Domnius of Salona does appear in hagiographical accounts, although without any mention of a connection to the Apostle Peter. (Joachim Schäfer [n.d.]) This anachronism can be explained by the fact that the Bishop of Salona lived and worked in the 4th century, whereas the Apostolic Prince had passed away two centuries earlier. Saint Domnius is celebrated on April 11th, according to the *Acta Sanctorum*, and his veneration dates back to the 11th century (Henschenius and Papebrochius 1675).

In the later work written by Adam de Paris, the connection between the bishop Domnius and the apostle's leadership becomes apparent. According to the medieval biographer, Domnius, who was born into a pagan family, was converted to Christianity at a young age by his parents, who themselves had been converted by the influence of the Apostle Peter.

But Domnius, having received baptism, though still a boy of seven years, divinely inspired, and already ardent with the love of Christ, left his parents and followed the Apostle... He therefore became a disciple of Peter, dear to his brother and Master and fellow-disciple Pancratius and Apollinaris (who later became Bishop of Ravenna). (Gioanni 2012; 2020, 2–3)

The biographical (*vita*) literature on Domnius is quite rich (*six vitae*). In this context, Lenzi notes that: "Come si vede le vite di S. Doimo apparterebbero tutte alla V. categoria del Ruinart, sarebbero per loro origine piu leggendarie, che storiche." (Lenzi 1913, 10–15)

Another medieval source, the *Historia Salonitana* by Thomas Spalatensis, also mentions Domnius as a disciple of the Apostle Peter, sent by Peter himself to Sa-

lona (Archidiaconus 1894, 8). In any case, we must regard this as a medieval hagiographical fiction (Gioanni 2020, 43–80).

In the 17th century, with the growing interest in Croatian history, earlier sources regained prominence. In his work *De regno Dalmatiae et Croatiae*, Johannes Lucius (hr. Ivan Lučić 1604–1679) refers to the work of the Archdeacon, thus advocating for the apostolic origin of the Church of Salona. However, Antonius Mathiasaeus Caramaneus (Croatian form of his name: Antun Matijašević Caramaneo), a prominent polymath of the time, rejected the idea of Domnius being a disciple of Peter, which sparked controversy. But this in no way pleased Riceputi, in fact, the scholar took a very dim view of the opinion, which undermined the cult of the saint, and so he believed that God or the saint had punished Caramaneus with an early death for his statement. (Cerno 2015, 171) At the beginning of the 20th century, the prominent scholar Bulic reexamined the possibility of Domnius being a disciple of the apostle Peter and suffering martyrdom under Emperor Trajan, ultimately ruling it out. (Jermelić and Dukić 2022, 4)

Overall, the scholarly inquiry into the figure of Domnius, the founding bishop, has been a subject of ongoing debate and reevaluation, with Bulic's conclusions gaining acceptance among scholars. (Prozorov 2006; Jermelić and Dukić 2022, 3)

3. Conclusions

The author's strong commitment to the dubious proof and insistence on its validity can be understood in the context of the religious and political dynamics of the time. During that period, there were religious feuds and active religious missions in various regions, including Hungary, Croatia, and the western part of the ancient Roman province Illyricum. In the case of *Illyricum Sacrum*, the efforts of the editors were most likely influenced by the tools of the Catholic mission. (Shek Brnardić 2016) However, the situation in the southern periphery of the Empire, particularly in the areas to be liberated from Ottoman rule, was different. (Radonić 1950) Unionist efforts, supported by Rome, aimed to assimilate the Greek Orthodox Church into the Western Catholic Church (Blažević 2016). (Korade and Pernjak 2015)

One of the possible reasons for Farlati's emphasis on early church foundation and Christianity in the region was to reinforce the Croatian national identity (Shek Brnardić 2016). This idea may have found support in the aspirations of the Archbishop of Split (namely Pacifico Bizza), who collaborated with Farlati in data collection (Bizza 2021). The scarcity of trained Catholic clergy and church educational institutions in the region could have also increased Jesuit interest in the area (Shek Brnardić 2016). The Croats, known for their resistance against the Ottomans, had earned the title of "*antemurale christianitatis*". After their incorporation into the Habsburg Empire, they sought to reassess their position, and the church-origin narrative became an important element in this process. Besides these, it is

also true that, while the Jesuits were not exactly looked upon kindly in Dalmatia, they were welcomed with little opposition in Croatia. (Shek Brnardić 2016)

Overall, Farlati's commitment to the dubious proof and the historical narrative of *Illyricum Sacrum* can be attributed to a combination of religious, political, and national identity factors that were prevalent during that time. The historical context, aspirations of prominent figures like the Archbishop of Split, and the strategic importance of the region are all likely to have played significant roles in shaping the approach taken by Farlati and the editors of *Illyricum Sacrum*. The relationship between Dalmatia, which was part of the Venetian Commonwealth, and the papal court was strained due to various factors. Venice was traditionally viewed by the papal court as a potential source of anti-Church sentiments and a breeding ground for the Reformation movement. This perception was reinforced by the presence of critical reformers in the eastern enclaves of the Venetian Republic. One such figure was Bishop Marko Antun de Dominis of Split, who eventually emigrated to England. Another notable figure was the Protestant church historian Matthias Flacius Illyricus. Interestingly, Flacius' work does not mention the apostolic origins of the Illyrian Church or the figure of Domnius. (Matešić 1993)

It is most likely that Farlati, influenced by the prevailing Baroque culture, embraced the trend of accentuating both secular and church history. This approach could have served for ideological purposes, either in support of the narrative of the Papal State or that of the Habsburg Empire. Farlati's work could have also been beneficial in establishing the antiquity of the Church in Illyricum, particularly in Dalmatia, and presenting a positive image of the Jesuits, who were actively working to demonstrate the apostolicity of the churches in the region. This would have helped to connect the history of these churches with the eternal city of Rome. In any case, the editors of *Illyricum Sacrum* deserve credit for their unwavering commitment to their work, even in the face of scholarly criticism. (Dzino 2008) Their dedication to the cause, regardless of the potential flaws in their argument, may have served their contemporary interests as well as those of future generations, especially during periods of national awakening and consolidation. This tireless dedication to gathering sources significantly contributed to the rich content found in the *Illyricum Sacrum*, establishing it as an esteemed resource for studying the history of Christianity in the Adriatic region.

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