

2. FEATURES OF PALEOCHRISTIAN BASORELIEF IN THE PROVINCES DACIA TRAJAN AND SCYTHIA MINOR

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Abstract: *On the territory of the two Roman provinces situated in the north of Danube, Dacia Trajan and Scythia Minor, after the Roman conquest, there will be changes both regarding the encountered topics and the artistic style of basreliefs. Once Antiquity ends, PaleoChristianity will add a religious component, with transformations regarding iconography, but also stylistic ones, this field represents one of the proofs of pervasion and spread of the new religion also in these border provinces of the Roman Empire. And this happens at the level of the two types of relief which exist even nowadays, as they did since Antiquity: funeral relief which ornaments monuments and also architectural relief which decorates the new types of buildings, the PaleoChristian basilicas.*

Key words: *PaleoChristianism, chrismon, stele, kline, kantharos, impost*

As far as the field of basrelief is concerned, the Roman period brings thematic and stylistic novelty in the two provinces on the territory of Romania (Dacia Trajan and Scythia Minor): a syncretic style, combining Italic influences with Thracian ones, Greek, micro Thracian, micro Asian, Egyptian, the result is an original and interesting art which denotes ingenuity in doing handicraft, despite the less increased level of the artistic side. After the Roman conquest, a major ideological change took place – at a religious, political level. The eclectic forms and richly ornamented characterize a provincial art which did not only took over prototypes that used to circulate in notebooks for models, but it interpreted – using particular means of artistic expression – well-known scenes, that are naïve, but full of expressiveness and picturesqueness.

Starting with PaleoChristianity, the scenes having an ancient topic were syncretically transformed into scenes with a Christian topic and the style is characterized by an essentially modified vision: figural motifs are more and more schematic, volumes are delimited by geometrized plans, we remark the more flattened reliefs. The fact is visible in the types of relief that have been preserved until now on the territory of our Roman provinces in this area: funerary relief and the one which decorates the new religious architecture.

1. Funerary relief. A category of proofs regarding the appearance and spreading of Christianity on the territory of Dacia is the one of funerary monuments with Christian signs. The basrelief of some of them impresses through the high level of artistic execution. The provincial mark can be noticed first of all regarding the types of monuments. They are only limited at funeral steles of small dimensions, with ornaments and simple inscriptions. There are less sarcophagi richly ornamented with basreliefs, typical for the PaleoChristian painting in the Empire. Thus, an example which proves their existence in the 4th – 6th century A.D. is a fragment from a pediment decorated with a Latin cross with widened arms, placed on a sarcophagus at Tomis (Constanța), the 6th century A.D.

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Compared to previous steles of big dimensions, which are typically Roman, it is now normal to see the reduced trapezium shaped stele, while regarding iconography, the non-figurative ones provide most of the new motifs of decoration specific to the period of beginning of Christianity: first of all, the engraved cross and Christ's monogram. In Dobrogea, one of the most representative and most well-done steles from the beginning of Christianity is the *Funerary Stele of Terentius*, Tomis, which mentions Terentius, the son of Gaione, a soldier among "the young archers", with the monogram of the name of Jesus Christ (the 5th–6th centuries A.D.)²¹⁶. Crosses having widened arms can be found on the Christian stele that was built by Marcia Aurella, the wife of Marcus who was once *principalis* (with administrative financial onus), at Tomis (the 5th – 6th centuries A.D.). Another stele from Tomis has a more laboured decoration: two Latin crosses, with the arms widened at the extremities, flanking a *chrismon* placed in a circle, superpositioning two doves – birds with a Christian symbolism. A *chrismon* inscribed in a circle is – in fact, a crown having another Christian symbol in the lower part: two vine leaves – here is to be found the pseudo pediment of a funerary stele from Tomis (65cm)²¹⁷ which mentions Torpilla, probably hailing from Epiphaneia Cilicia (Asia Minor) (the 5th–the 6th centuries A.D.)²¹⁸. A fragment with an inscription (in Greek) with a secular text – "Seppon's, a wine merchandiser from Alexandria" – has a palm branch represented (the triumph over death) and one of pentalph (a Pthagorean symbol taken over by Christian art)²¹⁹. Not even the inscription in Greek on a stele from Tomis, with three relief busts, dating back to the 4th century A.D. (121cm high) is not explicitly Christian, but the text has a small fish at the end and, moreover, the stele is decorated with other specific symbols: on the gable, a dove is ticking a grape, while under the gable, there is the representation of the family, mother, father and a child²²⁰. Concerning the funerary stele found on Trajan's Wall (the County of Constanța), dating from the first half of the 3rd century A.D., it is considered by some researchers that it surely is one of the oldest PaleoChristian steles: it is the stele of Hylas buried with his daughter, Pantera, and with his son, Hermogenes (all of them having a Greek name), the wife having a Roman name, Matriona who was converted (?) ("changing her opinion") and buried separately from the other members of the family. Just because she was a Christian?, as I. Barnea asked himself – he does not consider the stele a safe proof of the existence of a Christian community at Tomis²²¹. Except for the register with the Greek inscription, the stele contains a median register with a Thracian Knight (with the dog and the hare) and the upper register, with the funerary banquet, with a character on a *kliné*, with the

²¹⁶ D. Tudor, (1957), *Oltenia Romană*, Ed. Academiei R.S.R., București, p. 516

²¹⁷ Radu Florescu, (1980), *Daco-romanii*, Ed. Meridiane, București, p. 160

²¹⁸ D. Tudor, *op. cit.*, p. 516

²¹⁹ Virgil Lungu, (2000), *Creștinismul în Scythia Minor în contextul vest-pontic*, Ed. T.C. Sen, Sibiu – Constanța, p. 24

²²⁰ Ibidem, p. 23-24

²²¹ I. Barnea, (1991), *Considerații privind cele mai vechi monumente creștine de la Tomis*, in *Pontica*, XXIV, Constanța, p. 269-270

table full of oblations and with a woman seated (140cm high)²²². Another stele (95cm high), from the beginning of the 4th century A.D. has, under the disk decorated with a rosette, near the pagan inscription (in Latin, about the two daughters of Januarius, Aurelia Januaria and Aurelia Domna), a Christian inscription, "Spiritum Deo red(d)ere"²²³. These scenes, but also the image of the Hero on the stele of Valerius Victorinus from Ulmetum, just like Hercules in the Garden of Hesperides from the relief of a monument in Tomis, or symbols (on the steles from Sacidava, Halmyris, Tomis, Ulmetum): astral, vine, funerary wreath, ivy, they are all proofs of a syncretism in art which existed in this period at the end of Antiquity, carrying the ancient concepts about the soul's immortality forward, also the victory over death, Bacchanalian concepts about the deceased's lack of worries²²⁴.

In Dacia, regarding some reliefs from the 2nd–3rd centuries A.D., controversies revolve around the idea of agape and of the symbols with the dish with fish, the bread marked by a cross – characteristic also to the rituals of some oriental cults, also met on many pagan monuments. For example: the vinestalk, with leaves and grapes, embellishing the exterior of an aedicule from the Museum of Dacian and Roman Civilisation from Deva²²⁵, a woman holding a dove on the relief from the National Museum of History from Transylvania in Cluj-Napoca²²⁶, or *panis quadratus* on the table of the funeral banquet from an aedicule fragment to be found in the same museum²²⁷. Anyway, in the future centuries, these symbols will be imposed in funeral art (the cross, Christ's monogram, the vine, the anchor, the crown, the orantha). Decoration for the altar from Potaissa (Turda) is 135cm high and it has the form of a vaulted truncated pyramid, ornamented on the top part with an Ionic capital of 30cm. On the central side of the monument, it is very minutely sculpted a dolphin having its head down: one can distinguish the eye and the 5 small wings, its tail is intersected by a trident. On the right wing, a *kantharos* appears and a vinestalk emerges out of it, while on the left wing, there is a vinestalk with leaves and grapes²²⁸. Moreover, one can also find the image of the dolphin with the trident on the funeral decoration from the National Museum of the Union – Archeology from Alba Iulia, another similar item in the same place has a *kantharos* on one of the faces, a cross emerging out of the stalks of vine, while on the other side, a dolphin. And a monument from Micia has the representation of a *kantharos* with a stalk and grapes²²⁹. A

²²² Virgil Lungu, (2005), *Începuturile creștinismului în Scythia Minor în lumina descoperirilor arheologice*, in *Preda's*, Constanța, nr. 1, ianuarie 2005, p. 150; Virgil Lungu, *Creștinismul în Scythia Minor...*, p. 23

²²³ Virgil Lungu, *Creștinismul în Scythia Minor...*, p. 23; I. Barnea, (1991), *Considerații...*, in *Pontica*, XXIV, Constanța, p. 270

²²⁴ Nelu Zugravu, (1997), *Geneza creștinismului popular al românilor*, Ministerul Educației, Institutul Român de Tracologie, Bibliotheca thracologică, XVIII, București, p. 236

²²⁵ Octavian Floca, Wanda Wolski, (1973), *Aedicula funerară în Dacia romană*, in *Buletinul Monumentelor Istorice*, nr. 3, București, p. 12

²²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 22

²²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 24

²²⁸ Ion Ionescu, (1994), *Simboluri paleocreștine din secolele II-III pe unele monumente funerare din Dacia Romană*, in *Acta Musei Napocensis*, 31, Cluj-Napoca, p. 243-244

²²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 246-247

funerary stele from Potaissa (at the Museum of History Turda) and a funerary monument from Gilău (embedded in the wall of the Catholic Church from here) presents the scene of the funeral banquet approximately in the same manner, with the presence of fish and loaves²³⁰. The item from Gilău (of 145cm high) (completed with the colour red in Ancient times) minutely represents a man on a *kliné*, wearing a tunic, his hair and beard are rendered by incisions made by using a chisel, holding a cup in his hand. On a *cathedra*, a woman dressed in a tunic and *palla* is holding a *patera*, another character wearing a tunic is holding a *simpulum*, while in the back of the *kliné*, one can see another character with a *velum*. On *mensa tripes*, a fish on a tray and a *panis quadratus* are symbols which could have Christian meanings, if the existence of Christianity in the 2nd–3rd centuries A.D. could be demonstrated without any benefit of doubt here²³¹. At Micia and at Ulpia Traiana, a monument having the shape of a pediment and a stele with a similar décor (thus, also similar to the décor of a stele's pediment from the Museum of Cluj-Napoca and a pediment of a funeral altar from the History Museum of Aiud, and also of a stele from Cășei): an almost stylized scene (consequently the symbolic meaning is implicit), with two peacocks and a *kantharos* ornamented with *cannelures* out of which one of the birds is drinking²³². Items which are similar to the ones from Dacia Traian are to be found in Aquileia²³³.

2. Architectural relief. The most frequent architectural reliefs that reflect the new transformation are the basilica's capitals – simple and honest pleading for the new belief: Christianity. Found not only in Dobrogea, but also in Dacia, these are most of the time Corinthian (the other types are abandoned step by step), modified regarding the décor's technique. The form is classic, of the acanthus bush, while the technique is that of a flattened relief, having only a suggested volume, eventually exploiting the play of shadow and light with the trepan (Hystria), having a pointed cut of the leaves. The cylindrical palmiform capital appears.

It also seems that in the early Christian period, the impost capital-impost (which increases the building's resistance): at Callatis (Mangalia), the 6th century A.D., Tomis, Hystria, Tropaeum Traiani, Libida (the Russian Slava), Noviodunum (Isaccea). It is a capital derived from the Ionic one (Hystria), but where the scrolls, if preserved, are atrophied, placed at the basis of the massive truncated pyramid (Tomis). There is a great variety of ornaments on the inclined side of the impost: acanthus leaves, palmettes. And especially the cross with its arms widened at its extremities, eventually a simple one (Aegysus – Tulcea) or framed by stalks and leaves (Tomis) or even by a more complex décor: a Corinthian capital whose fragments are preserved, with stylized acanthus leaves on two superposed registers, with barely sketched scrolls, having a sculpted

²³⁰ Ion Ionescu, (1994), *Simboluri paleocreștine din secolele II-III pe unele monumente funerare din Dacia Romană*, in *Acta Musei Napocensis*, 31, Cluj-Napoca, p. 246

²³¹ Dan Isac, Alexandru Diaconescu, (1980), *Aspecte ale artei provinciale romane la Gilău*, in *Acta Musei Napocensis*, XVII, Cluj-Napoca, p. 12-125

²³² Ion Ionescu, (1994), *Simboluri paleocreștine...*, in *Acta Musei Napocensis*, 31, Cluj-Napoca, p. 248-249

²³³ *Ibidem*, p. 249

Latin cross in the middle (Tropaeum Traiani); or, on the impost, the zoomorphic décor is combined with the vegetal one and a cross (the Greek type, with widened arms) (Hystria).

Furthermore, it is very important the composite capitol, as they are those two dating from the beginning of the 6th century A.D. during the time of Theodosius, from the Syrian Church of Callatis (having a Constantinopolitan typology): having the shape of a circular basket made of thorny knitted acanthus leaves, in the lower part fretted with the trepan; the scrolls are replaced by an ensemble of four ram protomai placed heraldically, breaking away from the vegetal décor, with sculpted ravens placed among them, holding their prey (birds) in their claws. There are pieces of a high level of execution (having microAsian influences), probably import products from Constantinople²³⁴ (given the quality of marble of Proconnes)²³⁵.

In consequence, all these architectural pieces on the territory of Dobrogea can be local, made of limestone (from Asarlâc²³⁶, for example), or they can be imported (there are marble pieces from Proconnes and Tasos: Tropaeum Traiani, Callatis, Libida)²³⁷, while some of them had been brought together with the sketched décor, so that they could be later finished in autochthonous workshops.

In conclusion, PaleoChristianity comes with its specific features, with its modified vision, in order to transmit a new message using symbols and an iconography more or less explicit at the beginning, according to the artistic changes that took place in the entire Empire. And a basilica, with its architecture and ornaments and a funerary monument which is placed in a space which is semipublic, carried a new ideatic message, a powerful message which had a propagandistic value in a period when Christianity was settling in.

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²³⁴ Em. Popescu, *Cap. VII. Cultura (Partea a IV-a. Dobrogea în secolele IV-VI)*, in Dumitru Protase, Alexandru Suceveanu (coord.), (2010), *Istoria românilor*, vol. II, *Daco-romani, romanici, alogeni*, Ed. Enciclopedică, Academia Română, București, p. 651

²³⁵ Radu Vulpe, Ion Barnea, (1968), *Din istoria Dobrogei*, vol. II, Ed. Academiei R.S.R., București, p. 482-483

²³⁶ Corina Nicolescu, (1971), *Moștenirea artei bizantine în România*, Ed. Meridiane, București, p. 24

²³⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 26

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